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CONTENTS

Editorial *Dan Swain and Monika Woźniak*, Ecosocialism in the Post-Communist Landscape 5

Studies

Kenny Knowlton Jr. and Cameron Gamble, The Philosophy of Ecological Leninism 17

Weronika Parfianowicz, Limits to Socialist Growth: The Question of Economic Growth and Environmental Crisis in Polish Discussions of the 1970s 41

Martin Babička, A “Right to Sadness”: Late Socialist Environmentalism between Technocracy and Romanticism and the Czech Nature Writer Jaromír Tomeček 67

Interview

John Bellamy Foster interviewed by Dan Swain and Monika Woźniak, Marxian Ecology, Dialectics, and the Hierarchy of Needs 93

Translation

Wolfgang Harich, introduced by Andreas Heyer, World Revolution Now 113

Andreas Heyer, Wolfgang Harich’s Marxist Ecology 113

Wolfgang Harich, World Revolution Now: On the Latest Publication of the Club of Rome 116

Materials

Monika Woźniak, ed., Andrei Platonov: Thinking Nature in Post-Revolutionary Russia 127

Monika Woźniak, Neither Great, Nor Abundant: The Image of Nature in Andrei Platonov 127

Andrei Platonov, Repairing the Earth; A Revolutionary Council of the Earth; Light and Socialism 142

Discussion

Joseph Grim Feinberg, Why Contradictions? A Belated Manifesto 151

Reviews

Mikuláš Černík, *To Dismantle Injustice You Should Understand Its Roots* (Alf Hornborg, *Nature, Society, and Justice in the Anthropocene: Unraveling the Money–Energy–Technology Complex*) 169

Matej Ivančík, *Rethinking Forgotten Thoughts* (Onur Acaroglu, *Rethinking Marxist Approaches to Transition: A Theory of Temporal Dislocation*) 174

Steve Knight, *Ecosocialism, or Fascism?* (Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*) 181

Bartosz Matyja, *A Window into Socialism's Laboratories* (Matěj Spurný, *Making the Most of Tomorrow: A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Czechoslovakia*) 189

Julita Skotarska, *Factory Farm Animals: Out of Touch, Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (Eva Koťátková and Hana Janečková, eds., *Animal Touch*) 192

Dan Swain, *Prometheus Humbled* (Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettesse, *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics*; The Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene*) 199

About the Authors 207

EDITORIAL

Ecosocialism in the Post-Communist Landscape

To write about issues of ecology in the present moment is to risk being perpetually out of date. When we prepared the call for papers for this issue, we highlighted some of the starkest warnings about the climate catastrophe and noted the increased attention to these issues among socialists and Marxists of various stripes. Both trends have accelerated rapidly in the year since. A report by the Chatham House policy institute published in September 2021 observed that on current trends there is a less than 5% chance of keeping global temperature increases below 2°C, and a less than 1% chance of achieving the 1.5°C target set forth in the Paris Agreement.¹ As we write this editorial in the summer of 2022, large parts of Western Europe are on fire, Britain is experiencing its hottest days ever, and residents of Prague are waking up to the faint smell of burning from the largest forest fire in the country's history 100km away. The floods that killed at least 243 people across Germany and Belgium in July 2021 were found to have been made up to nine times more likely by global heating.² According to one study, over a third of heat-related deaths in summer from 1991 to 2018 occurred as a result of human-caused global heating.³ These events layer on top of the COVID-19 pandemic, not yet over, and increasingly recognised as intimately connected to the zoonotic overspill caused by deforestation and warming.⁴ Climate catastrophe is already with us.

¹ Chatham House, "Climate change risk assessment 2021", September 2021, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/2021-09-14-climate-change-risk-assessment-quiggin-et-al.pdf>

² Damian Carrington, "Revealed: how climate breakdown is supercharging toll of extreme weather", *The Guardian*, August 4, 2022, <https://theguardian.com/environment/2022/aug/04/climate-breakdown-supercharging-extreme-weather>.

³ Ana Maria Vicedo-Cabrera et al., "The burden of heat-related mortality attributable to recent human-induced climate change", *Nature Climate Change* 11 (June 2021), pp. 492–500.

⁴ See Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Verso 2021).

In recognition of this, activists and theorists across the socialist and Marxist tradition have begun to engage with ecology to an extent they have not done so before. These range from concrete utopian speculation on alternatives, through calls to action and debates over the form it should take, to re-examinations of the Marxist tradition of thinking about nature.⁵ It is in this context that we believe *Contradictions* has something distinctive to say, by raising these questions in the landscape – geographical, social, political, and ecological – of post-communism. This means thinking about the real history of “actually-existing” socialism beyond mythology and caricature, but also grappling with the way narratives of one-sided nostalgia or demonization dominate our present. One thing remains the same in both negative and positive portrayals of the past: Communism, which was once imaginable in a narrative of the future, became relegated to the past. A look at post-communism is thus not only a look at how communism once was, and then ceased to be, but also how communism was once *imaginable* as a point on the political horizon” but became “imaginable no longer”.⁶

When it comes to ecology, the dominant post-communist narrative tells a story that neatly combines Marxist theory and practice in order to dismiss both. The story goes something like this: Marx believed (perhaps infected by Hegel) in the total humanisation of nature through the endless expansion of productive forces, which would propel humanity to a realm of freedom and plenty – a sin frequently named “Prometheanism”.⁷ Official communism put this Prometheanism to work through rapid industrialisation and grand hubristic plans, leading to environmental devastation on a mass scale, smokestacks, stripmines, and catastrophes like Chernobyl and the drying of the Aral Sea. In these equations, socialism = industrialisation, planning = domination, and revolutionary hope = utopian hubris. Never mind that the rapid transition to the most brutal forms of capitalism brought its own devastations and destructions, and that limited ecological repair in some areas was at the expense of outsourcing problems to others, socialism has nothing to teach us about ecology or the environment. Like so much of post-communist ideology, this draws a veil over a century’s worth of human experience and theoretical debate.

⁵ A non-exhaustive list: Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettesse, *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics* (London and New York: Verso, 2022); Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene* (London and New York: Verso, 2021); Holly-Jean Buck, *Ending Fossil Fuels: Why Net Zero is Not Enough* (London and New York: Verso, 2021); John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene: Ecological Ruin or Ecological Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022); Peter Gelderloos, *The Solutions are Already Here: Strategies for Ecological Revolution from Below* (London: Pluto, 2022); Chris Saltmarsh, *Burnt: Fighting for Climate Justice* (London: Pluto 2021); Bernd Riexinger et al. (eds), *A Left Green New Deal: An Internationalist Blueprint* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

⁶ Joseph Grim Feinberg, “Why *Contradictions*: A Belated Manifesto”, this issue, p. 155.

⁷ For a discussion of Prometheanism, see William B. Meyer, *The Progressive Environmental Prometheans: Left-Wing Heralds of a “Good Anthropocene”* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillian, 2016), pp. 12–18. For a contemporary criticism, see Pendergrass and Vettesse, *Half-Earth Socialism*.

Pulling back this veil reveals that both theory and practice were more complicated than the narrative suggests. When it comes to Marxist theory, few people have done more in the past 30 years to challenge the simplistic story than [John Bellamy Foster](#), and we are delighted to present an extensive interview with him regarding his work. We discuss his development of Marx's idea of a "metabolic rift" between humanity and nature and his defence of Engels's ideas of dialectics of nature against its critics in the Western Marxist tradition. This challenges the simple reading of Marx and Engels as aiming at the domination and exploitation of nature, while still insisting, against some fashionable trends in post-humanism, on recognising a distinction between humans and nature (an issue also raised in [Mikuláš Černík](#)'s review of Alf Hornborg's *Nature, Society, and Justice in the Anthropocene*). In their contribution, [Kenny Knowlton Jr.](#) and [Cameron Gamble](#) do something similar for Lenin. Picking up on recent calls for an "ecological Leninism", they look beyond Lenin's politics to his philosophy, arguing that it understands the human/nature relationship in a way that "closely approximates much of contemporary ecosocialist and eco-Marxist thought in such a way as to contribute to the development of metabolic rift theory and lay the theoretical ground for a revolutionary politics and praxis in the context of the ecological rift." (36–37) This challenges readings of Lenin that see him as promoting a naive primacy of matter over thought, presenting him instead as a theorist of metabolism and dialectical transformation, still relevant in times of climate crisis. In the Czech and Slovak issue, [Patrik Gažo](#)'s dictionary entry on ecosocialism further complicates the standard story by presenting a portrait of the richness of ecosocialist thought beyond the caricatures, drawing not only on Marx and Engels's thought but also the history of ecological anarchism, and bringing these debates into the present by discussing debates over degrowth and accelerationism. Likewise, [Peter Daubner](#) explores debates over the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, arguing for a nuanced understanding of the "Anthropocene" that takes into account the fundamental role of capitalism.

If Marx's own thought was more complex than that of the caricature, so was "actually-existing socialism". As Foster discusses in his interview, the early Soviet Union contained diverse ecological innovations, from the introduction of the first nature reserves to "the most advanced ecological science in the world" (95).⁸ At the same time, under conditions of war and famine it faced the need to industrialise to survive. As socialism became increasingly tied to industrialisation and growth, the metabolic rift became, as the Salvage Collective put it, "to Soviet planners, a growth strategy".⁹ Perhaps as a result, these heroic early years often combined an optimism about the capacity to master nature and release its potential with a sensitivity to nature's limits

⁸ See also Kunal Chattopadhyay, "The Rise and Fall of Environmentalism in the Early Soviet Union", *Climate and Capitalism*, November 3, 2014, <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2014/11/03/rise-fall-environmentalism-early-soviet-union>.

⁹ Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker*, p. 50.

and a deep belief that communism would transform our relation to it. In this spirit, we present the translation of three short texts by the Soviet author [Andrei Platonov](#) that reflect aspects of this ambivalence (a fourth, already available in English, is translated into Czech only). These texts are dazzling in their revolutionary pathos, undoubtedly “Promethean” in their own way, but they also hint at the abuse of nature and the need to maintain balance in the earth’s metabolism.

It is understandable that the early period and its “original sins” are where many people look for reflections on both the promises and the failures of Soviet socialism’s ecological legacy. Later socialism is even more indelibly associated with industrialisation and environmental decay, and techno-utopian projects (such as the relocation of the entire city of Most to access the coal underneath, described by Matěj Spurný in *Making the Most of Tomorrow*, reviewed by [Bartosz Matyja](#) in the English issue). Indeed, as [Martin Babička](#) notes in his article in the English issue, this formed an important part of dissident narratives that have carried over into our post-communist condition. Several contributions to our volume challenge this narrative: Babička presents the complexity of late socialism’s attitudes to nature through the figure of the popular writer Jaromír Tomeček. The popularity of Tomeček’s nature writing provides an insight into what Babička calls “ecological techno-optimism”, which attempted to add ecological sensibilities to the techno-optimism of the previous eras, while avoiding the pessimism associated with Western environmentalism. This view rejected the Stalinist emphasis on mastery of nature in favour of more modest conceptions of control: “For late socialist writers then, the human subject was no longer the omnipotent master of nature but instead had to find ways to reconcile technological progress and ecological crisis.” (81)

Elsewhere in the English issue, [Weronika Parfianowicz](#) examines the competing visions of socialism involved in two scientific conferences organised in Poland in the early 1970s. These conferences reflected the prominence of the idea of a scientific-technological revolution and the growing prominence of expert culture. While not explicitly dedicated to ecology, these conferences were dominated by ecological themes, and participants grappled with issues of growth, consumerism, and technocracy, responding in part to the rise of Western environmentalism inspired by the publication of *The Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome. Many of the themes that dominate contemporary ecosocialist debate – free time and automation, growth and consumerism, a hierarchy of needs and the social role of science and expertise – are already present in these conferences, not, Parfianowicz argues, as marginal or dissident voices, but formulated within the framework of official ideology: “And yet, although their critical predictions proved to be quite prophetic, it was the technocratic and pragmatic model, with all its shortcomings, that prevailed in official state politics, with serious consequences for the future.” (61)

The picture becomes complicated further when we move from official discourses to include the various voices of dissent within these regimes. One of *Contradictions*’ ongoing projects has been revealing the diversity of these voices and challenging the exclusive identification of dissent with liberal politics. In this spirit, in our English

issue we present a translation of the GDR dissident [Wolfgang Harich](#)'s reaction to the 1991 report of the Club of Rome.¹⁰ Writing after the fall of the Berlin Wall and at the cusp of German unification, Harich calls on the left to unite behind the Club's three central tasks of disarmament, preventing climate catastrophe, and overcoming world poverty, evoking the history of the popular front and suggesting it might give renewed impetus to internationalism. Strikingly, Harich also calls for a levelling down in the newly reunited Germany – rather than developing the East, he calls for “drastic material losses for the old federal states, combined with more social security (at an equally modest level) and improved *quality of life* for all” (124). This call, especially its desire to separate quality of life from material development, is one of the ways in which Harich's text feels deeply contemporary. A reminder, perhaps, that the events of 1989 contained multiple possibilities, or at least multiple voices, that were concealed by the official narrative. Whatever one thinks of Harich's proposed strategy, our challenges remain substantially the same.

Continuing our engagement with Marxist dissident thought, our Czech issue contains a review by [Petr Kužel](#) of a recent collection of writings from the Czech Marxist Petr Uhl (who sadly passed away last year), and we translate a review of Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* by a central figure of the New Left in Britain, [Raymond Williams](#), published in *New Left Review* in 1980. In it, Williams notes the shared vocabulary of cultural revolution between Bahro and the New Left, arguing that this denotes a significant line of division in Marxist theory and socialist practice. The crucial significance of this line of division runs between those who believe it is sufficient to change the *relations* of production and those who believe it is also necessary to revolutionise the *forces* of production, “which are never only manual or mechanical, but are also (and now increasingly) intellectual means”.¹¹ Of particular relevance for the theme of ecology, the cultural revolution that Williams envisages rejects the idea that the quantitative production of more and more goods might by itself generate new social relations and consciousness: “Against this logic, the cultural revolution insists, first, that what a society needs, before all, to produce, is as many possible individuals, capable of all necessary association.”¹²

Which returns us to the charge of Prometheanism – if Prometheanism means a naïve faith that a quantitative expansion of humanity's productive powers is emancipatory in its own right, or that nature can be conquered or mastered once and for all,

¹⁰ See Alexander Amberger, “Post-growth Utopias from the GDR: The Ecosocialist Alternatives of SED Critics Wolfgang Harich, Rudolf Bahro, and Robert Havemann from the 1970s”, *Contradictions* 5, no. 2 (2021), pp. 15–30.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, “Beyond Actually Existing Socialism”, in *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*, ed. Andrew Milner (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 126–148, here 131.

¹² Williams, “Beyond Actually Existing Socialism”, p. 143.

then this is an illusion that ought to be abandoned. Marxism has to be aware of and informed by scientific limits – in the Czech issue, [Vít Bartoš](#) offers some challenging proposals on how that might be done through dialogue with the Ukrainian socialist Sergei Podolinsky, a pioneer of ecological economics. Moreover, as Gažo's contribution emphasises, ecosocialism should provide a vital counterpoint to those trends in contemporary leftism that see solutions in accelerated development and increased consumption. And yet we might not give up on the figure of Prometheus too quickly. On the contrary, the climate crisis demands a Prometheanism of a different kind: not heroic action dominating and conquering nature, but urgent (and no less heroic) action to consciously intervene to undo the damage that has already been done. Whatever form that takes – and there are real debates to be had about the merits of degrowth, green (new) deals,¹³ rewilding, and geoengineering – it is clear that none of this will happen without conscious action, and without a collective subject able and willing to carry it out. The climate crisis demands nothing less than “socialised man, the associated producers, govern[ing] the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their common control, instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.”¹⁴

This, in turn, points to a further sense of Prometheanism worth holding onto. As our interview with Foster discusses, any meaningful transition requires social relations of substantive equality and democracy that allow us to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary production, and to determine and articulate our needs free from the “needs” of capital. In the spirit of Williams's cultural revolution, we might also anticipate deeper transformations of ourselves and our relationships with nature and others (including, perhaps our relationship to non-human animals, discussed in [Julita Skotarska](#)'s review of a set of essays on factory farming), perhaps beyond what we can imagine. This is the sense in which the Salvage Collective argues that eco-modernists are not Promethean enough, and propose a Prometheanism in which Prometheus “must be, not bound by, perhaps, but *sublated* with a rigorous humility”.¹⁵ The climate crisis should teach us to respect nature and its limits; it should not stop us hoping for a transformed world.

But such hope is in short supply. Any movement for ecosocialism has to confront powerful forces of reaction and denialism. The most prominent and virulent form of

¹³ Gažo, in this issue, discusses how ecococialism and degrowth are variously counterposed and seen as complimentary. Likewise, Gareth Dale has argued there is substantial overlap among the “left corners” of both movements. Gareth Dale, “Degrowth and the Green New Deal”, *The Ecologist*, October 28, 2019, <https://theecologist.org/2019/oct/28/degrowth-and-green-new-deal>.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991, p. 959.

¹⁵ Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker*, p. 82.

this – the dark alliances between fossil fuel politics and the far right – are detailed by Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, in *White Skin, Black Fuel*, reviewed by [Steve Knight](#) in the English issue. Much of this is familiar to our region, from Václav Klaus's outright climate denial, through the Polish government's insistence that coal is a part of Polish culture, to the repeated refrain that climate change is a plot of the far left. Communism somehow stands accused of conspiring to first destroy the environment and then to use its defence as a way to sneak back into power. But post-communism also enables a softer denialism: as [Joseph Grim Feinberg](#) notes in his essay in this issue, reflecting on five years of the journal and laying out some principles for its work, the revolutions of 1989 were often presented as revolutions of “people against concepts”, in which revolutionaries “passionately defended the remarkable idea that ideas as such were the problem, that fancy concepts should be replaced by basic common sense, lofty vision replaced by a cynical recognition of lowly human nature, complicated social theory replaced by unvarnished and obvious truth.” (161) This legacy enables “sensible” politicians to profess their green credentials and recognise the reality of climate change while condemning the level of action necessary as “extremist” and “alarmist”.¹⁶

One thing we did not anticipate when preparing the issue was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022. This made several of *Contradictions* themes once again into issues for global debate – the legacy of communism, invoked both by Putin's startling attempts to blame the Bolsheviks for Ukraine's independence and the determination of new Cold Warriors to see in his actions a return to the Soviet Union; the imperial history of the region and its many nationalisms; and the urgent need to talk about the region and its history without clichés. There is little we can do in this text beyond condemning the invasion and extending our solidarity to its victims, including the millions displaced as refugees. However, the war has also had severe consequences for the central theme of our issue: as well as the direct environmental devastation and the looming food crisis it causes, the war risks setting back what little progress has been made towards emissions reductions. Fossil fuel companies sense an opportunity to shift the narrative, using the energy crisis caused by Europe's dependence on Russian oil and gas to reassert themselves in political debate. It seems to be working, as Germany extends the lifespan of coal generators, Dutch coal plants ramp up to 100% capacity, and Austria reopens a coal plant closed in 2020.¹⁷ Meanwhile, wildfires rage

¹⁶ Martin Vrba, “Od popíračství k ekofašismu. Stručné dějiny klimatického reakcionářství”, *Alarm*, May 30, 2022, <https://a2larm.cz/2022/05/od-popiracstvi-k-ekofasismu-strucne-dejiny-klimatickeho-reakcionarstvi>.

¹⁷ Katrin Bennhold and Jim Tankersley, “Ukraine War's Latest Victim? The Fight Against Climate Change”, *New York Times*, June 26, 2022, <https://nytimes.com/2022/06/26/world/europe/g7-summit-ukraine-war-climate-change.html>.

across Siberia, the forces that might otherwise deal with them diverted to Ukraine,¹⁸ and research into the impact of the climate crisis on the Arctic stalls as collaboration with Russian scientists becomes more difficult.¹⁹

But there are signs of hope in growing movements in our region that tackle the causes and consequences of the climate crisis. In the Czech Republic, some of the most lively recent protests have been by school students participating in Fridays for Future.²⁰ The group *Limity jsme my* (We Are the Limits) have organised direct action against coal plants, sometimes marching behind the slogan “burn borders, not coal”.²¹ *Nová dohoda* have brought the slogan of the New Deal to the Central European context, linking the climate crisis to issues of economic democracy and forging encouraging links between trade unions and climate activists.²² In September 2021, the climate camp in Slovakia began with the blockade of the port of Bratislava in protest at the construction of a liquified natural gas terminal.²³ In Poland, ecological movements after 1989 tended to focus on questions of wildlife conservation and air quality;²⁴ in recent years, however, the principles of environmental justice have become more prominent in the activity of newer movements, such as XR Poland, *Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny* (Youth Strike for Climate), or Polish Climate Camp, inspired by similar structures in different countries.²⁵

Often these movements involve not only ecological concerns for the future, but immediate threats to community life, in which social and ecological crises are closely intertwined. In Germany, local residents are campaigning against the destruction of their villages for lignite mining, defending both their immediate homes and the broader

¹⁸ Martin Kuebler, “Wildfires in Russia: Will war in Ukraine limit firefighting response?” *Deutsche Welle*, May 11, 2022, <https://dw.com/en/wildfires-in-russia-will-war-in-ukraine-limit-firefighting-response/a-61753044>.

¹⁹ Alexandra Witze, “Russia’s war in Ukraine forces Arctic climate projects to pivot”, *Nature* 607 (July 2022), p. 432.

²⁰ See Petr Zewlakk Vrabec, “‘Z důvěry ve falešné sliby jsme vyrostli,’ říkají středoškoláci. Skončil klimatický sjezd studentů”, *Alarm*, September 12, 2022, <https://a2larm.cz/2022/09/z-duvery-ve-falesne-sliby-jsme-vyrostli-rikaji-stredoskolaci-skoncil-klimaticky-sjezd-studentu>.

²¹ “O Nás”, *Limity jsme my*, accessed November 6, 2022, <https://limityjsmemy.cz/about>.

²² “Úvod: propojené krize, propojená řešení”, *Nová dohoda*, accessed November 6, 2022, <https://novadohoda.cz/nova-dohoda>.

²³ Petr Zewlakk Vrabec, “Historicky první slovenský klimakemp začal okupací bratislavského přístavu”, *Alarm*, September 4, 2021, <https://a2larm.cz/2021/09/historicky-prvni-slovensky-klimakemp-zacal-okupaci-bratislavskeho-pristavu>.

²⁴ On initiatives against smog and wildlife preservation (up to 2017), as well as ecological traditions in state-socialist Poland, see, e.g., Julia Szulecka and Kacper Szulecki, “Between domestic politics and ecological crises: (De)legitimization of Polish environmentalism”, *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 7, pp. 1214–1243.

²⁵ “O nas”, *Extinction Rebellion Polska*, accessed November 6, 2022, <https://extinctionrebellion.pl/>; “O nas”, *Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny*, accessed November 6, 2022, <https://msk.earth>.

environment. Serbia saw mass protests against the opening of Lithium mines.²⁶ Environmentalists in Bulgaria have long campaigned against the proliferation of landfills and incinerators, a consequence of the EU's internal "Trash Market" that has developed since 2018.²⁷ In Russia, the biggest protests around the landfill question appeared in the north of the country, near a small train station called Shies. This movement was led by local residents, who established a commune on the site designated for a new landfill and after many months of struggle successfully blocked its construction.²⁸ Shies became a symbol of social and ecological engagement, and the movement connected to it remains active in different issues (with anti-war posts frequently appearing on their Facebook pages).

Of course, there remains a huge gap between the capacity of these movements and the necessity posed by the climate crisis. There is considerable debate about how to get from where we are to where we need to be. These strategic questions are raised briefly in our interview with Foster, and discussed further by Tereza Reichelová in our Czech issue in her review of two recent books by Andreas Malm. Elsewhere in the volume, broader questions of social movement strategy and transition are taken up by Yuliya Moskvina, in her discussion piece on the experiences of the Prague autonomous social centre Klinika and campaigns for the right to the city, Matej Ivančík, in his review of a recent work on Marxist theories of transition, and by Maja Vusilović's discussion of Ewa Majewska's notion of weak resistance in her review of *Feminist Antifascism*. These raise questions of movement tactics, how they engage with and influence state power, and how to build alliances across them. The question, for example, of how the left should relate to and understand contemporary populism and liberal democracy is discussed further in Roman Kanda's review of Joseph Grim Feinberg, Michael Hauser, and Jakub Ort's *Politika jednoty ve světě proměn* (*The Politics of Unity in a World of Change*). All of these debates about strategy are of course inseparable from ongoing discussions about the world we want to build, and ultimately who is going to build it.

²⁶ See Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, "Mining Companies and the EU Want Serbia's Lithium", *Jacobin*, January 18, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/01/serbian-lithium-rio-tinto-environmental-protest-movement-eu>.

²⁷ Jana Tsoneva, "How Europe's 'Trash Market' Offloads Pollution on Its Poorest Countries", *Jacobin*, June 13, 2020, <https://jacobin.com/2020/06/european-union-green-new-deal-garbage-waste>.

²⁸ For basic information on Shies in English, see, e.g., "Russia: The Shies Anti-garbage Activists", *Deutsche Welle*, July 6, 2019, <https://dw.com/en/russia-the-shies-anti-garbage-activists/av-49278120>; "The Shies camp: How Moscow's trash became treasure for a group of environmental protestors", *Bellona*, January 21, 2022, <https://bellona.org/news/industrial-pollution/2020-01-the-shies-camp-how-moscows-trash-became-treasure-for-a-group-of-environmental-protestors>; Arjo Kvamme, "Balancing the thin line between political and ecological protest. A study of the Shies protest" (MA thesis, Universitetet i Bergen, 2021). On landfill protests in Russia in general, see Geir Flikke, "Dysfunctional orders: Russia's rubbish protests and Putin's limited access order", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 5 (2021), pp. 470–488.

Dan Swain and Monika Woźniak

Here, again, humility is important. Marxists will likely have more to learn from emerging new movements against climate catastrophe than we have to teach them, and we should not be surprised if they frame their struggles in ways we do not expect. Ecosocialism, however, has a history nearly as long as capitalism's fatal destruction of our environment, and we can all learn from it. In that spirit, we hope that this volume makes a small contribution to uncovering that common history; it is as necessary as ever.

Dan Swain and Monika Woźniak

STUDIES

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ECOLOGICAL LENINISM

Kenny Knowlton Jr. and Cameron Gamble

Abstract

Recently, the term “Ecological Leninism” has emerged as a popular invocation in the works of Marxist thinkers attempting to grasp dialectically the numerous intersecting ecological crises. Yet, beyond a few introductory remarks, little has been said about the content of this concept and, even less, its relation to Lenin. Generally, the concept attempts to combine Leninist political theory with the ecological analyses of the growing number of ecosocialists and eco-Marxists working both within the academy and without. This paper intends an initial, philosophical contribution toward developing Ecological Leninism: (1) by providing an interpretation of Lenin’s philosophical method, that is, dialectical and historical materialism; and (2) explicating the way in which this philosophy gives rise to a political ecological theory and practice, Ecological Leninism, that addresses the crisis of the metabolic rift between nature and society. We intend to contribute to the development of Ecological Leninism by clarifying the philosophy through which the political method is articulated. Thus, we hope to show that, under the conditions of a global metabolic rift produced by capitalist society, Ecological Leninism as a political ecological theory signals the possibility of securing a just and sustainable world for future generations.

Keywords

dialectical materialism, ecological Leninism, metabolic rift theory, Marxism, political ecology, dialectics

Recently, “Ecological Leninism” has emerged as a popular invocation in the works of Marxist thinkers attempting to grasp dialectically the numerous intersecting ecological crises.¹ Yet, beyond a few introductory remarks, little has been said about the content of this concept and, even less, its relation to Lenin. Generally, the concept attempts to combine Leninist political theory with the ecological analyses of the growing number of ecosocialists and eco-Marxists working both within the academy and without.² This paper intends an initial, philosophical contribution toward developing Ecological Leninism: (1) by providing an interpretation of Lenin’s philosophical method, that is, dialectical and historical materialism; and (2) explicating the way in which this philosophy gives rise to a political ecological theory and practice, Ecological Leninism, that addresses the crisis of the metabolic rift between nature and society. We intend to contribute to the development of Ecological Leninism by clarifying the philosophy through which the political method is articulated. Thus, we hope to show that, under the conditions of a global metabolic rift produced by capitalist society, Ecological Leninism as a political ecological theory signals the possibility of securing a just and sustainable world for future generations. István Mészáros asserts “[t]he proper theorization of the new imperialism [...] was left to the age of Lenin”;³ we require the theorization of the metabolic rift, as ours is the age of Ecological Leninism.

A Brief History of Early Bolshevik Ecology

During their time in power, Lenin and the Bolsheviks displayed their concerns for an alternative social metabolic relation to nature through their early policy on the preservation and sustainable use of the forests of Russia. The law sought “to introduce a modicum of statewide planning and control over a vast resource [...] [and] provided for the creation of a Central Administration of Forests of the Republic to manage the forests *on the basis of planned reforestation and sustained yield*”.⁴ Contrary to the capitalist

¹ See, for example, Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Verso, 2020); Kai Heron and Jodi Dean, “Revolution or Ruin”, *e-flux Journal* no. 110 (June 2020), pp. 1–15; and Ben Stahnke, “Lenin, Ecology, and Revolutionary Russia”, *Peace, Land and Bread* (February 2021).

² John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2018); Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017); John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Brett Clark, *The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

³ István Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), p. 249.

⁴ Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), p. 24 (emphasis is our own).

reduction of nature to exchange-value and treatment of natural resources as infinite and inexhaustible, the Bolsheviks, viewing nature as one of the two sources of all value, attempted to reorganize production so as to halt and reverse the destruction of nature wrought by the alienated capitalist social metabolism and, moreover, to achieve the sustainable future use of natural resources based on the foremost dialectical ecological science of the day.⁵

Building upon the Bolshevik policies regarding the protection and sustainable use of nature and natural resources, Lenin sought to determine the direction of development of ecological and environmental sciences in the Soviet Union by bringing research into line with the material needs of the population. To this end, Lenin and the Bolsheviks tasked Soviet agronomist and geneticist Nikolai Vavilov “with the responsibility for organizing an institute for genetics and plant breeding to end the chronic problem of insufficient food production in Russia”.⁶ Through his study of Marxism, Lenin had developed a keen understanding of the role played by nature in the processes of human labor and in the productive relations of society, and as such understood the necessity of directing state resources towards the study of environmental sciences such as ecology, agronomy, genetics, epigenetics, biosphere science, conservation science, and so on.⁷ By developing in accordance with a dialectical account of reality, science in the Soviet Union was not to take the same path as that of capitalist bourgeois science, which operates according to the bourgeois framework of mechanism and the accumulative logic of the capital system.⁸ It was instead to be founded on the principles of a materialism

⁵ On this matter, John Bellamy Foster has observed: “All these contributions to ecology were products of the early Soviet era, and of the dialectical, revolutionary forms of thinking that it engendered. The ultimate tragedy of the Soviet relation to the environment, which eventually took a form that has been characterized as ‘ecocide’, has tended to obscure the enormous dynamism of early Soviet ecology of the 1920s, and the role that Lenin personally played in promoting conservation [...] In his writings and political pronouncements Lenin insisted that human labor could not simply substitute for the forces of nature and that a ‘rational exploitation’ of the environment, or the scientific management of natural resources in accord with the principles of conservation, was essential. As the leader of the young Soviet state he argued for ‘preservation of the monuments of nature’ [...] Hence, under Lenin’s protection the Soviet conservation movement prospered in the 1920s, particularly during the New Economic Policy period (1921–1928).” Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, p. 243.

⁶ William DeJong-Lambert, *The Cold War Politics of Genetic Research: An Introduction to the Lysenko Affair* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), p. 6.

⁷ “These considerations on capitalist agriculture and the recycling of organic wastes led Marx to a concept of sustainability to be implemented in a society of associated producers concerned with the rational organization of their metabolic relation to nature. This analysis was later to inspire Kautsky and Lenin.” John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, “Classical Marxism and the Second Law of Thermodynamics: Marx/Engels, the Heat Death of the Universe Hypothesis, and the Origins of Ecological Economics”, *Organization & Environment* 21, no. 1 (March 2008), p. 27.

⁸ See Christopher Caudwell, *The Crisis in Physics* (New York: Verso, 2017).

that recognized the historical and dialectical character of the relationship between nature and society and was to serve the purpose of advancing a society of associated producers beyond the realm of natural necessity. Armed with this conception of science, the Bolsheviks expressed the “belief that communism made possible the development of science on a scale capitalist countries could only dream about”.⁹

Finally, contrary to the ideological misconceptions about Lenin,¹⁰ throughout his life he exhibited an attitude of care and concern for nature which was later reflected in his policies.¹¹ From Marxism, Lenin had gleaned the importance of the metabolic relation between nature and society and understood that a rational and sustainably planned economy could only be achieved by advancing a form of technical and scientific knowledge that sought not to control nature for purposes of accumulation, but to approach nature in a sustainable way in order to advance society beyond the realm of material necessity, to that of true freedom.¹²

Lenin and the Bolsheviks were entrapped by the force of historical circumstances to deal with very particular issues of the time (namely, responding to intra-capitalist struggle in the early 20th century and challenging the Imperialist order). Our historically specific moment, however, forces our attention to the ecological crisis engendered by the capitalist mode of production and to challenging a global capitalist order actively bringing about the destruction of the conditions for (human) life on earth. While these two moments have their differences and specificities, Leninism remains the only viable dialectical and revolutionary theory and practice with which to confront their challenges. Leninist politics in the 21st century must be reconstituted in order to give primacy to the foremost capitalist crisis of our time – the socio-metabolic rift of the capitalist mode of production. We will now turn to an exegetical account of the dialectical materialist philosophy in which an Ecological Leninist politics is grounded.

⁹ DeJong-Lambert, *The Cold War Politics of Genetic Research*, p. 6.

¹⁰ As Ben Stahnke presciently notes: “Lenin’s ecology was not overt. It was not the overarching point of his politics, and, as such, has been both overshadowed and obfuscated by history and time.” Stahnke, “Lenin, Ecology, and Revolutionary Russia”.

¹¹ Douglas Weiner remarks that “[d]espite his silence on the subject, Lenin appears genuinely to have loved nature and felt comfortable in the wild”. While the importance of Lenin’s attitude to nature is anecdotal, we know that Lenin had both a personal and theoretical appreciation for nature, reading books such as “M. N. Bogdanov’s *From the Life of Russian Nature*...[and] V. N. Sukachev’s *Swamps, Their Formation, Development and Properties*” (Weiner, *Models of Nature*, p. 23).

¹² “The realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends [...]” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 958–959.

Lenin, the Philosopher: Human-Nature Relations and Dialectical Materialism

“[T]here can be no ‘impartial’ social science in a society based on class struggle.”¹³

The *necessity* of articulating a (Leninist) politics grounded in dialectical-materialist epistemology arises from the inseparability between ontology, epistemology, and political analysis within the Marxist materialist tradition. All too often, these fields appear disassociated, reinforcing the apolitical character of epistemological premises as “value-neutral”, ontology as de-historicized empiricism,¹⁴ and politics as a realm standing independently from historically constituted and socially mediated conceptual frameworks. We, on the contrary, assert that a dialectical-ecological framework, an *Ecological Leninism*, combines the objectivity of a certain methodological approach (dialectical/historical materialism), and its ontological presuppositions, with the normative element of an intentionally directed political project. Far from being, “value-neutral”, a dialectical materialist epistemology provides the ability of a *concrete* and *effective* discernment of objective political problems, in our case, the *protracted* ecological crises, premised on a normative ontological ground which affirms the reproduction of human life.

While Lenin’s political theory has received due attention, here we show that his concern with ontology and epistemology throughout the entirety of his oeuvre reflects a systematically consistent approach to a determinate political project premised on an understanding of the human-nature relation as a social metabolic process. Grounding his ontological and epistemological concerns, his approach to the human-nature relation, to a theory of knowledge, allows us to show both his maturation as an original thinker, but also the coherence of his political praxis, one which remains relevant today.

Lenin’s concern with the inseparability of a philosophical method and a praxically oriented politics developed early on. In 1904, Alexander Bogdanov presented Lenin with his book *Empiriomonism*. What struck Lenin was not simply Bogdanov’s flirtation with the idealism of Mach and Avenarius, but the political implications of the philosophical approach itself,¹⁵ since for Lenin a Marxist political project is “inseparably bound up with its philosophical principles”.¹⁶

¹³ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 19 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 23.

¹⁴ For an account of the early 20th century debates on ontology and the rise of Neo-Kantianism and positivism, see John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), pp. 230–249.

¹⁵ Marcel Liebman, *Leninism under Lenin* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), pp. 442–443.

¹⁶ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 15 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 405.

In what would almost certainly be denounced by bourgeois theoreticians as “dogmatic”, Lenin writes, “by following the path of Marxian theory we shall draw closer and closer to objective truth (without ever exhausting it); but by following *any other path* we shall arrive at nothing but confusion and lies”.¹⁷ What is, or what did Lenin believe to be, the “path of Marxian theory”? How is this path different from a bourgeois approach to “objective truth” and what does this difference imply for a Leninist political project that remains acutely sensitive to ecological concerns?

The “dialectical method”, Lenin writes, “requires us to regard society as a living organism in its functioning and development”.¹⁸ Society understood as a “living organism” indicates the transformative character of social relations, on the one hand, and its necessary situatedness within nature, on the other. To regard society as a living organism is to approach sociality in a nonreductive form that retains its *relational* embeddedness within nature, as that from which it arises, that through which it develops, and that upon which it is necessarily dependent. Already, we see Lenin’s insight as not falling prey either to binary categorization, nor to collapsing the identity between nature/society.

From a close study of Engels’s writings on the dialectical character of nature, Lenin develops a relational conception of ontology, one which centers the unity yet irreducibility of motion and matter, and thus articulates the *objective and inter-affective determinations* which condition natural and social development, albeit in differing forms. For Lenin, a dialectical method captures precisely “the interdependence and the closest and indissoluble connection between all aspects of any phenomena (history constantly revealing ever new aspects), a connection that provides a uniform and universal process of motion, one that follows definite laws”.¹⁹ There are several epistemological claims here. The first characterizes the classic materialist position: preceding and beyond the conceptions of the human mind, there exists an objective world, nature, which is both universal and consistent with itself – that is, contains its own internal laws that characterize the limits of its process of becoming, its motion. Secondly, this objective world standing independently of human thought (though to which the human is always in relation) is the framework through which all material determinations are connected and interdependent and thus is the causal ground of the motion of material becoming. Third, Lenin makes a subtle but very important parenthetical remark, which exemplifies his attentiveness to *non-linear*, dialectical change: the claim that “history constantly reveals new aspects”. Against the fixity of metaphysical propositions, con-

¹⁷ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 14 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 143.

¹⁸ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 189.

¹⁹ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 54.

trary to the retroactive eternalization of the capitalist social form, Lenin shows how human knowledge, its relative social character within the absoluteness of nature, has the agential power to shift its understanding so as to reveal *new knowledge* about the past (both social and natural history) and thus reconsider its contemporary, existing social situatedness, and change it through conscious practice.

“The identity of opposites”, Lenin notes, “is the recognition (discovery) of the contradictory, *mutually exclusive*, opposite tendencies in *all* phenomena and processes of nature (*including* mind and society)”.²⁰ To say, “everything is connected” is empty. The relevant question is precisely how these connections arise, their social and natural historical origins, their material expression and consequences. *How* these connections are epistemologically determined represents the validity of the method applied, thereby revealing the determinate *political praxis* that emerges from it. The “*opposing tendencies in all phenomena and processes of nature*” identifies the objectivity of contradictions, relational contradictions. Here, contradictions are both internal to objects themselves, phenomena, and manifest *between* phenomena. The point of departure for human knowledge is the recognition of these two kinds of contradictions, which mediate each other and therefore reciprocally condition each other.

The reciprocal conditioning of these contradictions, however, represents an identity relation between subject and object. The subject, always already a social and historical subject, recognizes (even if they do not understand) the movement of the object, the object’s ability to escape totalization, because the subject recognizes its own *self-movement*. But, both the subject and object have different *forms* of movement predicated on their own limited set of determinations, the laws that govern their processual material becoming: “The concept of law is one of the stages of the cognition of unity and connection of the reciprocal dependence and totality of the world process.”²¹ The reciprocal dependence in question highlights the transformative character of both subjects and objects by means of an epistemological grasping of their unity and connection and, negatively, their forms of disconnection (their “*oppositional tendencies*”). In this way, the object and the knowledge that it provides are subject to change, subject to developing *new meaning*, new knowledge, precisely because the object’s own self-movement (its internal contradictions) begets an excess that temporally extends itself. This extension, however, is relational: the extension occurs only by means of the interconnections through which its excess becomes. The excess, thus, represents at the same time, a lack. Contrary to a Hegelian absolute identity, the relationality between determinate subjects and determinate objects is characterized by the lack, absence – and the ontological and epistemological impossibility – of a totalizing identity in which difference

²⁰ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), pp. 357–358.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–151.

may be collapsed, “the unity of opposites”. Thus, Lenin claims, “[t]he condition for the knowledge of all processes of the world [...] in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites”.²² The processual motion of subjects and objects and their material becoming, their ontologically constitutive transformative character, is the ground out of which the very possibility of knowledge arises. The emergent character of processual matter-in-motion is at once that which unifies the subject-object identity relation *and* that which gives rise to their oppositional relation, both their interdependence and relative autonomy. Thus, human sociality itself represents a break, a qualitative “leap”, a necessary contingency of nature’s becoming that nevertheless remains embedded within nature itself and is conditioned by the *motion of nature*.

For Lenin, the proper conception of motion “is directed precisely to knowledge of the source of ‘self’-movement [...] [this] *alone* furnishes the key [...] to ‘leaps’, to the ‘break in continuity’, to the ‘transformation into the opposite’, to the destruction of the old and the emergence of the new”.²³ To know the “source of self-movement” is to know the *necessary* causal determinations through which self-movement is propelled; that is, the process by which transformation and change occur. Lenin notes, “Causality [...] is only a small particle of universal interconnection, but [...] a particle not of the subjective but of the objectively real interconnection”.²⁴ The overcoming of pure subjectivity, which is itself a metaphysical abstraction, is predicated on subjectivity’s extension beyond itself toward the recognition of the necessary causal determinations that participate in conditioning its social, natural, *objective* existence.

Lenin further emphasizes the volatility of knowledge, its historically conditioned character as always belonging to a specific social form. The object of knowledge, consciousness’ object, is itself in motion: “There is nothing in the world but matter in motion and matter in motion cannot move otherwise than in space and time.”²⁵ Here, Lenin is not making arbitrary metaphysical claims. Matter-in-motion occurs determinately *through* objective spatiality and temporality. Consciousness is exposed to and confronts matter-in-motion within a spatial and temporal setting and approaches matter-in-motion *from* a situated history that has conditioned this *social* consciousness itself, since, Lenin notes, “materialism applied to the social life of mankind has to explain *social* consciousness as the outcome of *social* being”.²⁶ Consciousness *grasps* the object, comes to know it, only in historical and social terms and thus the object appears not as such but in a relationally situated form.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 360.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁵ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 14, p. 175.

²⁶ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, p. 55.

Between historical-social consciousness and its object, a relation exists predicated on both a lack and an excess. The lack marks the *incompleteness* of absolute knowledge due to the *excess* of movement that the object contains within itself.²⁷ Knowledge must always be limited knowledge. Dialectical materialism, therefore, “recognizes the relativity of all our knowledge, not in the sense of denying objective truth, but in the sense that the limits of approximation of our knowledge to this truth are historically conditional”.²⁸ Against the positivism of bourgeois science and the relativity of idealist philosophical ruminations, Lenin endorses the changing character of objectivity and thus the changing character of the social subjectivity which emerges from, is determined through, and agentially negotiates within this objectivity itself. Such endorsement is not, however, a rejection of the natural sciences. On the contrary, for Lenin, the natural sciences need to be taken seriously and interpreted dialectically. Here, Lenin shows the *open-ended*, non-dogmatic, character of a truly *dialectical* materialism that is consistent with his philosophical elucidation of a theory of knowledge when he notes, quoting Engels approvingly, that “Engels says explicitly that ‘with each epoch-making discovery even in the sphere of natural science, materialism has to change its form’”.²⁹ Thus, a reconsideration of the normative intentions of a Marxist project through a dialectical interpretation of the findings of the natural sciences “[...] is an essential requirement of Marxism”.³⁰

The methodological determination of this objectivity arising from a dialectical-materialist, scientific approach, contains a normative impetus predicated on the social relevance and purpose of the knowledge in question. Knowledge of the world is never merely for itself, it indicates the realm of differentiated potentialities expressed by relationally situated objects, their interconnections and causal relations, and the possible forms by which such potentialities can be actualized through social practice: “[m]an’s consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it [...]. The world does not satisfy man and man decides to change it by his activity.”³¹ Social consciousness reflects the objective world not because of a mirroring, an immediate correspondence, but because social consciousness develops out of and through the objectivity of the world, a world imbued with heterogenous social mediations. The movement of the world objectively reflects *through* the subjectivity of social consciousness, not *from* it.

²⁷ This conception of lack or absence is particularly relevant to the development of a dialectical-materialist method in line with Lenin’s thought. For more contemporary articulations consistent, in our view, with Lenin’s method, see Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2008) and Adrian Johnston’s “Lacano-Hegelian” analysis in *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, vol. 2: *A Weak Nature Alone* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 14, p. 137.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

³¹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, pp. 212–213.

The limits of knowledge are predicated on the “active side”, to borrow Marx’s words, of social subjectivity’s practice. Indeed, against the metaphysical conception of truth as fixed and immutable, against the positivist conception of truth as “value-neutral”, for Lenin, “[t]ruth is a process. From the subjective idea, man advances towards objective truth *through* ‘practice’ (and technique)”.³²

Truth, in Lenin’s view, is a process, that is, the mediation between social subjectivity and the objective processes of material becoming that retains an ontological potential of transformation: truth can potentially become its opposite either from the development of new knowledge or because of the relationally conditioned “self”-movement of the object itself, since the object too is shaped by the causal interconnections, relations, and inter-affective dynamics of other phenomena. Thus, Lenin claims, “[i]ndividual being (an object, a phenomenon, etc.) is (only) one side of the Idea (of truth). Truth requires still other sides of reality, which likewise appear only as independent and individual. *Only in their totality and their relation* is truth realized”.³³ This rigorous and original *materialization* of Hegelian philosophy exemplifies Lenin’s systematic relational ontology. An individuated object theoretically disconnected from its relational situatedness can only result in a one-sided and necessarily incomplete account of the truth it brings forth. A dialectical-materialist method, however, grounds the individuated object through establishing the interconnections and historically specific totality in which it subsists, to which it belongs *qua* this individuated object, since, as Lenin notes, “[e]very individual enters incompletely into the universal”.³⁴ The incompleteness here is predicated on the kinetic character of both the individuated object and the totality in which it emerges. Nonetheless, the specification of the conditions of its appearance, the *cognizing* of the determinate relations involved in the *form* of the individuated object’s relational situatedness, does allow for human knowledge to *approximate* – to “realize” – its truth. This coherence requires the methodological prowess of accounting for the essence of the *interdependent* determinations which only “appear” as independent yet objectively participate in the realization of truth regarding the relationally situated individuated object; for, Lenin reminds us, “[e]very individual is connected by thousands of transitions with other kinds of individuals (things, phenomena, processes)”.³⁵

Thus, for Lenin, truth is grounded through understanding why an object *appears* in a particular form in accordance with determinate, necessary relations that require its appearance in that form and not any other. Such appearance is never, in Lenin’s view, dislocated from the essence of the object. Essence itself is not fixed but subject

³² *Ibid.*, p. 201.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

to change depending on the forms of interactions with other objects to which it is in necessary relation, depending, in other words, on the determinate movement of totality. Appearance, then, is fundamentally necessary: “the appearance is essential”.³⁶ Epistemologically – even *phenomenologically* – appearance is the first indication that calls upon consciousness, that directs consciousness towards an intrigue of the object, as a knowable and relevant object. This moment of intrigue, in turn, demands further investigation from which the essence is made relationally coherent, that is, the investigation from which truth is cognitively retained in an approximate, historically specific form. Indeed, Lenin affirms, “[h]uman thought goes endlessly deeper from appearance to essence, from essence of the first order, as it were, to essence of the second order, and so on *without end*”.³⁷

Lenin asserts, “Human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which endlessly approximates a series of circles, a spiral”.³⁸ The process of human knowledge is defined as a spiral, that is, by the dialectic between linearity and non-linearity in terms of the truth it seeks to obtain. Human agency, expressed through social practice, is constantly negotiating between the novel achievements of knowledge, which are subject to redirection or reorientation by social mediations, the permeation of the historical, already existing knowledges, and the purpose to which this knowledge is applied. The non-linearity is present here insofar as the *spirality* of human knowledge is at once a return to, and superseding of, the historical elements of categories once confronted with the ontological excess of reality in persistent *processual motion*.

Thus, Lenin emphasizes that “[c]ognition is [...] the endless approximation of thought to the object”. The truth that belongs to the historically, socially, relationally *situated* object can be grasped by cognition only through and in this situatedness, since both the object and cognition are subject to transformation by means of practical activity. Such processual truth, however, reflects the relevance of the object for human cognition in a specific space and time. Lenin continues: “[t]he *reflection* of nature in man’s thought must be understood not ‘lifelessly’, not ‘abstractly’, *not devoid of movement, not without contradictions*, but in the eternal *process* of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution.”³⁹ Nature is reflected in human thought because of the contradictions internal to the human subject, internal to the object, and the incessant, dynamic relation between human subjects themselves and the objects to which they are exposed. Practice, however, “solves”, so to speak, certain contradictions, immediate contradictions, without eliminating the propulsion of continuous contradictions,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

because the latter stand outside human determinations, are at once the lack and excess of an ontologically *kinetic* human-nature relation.

Lenin further complicates the naïve understanding of reflection: “But this is not a simple, not an immediate, not a complete reflection, but the process of a series of abstractions.”⁴⁰ Reflection, then, is not a relation of immediacy. Instead, it is an ontologically *kinetic* facet of the social, human dimension of nature – an internal differentiation of nature itself. Nature knows itself through the social mediations arising from the ontological condition of socialized humanity. Lenin continues, “[h]ere there are *actually*, objectively, *three* members: 1) nature, 2) human cognition = the human brain (as the highest product of this same nature), and 3) the form of reflection of nature in human cognition, and this form consists precisely of concepts, laws, categories”.⁴¹ Notice that Lenin gives primacy to nature as the condition of possibility of human cognition, that out of which human cognition emerges and from which it develops a relative autonomy. Human cognition, therefore, presupposes its own lack, its own insufficiency, but satisfies this lack in a spatio-temporal sense through its appropriation of the natural world in a socialized form, a world that is *ontologically* always in a relational excess to it. The third moment, the “form of reflection”, is determined by the historical situation in which human cognition actualizes itself. Thus, the specific *form of reflection* can only be understood by a method able to articulate the contradictory process of unity and distinctness, a universal claim about human beings as such, their natural proclivities qua cognizing beings, *and* the distinct character of the “form of reflection” as it pertains to and emerges from a concrete, historically specific social form.

Since, for Lenin, the form of reflection of human cognition is the material expression of a historically and socially situated human, the concepts that arise from this immediate reflection are mediated by previous “reflections”. Lenin notes, “[h]uman concepts are not fixed but are eternally in movement, they pass into one another, they flow into one another, otherwise they do not reflect living life”.⁴² An ontology premised on determinate and processual motion necessarily implies the fluid essence of concepts and their ties to the material conditions from which they emerge. Thus, concepts themselves – and, therefore, the truths they produce – require the methodological ability of determining the specificity of their movement, “of their interconnection, of their mutual transitions”.⁴³ Without this methodological quality, “living life”, the objective motion of natural and social processes falls prey to “dead being”, becomes static and reified. Subjects and objects, the real composition of a social and natural world, lose their vitality, lose their actual potentialities, are emptied of their transformative character,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

and thus the dominant thought of a historically specific social metabolic order is able to justify its eternality over-against the potential for revolutionary change.

Such fixity is, to be sure, incompatible with Lenin's approach to philosophy and praxis. It is not only the relations between concepts, and their changing forms, but also the relations of and between things, *and* the relations between things and concepts, that provide the key to Lenin's implicit understanding of the social metabolic relation between humans and nature. Lenin writes,

The totality of all sides of the phenomenon, of reality and their (reciprocal) relations – that is what truth is composed of. The relations (= transitions = contradictions) of notions = the main content of logic, by which these concepts (and their relations, transitions, contradictions) are shown as reflections of the objective word. The dialectics of *things* produces the dialectics of *ideas*, and not vice versa.⁴⁴

Totality implies both natural and social processes operating in irreducible yet necessary unity. For Lenin, both nature and sociality retain distinctive essential determinations that orient their kinetic ontological condition, their material becoming. Nonetheless, they develop relationally by means of each other. For any truth claim – and, therefore, any normative claim – to gain validity and social relevance, the dialectical-materialist method must account for the relationality of which the claim is composed in that it must show the reflections of the objective world to which it refers, that is, a historically specific and determinate totality that participates in and underlies the claim itself. That “the dialectics of *things* produces the dialectics of *ideas*” does not mean simply that objects give rise to the dialectic of and between concepts. Lenin's observation here is at once subtler and more profound, being predicated on his differentiation between the laws and determinations that condition the movement of nature, on the one hand, and human sociality, on the other. In other words, he is differentiating between the kind of dialectic that belongs to each and another dialectic that mediates their relation to each other. Namely, the objective dialectics of nature, of relationally situated and inter-affective objects themselves, actively *engenders* subjective (social) dialectics through the *practical dialectics* of their inter-relation. In this way, from the objective dialectics of nature, the objective dialectics of inter-active and inter-affective relationally mediated objects, unfolds a historically situated and determinately *socialized* human cognition, a subjective dialectics, the dialectics of (social) consciousness itself: “[n]ot only is the transition from matter to consciousness dialectical, but also that from sensation to thought”.⁴⁵ This qualitative rupture, however, is not an absolute separation of externalized processes, but rather is *mediated* by a *practical dialectics*, a relational,

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

active, dialectic between the objective dialectics of nature and the subjective dialectic of human sociality. This “triadic” dialectics, as Zhang Yibing calls it,⁴⁶ is premised on a kinetic, relational ontology that emphasizes the changing, transformative character of determinate, mediated (social and natural) development.

Differentiating between the kind of dialectic that pertains to a particular ontological category is possible because of the “unity of opposites” in Lenin’s account. Further exploring this differentiation will allow us to tease out Lenin’s implicit understanding of the human-nature relation as a *social metabolic process* and, thus, demonstrate the ecological proclivities that can be constitutive of a politics emerging from his dialectical-materialist method.

The laws of the external world, which are divided into *mechanical* and *chemical* [according to Hegel] [...] are the bases of man’s *purposive* activity. In his practical activity, man is confronted with the objective world, is dependent on it, and determines his activity by it. From this aspect, from the aspect of the practical (purposive) activity of man, the mechanical (and chemical) causality of the world (of nature) appears as though something *external*, as though something secondary, as though something hidden. Two forms of the *objective* process: nature (mechanical and chemical) and the *purposive* activity of man. The mutual relation of these forms. At the beginning, man’s ends appear foreign (“other”) in relation to nature. Human consciousness [...] reflects the essence, the substance of nature, but at the same time this consciousness is something external in relation to nature (not immediately, not simply, coinciding with it).⁴⁷

For Lenin, the laws that govern natural processes are not identical to the immanent laws of social processes, though they bear an obvious and necessary relation. The natural world is the framework that constitutes the limits and determinate possibilities of the subjective dialectics of human sociality. The relation between these objective limits – that is, existent actualities and determinate possibilities – and the subjective dialectic of human sociality is one mediated through *practical dialectics*. This practical dialectic encompasses the active, human appropriation of nature. Thus, out of this *relationally situated practical dialectic* emerges *purposiveness*. Socialized humanity engages in *purposeful, practical activity*. This conception of purpose is not metaphysically determined, not an *a priori* postulate of activity as such. On the contrary, purpose develops *immanently* through the *techniques of transformative activity* that arise from geopolitically distinct social formations. In this view, techniques of transformative activity that are purposeful characterize the aesthetically distinct, heterogeneous social practices that

⁴⁶ See Zhang Yibing, *Lenin Revisited: His Entire Thinking Process on Marxist Philosophy* (London: Canut Publishers, 2012), pp. 399–416.

⁴⁷ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, pp. 187–188.

differentiate societies from one another; their respective traditions, cultures, arts, all of which are constitutive features of a historically specific mode of production. Purposive activity is, nonetheless, *objective* activity that acts upon an *objective* nature. These two objective processes retain a reciprocity in terms of mutual inter-affectivity, mutual conditioning, and mediated determinacy. Naïve social consciousness experiences this nature as “other”, as *pure* externality. However, it can be methodologically determined that such externality is not absolute, not the “outside” of human sociality. Instead, human sociality itself is relatively, not absolutely, *subsumed* by the objective dialectic of nature, that is, embedded in the “universal metabolism of nature”⁴⁸ yet not reducible to it.

Lenin concludes by asserting that “human consciousness reflects the essence, the substance of nature”. This claim makes sense only insofar as we are methodologically equipped to determine the essence of nature itself. Given the entirety of the preceding analysis, we may venture to assert that, for Lenin, the *essence of nature* is kinetic transformation, relationally determinate, processual motion that undergoes necessary and contingent *change*. The essence of nature – kinetic transformation – is reflected by human consciousness; that is, human consciousness *contains and expresses this essence, kinetic transformation*, within the limits of its own determinate materiality. Though relating by means of the same essence, human consciousness – always already *social consciousness* – actualizes itself, lets its essence shine (Hegel, *Scheinen*),⁴⁹ gives shape to its essence, differentiates itself (through kinetic, transformative activity), in a necessarily distinct *form* that diverges from the kinetic transformative unfolding of natural processes. For this reason, human consciousness is never reducible to nature alone, never coincides with it absolutely. Neither can human consciousness “comprehend = reflect = mirror nature *as a whole*, in its completeness”,⁵⁰ since both nature and socially situated human consciousness are undergoing, ontologically, ceaseless *kinetic transformation* and thus are by definition always incomplete.

Furthermore, despite this ontological excess that gives nature its incomplete quality and human knowledge a relative, interminable, lack, nature still gives itself to human sociality in immediacy. Herein, Lenin makes a phenomenological point: “Nature is both concrete *and* abstract, *both* phenomenon *and* essence, *both* moment and relation.”⁵¹ In its actual immediacy, nature retains both the most obvious and most mystifying contradiction; for human consciousness intuitively realizes its natural condition, its belonging to nature, its relational finitude, at the same time that nature appears as an

⁴⁸ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 30 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), pp. 54–66.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Hegel’s discussion of the relational determination of “shine” and “essence” throughout the *Doctrine of Essence* (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 341–353).

⁵⁰ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, p. 182.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

external aggregate of disconnected, individuated objects. Yet, human consciousness can come to know – indeed, *must come to know* – its own determinate and interconnected existence, because its self-reproduction requires a *practice* which, albeit expressed in multifaceted form, is dependent on nature itself, as Lenin writes, “[f]rom living perception to abstract thought, *and from this to practice*”.⁵²

Though nature is always immediately and objectively present before human consciousness, the immediacy of nature is always dialectically mediated by a spatially arranged and temporally conditioned human consciousness. Human consciousness, thus, *attunes* to the immediacy of nature by means of the mediations of the historical and social purposeful activity from which it arose and through which it was conditioned. This position exemplifies, once again, the dialectic of linearity and non-linearity inherent to dialectical-materialist analysis. The necessity of mediated immediacy shows that human consciousness is, in this very immediacy, nothing more than the crystallized and condensed result of historical mediations through which practice must realize itself immediately and objectively. In this way, the past is not moving away from the present but makes its presence clear as the necessary, active mediation between the mediated-immediacy of consciousness in the present and the *practical expression of consciousness*, historical and social purposeful activity, *oriented toward the future* through purposive-transformative activity within the bounds of immediate actuality. Moreover, human consciousness *qua* social consciousness and human purposive-transformative activity as always already historically specific and socially distinct (the universal character of these categories necessarily implied), means that for Lenin world history itself operates in a multi-linear fashion: “It is undialectical, unscientific, and theoretically wrong to regard the course of world history as smooth and always in a forward direction, without occasional gigantic leaps back.”⁵³

Without a method that retains the normative dimension of objectivity – as processually determinate and differentiated forms of relationally interdependent social and natural motion – the existing state of society, and its mode of reproduction, is thought to be the *only* form of sociality possible. Against this, Lenin’s dialectical materialism consists of positing an ontological incompleteness while emphasizing the value of human cognition’s practical relevance for social transformation by means of purposeful transformative activity; thus, Lenin’s politics emerges not as a ready-made program, nor as a predetermined, “authoritarian” and scientistic objectivism, but rather as a methodological application of Marxian dialectical materialism to the concrete, material conditions of a historically specific social form. In this way, Lenin’s philosophical articulation of dialectical materialism is not, contrary to countless accusations, an

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵³ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 22 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 310.

exaltation of matter as the primary metaphysical concept⁵⁴ which guides all concepts, nor is it an exaltation of motion as a metaphysical category that explains all things. If anything, it is an exaltation of *determinate and relational change*, a dialectics of matter-in-motion expressing itself through objective transformations within space and time; both in terms of natural processes *and* social processes (the latter understood by Lenin with impressive rigor as a universal heterogeneity). Thus, we argue that the category that implicitly reigns supreme throughout Lenin's oeuvre, that dialectically underlies and unites his ontological, epistemological, and, therefore, his political observations and prescriptions, is the category of μεταβολή (metabolē),⁵⁵ that is, metabolism or, what amounts to the same: *dialectical change, transformation*.

Ecological Leninism: Social Metabolism and the Political

We choose to highlight the category of metabolism because it accounts for the emphasis of motion, the difference between the forms of development of sociality and nature, the political directives arising from Lenin's articulation of dialectical materialism, and, consequently, allows us to initiate a dialogue between our reading of Lenin and the contemporary Metabolic Rift Theory, and therefore articulate an Ecological Leninism in congruence with it. Additionally, our analysis seeks to situate Lenin beyond his classification as a purely political thinker and politician (or vulgar dogmatist),⁵⁶ and instead position him as belonging to a lineage of original, creative, and rigorous materialist thought. What distinguishes Lenin in this regard is how seriously he engaged with the idea of the inseparability of matter and motion and how he explored the consequences of this unity in terms of ontology, science, method, and politics. For this reason, we suggest that,⁵⁷ beyond his existing notoriety as a revolutionary, Lenin also ought to be viewed as part of what Ernst Bloch termed the "Aristotelian Left",⁵⁸ as well as part of the Left Hegelian tradition concerned with *Naturphilosophie*, and as one of "[t]he Three Fathers of *Naturdialektik*", as Adrian Johnston correctly notes.⁵⁹

Briefly, for Aristotle, specifically in his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, the category of metabolism plays a central, though subtle, role. There, metabolism is defined modally and

⁵⁴ For similar and even more vulgar critiques of Lenin, see Neil Harding, *Leninism* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1996).

⁵⁵ Though Lenin does not mention this term explicitly, it is clear that he was very fond of Aristotle, writing approving notes of his *Metaphysics* (Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 38, pp. 365–372).

⁵⁶ Adorno castigates Lenin as an unsophisticated dogmatist. See, for example, Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden: Polity Press, 2008), p. 21.

⁵⁷ As there is not enough space to develop this genealogy here, we will leave it for a future work.

⁵⁸ See Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, trans. Loren Goldman and Peter Thompson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁵⁹ See Adrian Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*, vol. 2.

through its direct connection to φύσις (*nature*) and κίνησις (*motion*, which for Aristotle is predicated on the combination of actuality and potentiality).⁶⁰ Relevant here is that the unity of motion and metabolism signifies the ontological necessity of change, of transformation by means or as the process of material motion.⁶¹

Here we move from Lenin proper to an *Ecological Leninism* and this can only be achieved methodologically. It has been argued that a properly dialectical materialism can methodologically determine objectivity while simultaneously retaining a normative basis.⁶² The question is, how is this expressed politically? How does Lenin's dialectical materialist method account for a *political ecological theory*?

Though Lenin does not use the term metabolism explicitly, our analysis above demonstrates that he methodologically stipulates *how* the necessary inter-affective relations between the subjective dialectics of human sociality and the objective dialectics of nature are mediated by a practical dialectics which structures the *form* by which the interchange between the two (between subjective and objective dialectics) can be understood as a *metabolic process*, that is, as purposive-transformative activity (that is, social labor) engaged in determinate and relationally situated *change*.

This metabolic process, as a "rational abstraction",⁶³ can be further specified by means of delineating a historically specific sociality, moving thereby from the abstract to the concrete. Therein, the geopolitically and relationally situated social form becomes the object of analysis, not as a static and fixed aggregate, but as a *self-transforming, determinate, and processual motion* of a practical dialectics *qua* human-nature metabolic mediation. Underlying this motion – indeed, what comprises the forms of this motion – is the objectivity of the purposeful-transformative activity of socialized humanity in its direct interchange, metabolic relation, with objective nature, that is, *labor*. In this way, the *political* component of Lenin's method seeks to reveal the organizational structure that governs the processual motion of such determinate and socially specific purposive-transformative activities (that is, social labor). It achieves this through an

⁶⁰ See Remi Brague, "Aristotle's Definition of Motion and Its Ontological Implications", *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990), pp. 1–22.

⁶¹ A full exploration of Lenin's indirect relationship to Aristotle is outside the scope of this paper. For a brief discussion of Lenin's sympathy to Aristotle, see Savas Michael-Matsas, "Lenin and the Path of Dialectics", in *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*, ed. Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 101–119. For a thorough analysis of Marx's indebtedness to Aristotle, see Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 1985).

⁶² For a similar account of how dialectical materialism can epistemologically determine objectivity while not shying away from its normative elements, see Kenny Knowlton Jr., "Motion & Materialism: On Tran Duc Thao's Philosophical Framework", in *Peace, Land, and Bread: A Scholarly Journal of Revolutionary Theory and Practice*, vol. 5, forthcoming.

⁶³ See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

immanent analysis predicated on differentiating the structural form of the existing political-economic relations which serve as the mediating forces of the aforementioned activity of social labor (practical dialectics), the organization of their particular relations of production. Thus, the method of Leninist political prescriptions arises not from a preset idea, but from an understanding of the relational social arrangements belonging to a historically specific, geopolitical social formation constituted through, and characterized by, historically antagonistic social relations – antagonistic as a result of conflicting material interests and the determinate relations of political power that mediate these interests.

To reiterate, this political method is premised on a relational ontology of processual motion. This relationally situated motion, however, is *not* motion as such. The move from an ontological account to a political account, however, is complex, since political relations are, on the one hand, mediated by historical-ideological tendencies and, on the other, affect the agency and conditions of reproduction of *living* human beings. Lenin notes, “all classes and all countries are regarded, not statically, but dynamically, that is, not in a state of immobility, but *in motion* (whose laws are determined by the economic conditions of existence of each class).”⁶⁴ Through the analytical ability to differentiate the causal relations of “self”-movement of socially situated subjects, Lenin captures the decisive conditions and mediations that *determine* the objectivity of this social motion – the motion between social subjects – by identifying that which antagonistically interconnects the social subjects in question: their class position. Specifically, any given society is composed of inter-related subjects, but such relations between subjects are not arbitrary. On the contrary, they are related determinately, express *objective social relations*, through an objective historical system that structures and positions – politically and economically *arranges* – them in terms of a definite social metabolic order, a given mode of production. The relation between social groups, as situated within and through the social metabolic process, reveals their *class position*. Lenin writes, “[c]lasses are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production.”⁶⁵ The class structure of society expresses the historically grounded relations between social subjects and determines the objective limits of the modalities through which members of different classes metabolically appropriate the necessities that sustain their (biological) reproduction. The differentiation between each class, their determinate location within the existing mode of production, can be methodologically discerned and, thus, the *causal interconnections* that enforce the dominance of one class over another, and the *forms* of their domination, become an object of knowledge, the result of a particular politi-

⁶⁴ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, p.75

⁶⁵ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 421.

cal method. The “truth” expressed as a result of this method, then, is not a mere fact, independent of any normative commitment. Rather, the forms of social organization, class differentiation, relations of exploitation and domination indicate the *possible forms* of setting in motion a political praxis that seeks to abolish the very conditions that reproduce such relations.

Insofar as the social becoming of material life is constituted by an ontology of dialectically kinetic transformation, then, this Leninist political method must orient itself toward the historically and relationally situated process of such social becoming. But, Lenin notes, “[i]t is common knowledge that, in any given society, the strivings of some of its members conflict with the strivings of others”, and he further asserts that “the conflicting strivings stem from the difference in the position and mode of life of the *classes* into which each society is divided”.⁶⁶ The ecological component of Lenin’s political method can be implicitly ascertained from the recognition that in a definite and determinate *social metabolic order*, there exists class-positioned social subjects impeded from actualizing their own self-movement – their “mode of life” – by force of the conflictive power relations that structure both their self-movement *and* exploitatively alienate their *purposive-transformative* activities, *their practical metabolism*, that is, historically situated, relationally embedded *living labor*. These limitations, viewed through the universalization of the capitalist social metabolic order, are not, however, merely *particular* social limitations. They are, at this point in time, in the beginning stages of a *protracted ecological crisis*, which will incessantly destabilize the already unstable conditions of their existence, their *universal socio-ecological limitations*.

Capital’s historical emergence through the homogenization and universalization of the value-form continues to determine the historically specific character of the existing social metabolic order, the processual motion of existing sociality. The totalizing dynamic of the ontology of capital, *its essence*, “the self-valorization”⁶⁷ of value, has penetrated and subsumed all existing social formations,⁶⁸ albeit unevenly, while rendering the conditions of (social) reproduction ecologically precarious. An Ecological Leninism, which accounts for both the unity-and-distinctness of heterogenous social forms and their *objective* dependency on the natural world, maintains a dialectical commitment to the universal *ecological* character of the class struggle. Thus, an Ecological Leninism must determine political praxis as a decisive interruption of the capitalist social metabolic order.

We have shown that, although Lenin did not employ the vocabulary of social metabolism, his thought closely approximates much of contemporary ecosocialist and

⁶⁶ Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, p. 57.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 255.

⁶⁸ The two steps of this historical process correspond to Marx’s analysis of “formal” and “real” subsumption as articulated in the Appendix to *Capital*, vol. 1.

eco-Marxist thought in such a way as to contribute to the development of Metabolic Rift Theory and lay the theoretical ground for a revolutionary politics and praxis in the context of the ecological rift.

Lenin's recognition, following Marx and Engels, of the relational embeddedness of the social metabolism of human society within the larger context of the universal metabolism of nature enabled the development of an ecologically revolutionary political project. Lenin understood that the capitalist mode of production had to be comprehensively transformed in order to promote a more balanced, *socially rational*, socio-metabolic relation in the process of realizing communist society. Yet, despite being of a different time, the stakes remain the same: Socialism or Barbarism? Revolution or Rift? Communism or Climate Collapse? In other words, in facing Ecosocialism or extinction, what, then, we might ask, does an Ecological Leninist politic have to offer the struggle today?

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LIMITS TO SOCIALIST GROWTH

The Question of Economic Growth
and Environmental Crisis in Polish
Discussions of the 1970s*

Weronika Parfianowicz

Abstract

*The article is devoted to the discussions concerning economic growth and the environmental crisis that took place in Poland in the 1970s. The author focuses on two scientific conferences and the publications that accompanied them in order to analyse the questions of economic growth, science, technology, and consumption with regard to raising awareness of the ecological crisis. The reception of the Polish translation of *The Limits to**

* Some of the arguments presented here were initially developed in an earlier article “‘O nowo pojętą oszczędność’. Umiar w socjalistycznym systemie wartości”, published in Polish in the journal *Kultura współczesna* 2022, no. 1, pp. 52–69. This article was written as a part of the research project “Pułapki industrializacji, pokusy konsumpcji, poszukiwania ‘harmonijnego rozwoju’ i troska o przyszłość Ziemi. Polska ludowa wobec wyzwań środowiskowych (1944–1989)” [Traps of Industrialization, Temptations of Consumption, the Search for ‘Harmonious Progress’ and Care for Earth’s Future. Environmental Challenges in socialist Poland], financed by the University of Warsaw as part of the IDUB IV POB program.

Growth is one of the questions discussed more specifically in the article. The main purpose of the article is to amend the ecological dimension of socialist thought and to reconstruct the main tensions and contradictions between the ecological and productivist tendencies within socialist ideology. The author analyses these questions in the context of degrowth theory and with regard to the current climate and ecological crisis.

Keywords

socialism, economic growth, ecosocialism, ecological crisis, degrowth, Limits to Growth, consumption, science, scientific-technological revolution

Nevertheless, it's necessary to discuss whether it's possible and necessary today to provide for certain 'non-productive' social goals and whether it brings us closer not only to the final goals of socialism but also whether it becomes a necessary condition for faster economic growth.

Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski

Perspektywa człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej (1974)¹

The increasingly one-sided fetishisation of economic growth and the pursuit of increasing production regardless of the society's needs becomes an anachronistic feature of the current economy.

Juliusz Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro* (1973)²

In 1972, a new economic strategy was launched in Poland by First Secretary Edward Gierek, aimed at stimulating “the great dynamics of economic growth”. It seemed that the model of the growth-based economy, introduced on a global scale after World War II, had been settled on for good, adapting it to specific local conditions. In the same year, the famous report *The Limits to Growth* was published with a clear message: if the use of non-renewable energy sources, depletion of other natural resources, environmental costs of food production and waste continue to grow at the pace characteristic of the growth-oriented economies, it will bring humanity to the brink of collapse in less than a century. The opponents of the dominant paradigm, who had long pointed to its weaknesses, were given some strong arguments by this report. The discussion concerning the environmental and social costs of economic growth resonated in both capitalist and socialist states. It was accompanied by some initial steps to reduce energy and material

¹ Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski, “Perspektywa człowieka w rewolucji”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 79.

² Juliusz Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1973), p. 305.

consumption, which were soon dispersed by a neoliberal economic model that was even more extractivist. While some of the pillars of the Bretton-Woods consensus were abandoned, the growth imperative remained well embedded in the world's economies.

This course of events proved to have serious implications for the condition of our planet. Today's assessments show that Club of Rome scenarios, even if flawed, were correct in their general conclusions. The causative role of the growth-oriented economic system in accelerating the planetary ecological and climate crisis is becoming clearer and clearer. As is shown in recent research, the idea of "green growth", based on the premise that economic growth can be decoupled from the negative impact on the environment, is far from feasible.³

Since capitalism is known as a system inherently dependent on economic growth, the question arises as to whether socialism could be considered a serious and prospective alternative. As was noted by Giorgos Kallis, socialism may operate on a different premise.⁴ There are however some explicit productivist traditions within socialism, and the economic strategy of the Polish People's Republic is one of the examples that shows that socialist ideology may also be susceptible to growthism.⁵ Thus, the contradictory approach to economic growth and environmental challenges that characterised socialist political and economic practices in the past needs to be addressed in order to plan a feasible ecosocialist agenda for the future. In this regard, discussions taking place in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1970s may be instructive, as they reflect competing visions of socialism, some of which were based on the praise of economic growth, while others could be seen as precursory for ecosocialism and degrowth. We need to unravel this complex entanglement of the various visions of socialist society and economy as they were performed in the past to analyse their potentials and shortcomings and scrutinise how they were impacted by global, geopolitical shifts.

With my paper, I am aiming to reconstruct small segments of those debates that took place in Poland in the seventies, representing both pro-growth and growth-sceptical approaches. In this regard, my study will develop some of the issues that were previously examined in the context of Czechoslovakia and the GDR.⁶ It will also contribute

³ See Jason Hickel and Giorgos Kallis, "Is Green Growth Possible?", *New Political Economy* 25, no. 4 (2020), pp. 469–486.

⁴ Giorgos Kallis, "Socialism Without Growth", *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 30, no. 2 (2017), pp. 189–206.

⁵ Those productivist tendencies are discussed in more detail by Michael Löwy in the chapter "What is Ecosocialism?" in his book *Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015). Giorgos Kallis presents another question that should be addressed in order to avoid growth-dependency, that is the distribution of surplus. See Kallis, "Socialism Without Growth".

⁶ For Czechoslovakia, see Matěj Spurný, "Mezi vědou a politikou. Ekologie za socialismu a kapitalismu (1975–1995)", in *Architekti dlouhé změny. Expertní kořeny postsocialismu v Českosloven-*

to a reflection concerning the environmental history of Central and Eastern Europe after World War II.⁷ My goals are similar to those set by John Bellamy Foster in his monumental work *Return of Nature*, thus revealing the sometimes unnoticed ecological dimension of socialist thought. The other objective of the paper is to revise those discussions from the past, in order to answer the question of what kind of knowledge they can deliver in the light of the latest findings concerning the planetary crisis and current debates on the alternatives to the growth-oriented system.

I focus on two conferences organised in Poland in the first half of the 1970s, and a few publications accompanying these conferences. The main body of research material comprises presentations delivered during a 1975 symposium held under the title *The Development of Polish Culture in the Perspective of the Socialist System of Values*, organised in the research centre of the Polish Academy of Science in Jabłonna near Warsaw by the Committee of Research and Prognosis “Poland 2000”, affiliated with the Academy. The Committee was established in 1969 and its research covered multiple areas: economic development, demography, housing policies, and so on. We may see this prestigious scientific institution as a part of the futurological boom, which was a wider trend, encompassing, at that time, both sides of the “iron curtain”. The development of future studies created a common platform for scientists and intellectuals from different parts of the world to exchange the results of their research, collaborate on improving prognostic methodologies, and discuss their philosophical and moral implications.⁸ The futurologist movement was, in general, informed by the rising ecological awareness. The need to satisfy human needs in accordance with the natural environment was explicitly presented as one of futurology’s tasks by the Polish Committee, and we can consider the Jabłonna conference as an attempt to reconcile this approach with other challenges that the socialist system was facing at this time. More than one-third of the

sku, ed. Michal Kopeček (Praha: Argo, 2019). The example of GDR was described by Alexander Amberger in the article “Post-growth Utopias from the GDR: The Ecosocialist Alternatives of SED Critics Wolfgang Harich, Rudolf Bahro, and Robert Havemann from the 1970s”, trans. Julian Schoenfeld, *Contradictions* 5, no. 2 (2021), pp. 15–29.

⁷ See Matěj Spurný, “Mezi vědou a politikou”; *Making the Most of Tomorrow: A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Czechoslovakia*, trans. Derek and Marzia Paton (Prague: Karolinum, 2019); Raymond Dominick, “Capitalism, Communism, and Environmental Protection. Lessons from the German Experience”, *Environmental History* 3, no. 3 (1998), pp. 311–332; Petr Jehlička and Joe Smith, “Trampové, přírodovědci a brontosauři. Předlistopadová zkušenost českého environmentálního hnutí jako předzvěst ekologické modernizace”, *Soudobé dějiny* 24, no. 12 (2017), pp. 78–101.

⁸ For more on the topic of the futurological turn and activities of Committee “Poland 2000” see Emilia Kiecko, *Przyszłość do zbudowania. Futurologia i architektura PRL* (Warszawa: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2018). The development of future studies and prognostics in the Czechoslovakian context is discussed in the chapter “Zkoumání budoucnosti socialismu: ‘vědeckotechnická revoluce’ a prognostika v reformě a ‘konsolidaci’”, in Vítězslav Sommer et al., *Řídit socialismus jako firmu. Technokratické vládnutí v Československu, 1956–1989* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2019), pp. 52–82.

papers delivered during the conference were in some way referring to environmental issues and some of the participants were to develop that subject in their individual work in the coming years.

In order to better understand the meaning of the conference in the context of Polish scientific, political, and cultural life, let me briefly introduce some of its participants who contributed significantly to this debate. The conference gathered some of the most prominent researchers of their time. Bogdan Suchodolski, the editor of the post-conference monograph, was a philosopher, historian of science, and pedagogue, affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences, and author of numerous scientific and popular publications concerning the history of culture, education, and philosophy. Juliusz Goryński was an architect and urbanist, a renowned specialist in the field of housing policies. During the interwar period, he collaborated with a prominent left-leaning organisation, the Polish Association for Housing Reform, and, in the 1950s he was for a short period the director of the Housing Building Institute. He was a Polish delegate to the U.N. Committee on Housing, Building, and Planning. In his reports for the Committee "Poland 2000", he warned about worsening housing conditions in the near future. Włodzimierz Michajłow was a zoologist and parasitologist, collaborating with various scientific institutions in Poland and abroad. Thanks to his efforts, the project "Parasitology and Environmental Protection" was included in the UNESCO programme "Man and the Biosphere". He was a member of numerous organisations, such as the State Council for Environmental Protection and the Scientific Committee "Man and Environment", affiliated with the Polish Academy of Science. Julian Aleksandrowicz was a medical doctor and haematologist who was also interested in the philosophy of medicine. He was in the process of developing the concept of "ecological conscience", highlighting the connection between human health and wellbeing and the general condition of the natural environment. Jerzy Bukowski was an aeromechanics engineer and lecturer on polytechnics involved in the organisation of the technical education system and co-organisier of the Museum of Technology. He was also a member of the international peace movement, involved in Pugwash and the World Peace Council. Andrzej Grzegorzczak was a mathematician and philosopher, affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences. He was a member of the Club of Catholic Intelligentsia and was involved in ecumenical activities, especially with the Orthodox Church. Jan Szczepański was a sociologist, actively involved in local and international scientific life. In the late sixties, he was chairman of the International Sociological Association. He was a member of various editorial boards and co-founder of the Committee "Poland 2000". He was also actively involved in politics as a member of parliament for several terms.

Even these very brief biographical notes allow us to make some more general assertions. The conference gathered renowned scientists and researchers, predominantly representatives of the generation born at the beginning of the 20th century. As far as can be judged from their activities, for most of them, support for socialist ideology was not merely an opportunistic attitude. Some were already active in the interwar leftist

milieus, and most of them were involved in building the scientific, cultural, technical, and educational institutions of the postwar socialist state. Their activities were frequently awarded state decorations. Except for Michajłow, they were also not primarily and scientifically interested in the protection of the natural environment, but some of them started to reflect on ecology in their respective fields of work during this period (Goryński in housing policies, Aleksandrowicz in health). The other important common thread was their involvement in international organisations, not only scientific ones but also the peace and anti-nuclear movements.

In order to present a more comprehensive picture of the approaches to growth economics and natural environment circulating in official discourse at the time, I'll complete my analysis with materials coming from another conference, *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna* (Man, socialism, scientific-technological revolution), organised by the University of Silesia together with the Party Propaganda Provincial Centre in the autumn of 1973 in Katowice, which was followed a year later by a publication with the same title. Its aim was to scrutinise the potential application of the scientific-technological revolution's achievements in the developmental policies of the region. Katowice voivodeship did not become a laboratory for modernisation by accident. Historically one of the most industrialised and developed regions and a fossil fuel provider for the rest of the country, the region was the apple of Edward Gierek's eye, the Party's First Secretary at the time. The Silesian capital, Katowice, and the region as a whole was not, of course, a mere showcase for socialist industrialisation and modernisation, but some of those processes were indeed more palpable there. The event was more of a regional gathering, but with some prominent personalities of the time invited as well. The presentations were delivered by Marxist philosophers, political scientists, professors affiliated with Silesian University, and party activists.

Both conferences could be perceived as prestigious events. They shared an ambition to discuss crucial contemporary issues, with the Jabłonna conference aiming at a more universal reflection, and the symposium in Katowice focused on more pragmatic political goals to be implemented on a regional scale. They were also illustrations of some more universal trends, characteristic of Central Europe at the turn of the sixties and seventies: the rising role of expert culture and the technocratic turn and economic shift that was associated with it.⁹ None of them was devoted directly to environmental issues, but the question of the ecological crisis was brought up by numerous participants and in various contexts. Economic growth was one of them, but it should be examined as a part of a complex tangle of numerous processes, including the role of technology, science, economy, work, consumption, and lifestyle.

⁹ To see a more detailed analysis of those processes, see Sommer, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu*; Kopeček, *Architekti dlouhé změny*.

Framing the Crisis

In his opening presentation during the Jabłonna conference, historian Bogdan Suchodolski noticed:

This strategy of one-sided domination leads to the wasting of natural resources, which are not inexhaustible. This waste – armaments and the luxury of the wealthy class in the richest countries are its most evident source – is not only a nonsensical economic loss on a global scale, but it also generates a lifestyle that distorts attitudes toward other people; it leads to increasing egoism and lack of responsibility for the millions of people who are starving, for the millions of those who will be born in the future on that Earth, exploited to its ultimate limits, or maybe even intoxicated forever. The moral problems of the civilisation of affluence, excess, and waste now stand out more sharply and clearly.¹⁰

In this short fragment we can already recognise some important diagnoses that in the current day form the cannon of environmental discourses: a clear relationship between affluence and exploitation of finite planetary resources, the unequal distribution of wealth, the connection between the ecological and social crisis, so in other words – between environmental and social justice, and the moral responsibility toward the population already affected by the crisis and toward the future generations.

Papers delivered during these conferences are not interesting because of their originality, as they were iterating some arguments that were already circulating in global discussions. They were, however, formulated within the specific socio-political framework of socialist state and socialist ideology, still perceived as a viable alternative to capitalism, which in some cases made the authors disregard some of the threats already clear in Western societies, but in others provided them with valuable insights.

If we scrutinise discursive strategies of framing the crisis, we will come to the conclusion that the images of negative socio-economic trends causing the crisis were emphasised more than the specific images of the ecological destruction. While the specifics of the ongoing devastation of nature could have been unclear for many researchers who were not primarily specialised in natural sciences, they shared the rising awareness of how grave the situation is, which influenced their work. The publication *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro* (Dwellings of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow) by Juliusz Goryński, vice-chairman of the Committee “Poland 2000” and expert in housing politics, included a significant final chapter “Dwellings and the World”, where he

¹⁰ Bogdan Suchodolski, “Przewaga środków nad celami w cywilizacji kapitalistycznej”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), pp. 26–27.

described the essence of the current problems: "It's not only that we have to save some rare animal and plant species, it's the survival of the human species itself that is at stake."¹¹

The participants in Polish discussions were informed by the global debates on the natural environment and they were openly referring to some of its milestones: to the Club of Rome report, the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment, *A Blueprint for Survival* and *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* by R. Buckminster Fuller. The "spaceship Earth" metaphor, popularised by the last work, was used by at least two commentators. Juliusz Goryński was writing about the "youngest members of the spaceship crew", arrogant enough to violate the metabolic processes the Earth system depends on and starting "a fight to conquer nature".¹² Włodzimierz Michajłow used this image to underline the suicidal dimension of human activities, such as "constant plunders, murders [...] using limited resources in [...] a predatory way". He underlined the usefulness of "the metaphor of the Earth as a spaceship" for "its ability to highlight the threat of a catastrophe caused by its own crew".¹³

Judging by the frequency of references, it was, however, *The Limits to Growth* that resonated most strongly with Polish authors. The slogan was recalled in the preface to the post-conference monograph *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości* (Polish Culture and the Socialist System of Values), having been indicated to be one of the impulses to organise the debate in Jabłonna:

The propagation of consumptionist attitudes that we're observing lately in highly developed countries of the West forces us to seriously reflect not only on the "limits to growth", but also on the substance, content and values of the culture, as one of the factors of the new quality of life.¹⁴

The reception of the Report of Rome by the Polish audience was similar to the one abroad: namely, ambiguous. As for the Western world, the report provoked objections from mainstream economists who criticized the aggregative methods used by its authors – the same methods that they usually "preached right and left", as noted ironically by Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, but which were now applied to undermine the growth-ori-

¹¹ Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, p. 299.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 301–302.

¹³ Włodzimierz Michajłow, "Środowisko życia człowieka jako wartość humanistyczna", in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 136.

¹⁴ Bogdan Suchodolski, ed., *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 9.

ented paradigm, while their theories were “anchored solidly in exponential growth models”.¹⁵ But the Report was also questioned by leftist researchers, who accused it of the opposite. “What we fear is that this type of analysis will not lead to a politics of equity, equality, and justice since these were never made the primary variables of the study but were seen as ‘side-effects’ – but to more of the politics of growth, in order to create all the anti-technologies needed to counter-act the effects of the present technologies”, as Johan Galtung put it.¹⁶ In Eastern and Central Europe, *The Limits to Growth* was also received with mixed feelings. In Czechoslovakia, as described by Matěj Spurný, the report, published as an internal document, and circulating in the scientific institutions, was rejected by some economists but welcomed enthusiastically by the representatives of the natural sciences.¹⁷ In Poland, it was published officially by the State Economic Publishing house and provided with a preface by prominent economist and prognostic, member of the Club of Rome, Kazimierz Secomski. The preface was rather restrained in its tone, underlining the contribution made by the Report, but also pointing out its flaws. Regardless of objections formulated by some of its readers, it’s clear that the Report of Rome delivered some important impulses for questioning the existing socio-economic models, as well as the metaphors and vocabulary for the many Polish researchers discussing the environmental issues and global challenges. As Włodzimierz Michajłow put it, this publication was the source of the “knowledge about how catastrophic the current state of things is”.¹⁸

Limits to Technology

To understand better the responses to the threats of ecological crisis (including the ambiguous reactions elicited by the Club of Rome’s report), we must analyse them in the context of a notion recalled in the title of the Silesian conference, one that formed an important theoretical and political background for the era: the scientific and technological revolution [STR]. At the beginning of the 1970s, the term, popularised by the famous scientist and engaged communist activist J. D. Bernal some decades previously,¹⁹

¹⁵ Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, “Energy and Economic Myths”, *Southern Economic Journal* 41, no. 3 (1975), p. 365.

¹⁶ Johan Galtung, “‘The Limits to Growth’ and Class Politics”, *Journal of Peace Research* 10, no. 1/2 (1973), pp. 111–112.

¹⁷ Spurný, “Mezi vědou a politikou”, p. 276.

¹⁸ Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 145.

¹⁹ Bernal himself had undergone an interesting evolution in his views, including a more developed view on environmental matters in the decades after World War II. In the last years of his life, he was warning against an ecological crisis caused largely by industrial civilization, see John Bellamy Foster, *Return of Nature. Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review, 2020), pp. 489–497.

was shaping the political imaginary and influencing the work of various scientists both in the West and the East.²⁰ The STR was not a homogenous concept, but rather an umbrella term for various trends, emphasizing the role of scientific achievements in various areas of modern life. Some of the STR's proponents would praise its socially progressive and emancipatory potential, while others would focus on the economic gains it could bring. As we'll see, STR also suggested a certain set of tools and ideas to counteract the ecological crisis.

The process, in which science was supposed to set the direction of technological and economic development, was embraced enthusiastically by the Polish government as "a historical process, the realisation of which will ensure the final and irreversible victory of socialism".²¹ The ambiguity of the STR was however clear, even to its proponents. During the Silesian conference, organised under the STR slogan, political scientist and activist Andrzej Werblan highlighted that:

On a capitalistic basis, the STR developed in a very imperfect form, revealing its numerous defects, especially the devastation of the natural environment, irrational exploitation of resources, destructive features of social life, deep frustration and ideological hollowness.²²

There was a strong conviction that the socialist system is better prepared, perhaps even necessary, for STR to work for the benefit of mankind. As the great proponent of this idea, the Czechoslovakian researcher Radovan Richta (who was often quoted by Polish authors), put it: "Theoretically, the social groundwork capable of carrying out the scientific and technological revolution thoroughly in all respects – while avoiding any disastrous alternatives – is to be found in the advance of socialism and communism in their model aspect".²³ The question of how the achievements of STR should be applied by socialist governments in practice was however still open and it was especially urgent with regard to environmental questions. Paraphrasing the title of a famous book by Richta and his collective, socialist civilisation too, in this regard, found itself at a crossroads.²⁴

²⁰ See Sommer, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu*.

²¹ Janusz Kolczyński, "Przedmowa", in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 5.

²² Andrzej Werblan, "Istota kierowniczej roli partii i metody kierowania przez partię procesami społecznymi na etapie rewolucji naukowo-technicznej", in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 25.

²³ Radovan Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads. Social and Human Implications of the Scientific and Technological Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 57.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The STR offered different and sometimes contradictory solutions to environmental challenges. On the one hand, the very work *The Limits to Growth* itself, with its analysis based on an advanced modelling system, may be perceived as one of the greatest STR achievements. On the other hand, this revolution reinforced the techno-optimistic approach toward the ecological crisis – the attitude we know so well from contemporary debates on the planetary crisis. “Technocrat-optimists”, as Juliusz Goryński called this group, shared the belief that technological development will allow us to use energy more efficiently, produce it from renewable sources and substitute finite natural minerals with synthetic ones. Those were the premises on which they based their trust in avoiding ecological crises while maintaining perpetual economic growth.²⁵ This argumentation was used, for instance, by Kazimierz Secomski in his preface to *The Limits to Growth*, with the intention of mitigating the report’s potentially pessimistic tone: “surely there already exist certain possibilities and justified premises that allow future actions, based on effective scientific-technical progress, that will prevent the realization of the visions of destruction that may come to the minds of readers of the report.”²⁶ The “ecologists-pessimists”, on the other hand, while appreciating some of the technical achievements, were concerned about the unpredictable side effects of those new technologies, which could even worsen the situation. They were also worried that those technological gains will be used exclusively for the sake of further growth in production and consumption in the most wealthy countries.²⁷

Rising inequalities and the unequal distribution of wealth among the global population were seen to be among the main sources of social and ecological crises. “Who will participate in consuming the achievements of technical civilisation?” Goryński asked rhetorically, as the answer was clear: “one-third of the population – the ‘rich’ – has at its disposal two-thirds of all resources, including food supply”.²⁸ As another participant of the Jabłonna conference, haematologist Julian Aleksandrowicz wrote in his work *The Ecological Conscience*, published a few years after the conference:

The excessive accumulation of goods in some people’s hands and the rising impoverishment of others is just as common in this world as is the elimination of substances essential for life from the environment and intoxicating it with industrial production waste, which is the source of the ecological crisis.²⁹

²⁵ Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, p. 302.

²⁶ Kazimierz Secomski, “Wstęp do wydania polskiego”, in Donella H. Meadows et al., *Granice wzrostu*, trans. Wiesława Rączkowska and Stanisław Rączkowski (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 1973), p. 18.

²⁷ Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, pp. 304–305.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

²⁹ Julian Aleksandrowicz, *Sumienie ekologiczne* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, [1979] 1988), p. 9.

In geopolitical terms, as noted by Michajłow, it was neocolonialism that “created new forms of exploitation, such as constructing ‘dirty’ factories in the developing countries by the capitalist ones”.³⁰

Those problems challenged the narrative of the STR as being able to provide solutions for complex socio-ecological problems. This narrative was also undermined by the failure of projects such as the “green revolution” in India. The technological innovations in agriculture not only did not resolve the humanitarian crisis but even worsened the situation, on both social and environmental levels. This failure was already discussed at the time, among others, in *The Limits to Growth*.³¹

Limits to Science

The role of the other part of the STR slogan – the science – created further important challenges. The STR put science in the leading role in the processes of planning, production, or labour organisation, resulting in the growing role of science in governmental politics. The resolution made by the Sixth Convention of the Polish United Workers’ Party proclaimed that “science should be the leading factor forming our state”. The tasks for science were discussed during the Silesian conference. Romuald Jezierski underlined the “vital function of science in developing productive forces, work efficiency, technology, economic structure, and the efficiency of the economic system in general”.³²

In his paper, he was referring to the resolutions of the Second Congress of Polish Science published under the title *Science in the Service of the Nation*: “Under the scientific-technological revolution, science should be a fundamental factor in the development of the system of the national economy, a crucial parameter of the progress of civilisation. Its potential to be applied in all human activities becomes almost unlimited.”³³

The consequences of this “scientific turn” were at least twofold. While praising the meaning of scientific knowledge for social development, officials and politicians were subordinating it to the needs of the national economy. At the same time, it allowed technocracy and a specific cult of science to flourish. This technocratic and instrumental approach was problematic for some of the commentators, especially among the Jabłonna Conference participants. The range of their critique was wide, but what’s interesting for us is that it was primarily the inability of science to handle the ecological crisis and other urgent problems of the day that initiated the discussion. Another

³⁰ Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 139.

³¹ Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth. A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972), pp. 146–148.

³² Romuald Jezierski, “Program wychowania człowieka socjalizmu”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 82.

³³ “Uchwała II Kongresu Nauki polskiej”, in *II Kongres Nauki Polskiej. Materiały i dokumenty*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1974), p. 197.

significant feature was that this critique of scientific claims and of the insufficiency of the scientific tools was formulated not only by the representatives of the humanities, but also by the natural scientists, medical doctors, and engineers.

Physicist and philosopher Grzegorz Białkowski emphasised that the rate at which scientific inventions are transforming the human environment “makes it impossible for humans to understand their new role on Earth” and warned about the destructive features of this process.³⁴ Therefore, he called for an interdisciplinary collaboration of scientists representing different disciplines in order to create a new, expanded form of humanism that could “include not only our species but also every living being”.³⁵

The commentators considered economics to be a discipline crucial for resolving ecological problems and yet which was strikingly unprepared for that purpose, suggesting that “the economics milieus still don’t have much to offer, as their discipline is significantly underdeveloped in terms of taking into account environmental issues”.³⁶ What was even worse, when economists did finally undertake some actions, they were “based on the same instruments that were responsible for the degradation of the natural environment in the first place”.³⁷ Probably the most severe critique of science was formulated by the mathematician and philosopher Andrzej Grzegorzczuk:

Science itself ceased to be an inspiration for social progress and, through its institutions, it is instead strengthening the existing structures and the social order based on violence and struggle. Despite their general progressive or even revolutionary views, institutionally, scientists are in service of the establishment, letting all their inventions be used in its favour.³⁸

Grzegorzczuk was well aware of the increasing significance of the technocratic approach and predicted some possible consequences of the emerging expert culture. He criticised science as a form of modern religion with “its own priests: scientists, technocrats, experts”. He perceived technocracy as “the dominant ideology that is standing behind the senseless pursuit of so-called ‘progress’ and has led to the ecological crisis that we’re experiencing now”.³⁹ In this regard, we may put his critique in the context of the technocratic turn, which – as emphasised by researchers of this phenomenon in

³⁴ Grzegorz Białkowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu a nauki ścisłe”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 189.

³⁵ Białkowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu a nauki ścisłe”, p. 189.

³⁶ Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 143.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³⁸ Andrzej Grzegorzczuk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 216.

³⁹ Grzegorzczuk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, pp. 220–221.

the Central European context – took the form of the “politics of depoliticisation: the belief that, essentially, political and ideological conflicts, and those concerning values, can be resolved by depoliticisation and a rational, scientific analysis”.⁴⁰ This turn has far-reaching implications for dealing with the environmental crisis. Presenting economic and political decisions as the result of “objective” scientific research obscured the interests standing behind the research and its premises, as well as the fact that, as Grzegorzcyk accurately pointed out, “each economic decision is a decision in the realm of human values. By building a huge, concrete airport, we’re reducing arable land and thus eliminating some group of people from a wealthy life, or maybe from life at all.”⁴¹

There was no doubt that scientific research could offer important tools and knowledge, but it was not sufficient to effectively transform socio-political reality. As Bogdan Suchodolski noted: “it was obvious that important political movements, such as the peace movement, were never initiated by science itself”.⁴² At the end of the day, according to Grzegorzcyk, “to save us from catastrophes, we don’t need any sophisticated technologies or scientific theories, but, above all, ordinary fairness, justice, respect and compassion for every human being”.⁴³

The discussions concerning science resonated with those taking place among Western intellectuals. Let us recall J. D. Bernal once more, who condemned Western scientific life for its imperialistic structure, centralisation, and subordination to the needs of the capitalist economy.⁴⁴ As for his counterparts in Eastern and Central Europe, we can see their reflection in the critique of the scientific claims of socialism and of power relations related to knowledge within the socialist model of society that, in this case, was made from the inside and was articulated by the socialist intellectual elites themselves.⁴⁵

Limits to Economic Growth

Technology and science were perceived as ambiguous forces, responsible for propelling the crisis and providing tools for crisis prevention. A large role was thus attached to the political system that made use of these forces. The belief shared widely, and not only in the socialist states, was that the main factor responsible for the ecological crisis was the capitalist system with its extractive, exploitative, and wasteful economic practices. Socialism, on the other hand, “by its very nature, creates a better chance of a successful solution to the pressing problems related to threats to the human environment”,

⁴⁰ Sommer, *Řídít socialismus jako firmu*, p. 18. To read more on how the technocratic turn prepared the ground for the introduction of a neoliberal economy, see Kopeček, *Architekti dlouhé změny*.

⁴¹ Grzegorzcyk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, p. 225.

⁴² Suchodolski, “Przewaga środków nad celami”, p. 19.

⁴³ Grzegorzcyk, “Pewne aspekty humanizmu w naukach ścisłych”, p. 226.

⁴⁴ See Foster, *Return of Nature*, p. 494.

⁴⁵ More on critique of scientific socialism, see Sommer, *Řídít socialismus jako firmu*, p. 47.

as zoologist Włodzimierz Michajłow put it during the Jabłonna conference.⁴⁶ Similar opinions were formulated during the Silesian conference as well. In the words of the Marxist philosopher Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski, this political system was perceived as the one creating favourable conditions for a “responsible and reasonable use of scientific and technological achievements and management of the world’s material resources (and such management that would not lead to a catastrophic violation of ecological relations and the devastation of the natural environment)”.⁴⁷

However, already at the time, many commentators were well aware of the rising gap between the ideas and the practices of socialist state-run economics, and some of them shared the concern that a socialist system, deprived of its substantial, normative dimension, would be susceptible to the negative trends as well. As Suchodolski noticed in his presentation delivered during the Silesian conference, “the attitude of this [socialist] industrial civilisation toward the natural environment is a problem that still needs to be addressed”.⁴⁸ Jerzy Bukowski underscored: “Even some countries that have chosen a socialist way of economic development were not able to see in time the dangers of industrial development to the natural environment.”⁴⁹

Those tensions become especially clear when scrutinising the notion of economic growth. In 1975, the year of the Jabłonna conference, a U.S.-based Romanian economist named Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen published the article “Energy and economic myths” that referred to *The Limits to Growth* (he was collaborating with the Club of Rome at that time) and diagnosed prevalent economic trends: “except for some isolated voices in the last few years, economists have always suffered from growth-mania. Economic systems and economic plans have always been evaluated only in relation to their ability to sustain a great rate of economic growth.”⁵⁰

As for Poland, the timing of the discussion was especially unfortunate, as just a few years earlier a new economic strategy was launched in Poland by First Secretary Edward Gierek, aimed at stimulating “the great dynamics of economic growth”. It explains, to some extent, the tone of the Polish preface to *The Limits to Growth*. Kazimierz Secomski

⁴⁶ Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 149.

⁴⁷ Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 46.

⁴⁸ Bogdan Suchodolski, “Socjalistyczna cywilizacja naukowo-techniczna”, in *Człowiek, socjalizm, rewolucja naukowo-techniczna*, ed. Janusz Kolczyński and Joachim Liszka (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1974), p. 201.

⁴⁹ Jerzy Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku kształtowanym przez technikę”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 114.

⁵⁰ Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, “Energy and Economic Myths”, *Southern Economic Journal* 41, no. 3 (1975), p. 365.

was trying to reconcile two incongruous perspectives by proposing a “development of the socialist theory of socio-economic growth”.⁵¹

The authors who were discussing the findings of *The Limits to Growth* during the Jabłonna conference were more willing to accept the implications of introducing such terms as “zero-growth” or other proposed notions, such as “organic growth”, based on the “diversity of the world and global human solidarity” or “ecodevelopment” that “wouldn’t be destructive for the environment, degrading the biosphere of our planet and would reconcile the economic laws with natural ones”.⁵² The other proposal was to replace the term economic development with “harmonious development”.⁵³ In the end, even the proponents of “socialist growth” shared the intuition that – in the words of Kazimierz Secomski – “forcing economic growth for the sake of further growth” and its fetishisation is anachronistic and absurd.⁵⁴ Probably the harshest critique of “growth-mania” was formulated by Julian Aleksandrowicz:

the constant increase of the GDP has been made a synonym of social progress, production and consumption, becoming the only tangible goal of existence and social activity for millions of people [...] our thinking must be sick since we produce so many unnecessary things only because they serve to increase the national product, and we do not do many necessary things because they do not bring measurable profit.⁵⁵

The ideology of the socialist state however was more and more prone to embrace the pro-growth perspective, going as far as to subordinate the social needs to the economic one. During the Silesian Conference, Tadeusz M. Jaroszewski underlined the need to discuss not only whether larger “non-productive” expenses “will bring us closer to the ultimate goals of socialism, but also whether they are indispensable conditions for the economy of growth”.⁵⁶

Limits to Work

The consequences of this reorientation became especially clear in the field of labour organisation. As many commentators would argue, the main advantage of socialism over capitalism was the promise of liberation from the burdens of wage work, which would allow humans to flourish, to develop their individual, creative potential, while

⁵¹ Secomski, “Wstęp do wydania polskiego”, p. 21.

⁵² Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 145.

⁵³ Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku”, p. 118.

⁵⁴ Secomski, “Wstęp do wydania polskiego”, p. 24.

⁵⁵ Aleksandrowicz, *Sumienie ekologiczne*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, p. 78.

simultaneously strengthening collective bonds with meaningful activities for the sake of the community. The threat of the ecological crisis revealed one more important dimension of this transformation: socialism would offer reasonable alternatives to the capitalist forms of leisure based on the consumption of material goods that thus foster production with its negative impact on the natural environment. It would promote less harmful practices: enjoying nature, using the public recreational and sports facilities, and devoting itself to arts and crafts. With the automation of production in progress and the new gains in work efficiency, hopeful outlooks emerged for socialism to deliver this promise. The issue of shortening the working week was widely discussed during both conferences. Some commentators referred to Friedrich Engels and recalled his appeal “for shortening the working time to what we consider as minimal”.⁵⁷ Those claims were in accordance with what Sommer calls “the emancipatory current” of STR, seen as “the shift from the one-sided emphasis on production, economic growth and provision of basic needs to the development of the non-material aspects of human life”.⁵⁸

Competing tendencies, however, emerged. There was a temptation among the socialist governments, who embraced the growth-oriented economic mechanisms, to use the rise in productivity and work efficiency to further fuel economic growth. The fulfilment of the promise of shortening the working week was jeopardised by the same mechanism that made it possible in the first place. This shift was reflected in some of the papers presented during the Silesian conference. The sphere of reproduction was described as an “element of the development of the productive forces” and the expenses this sphere was absorbing were seen as “productive investments promoting economic growth”.⁵⁹ In this discourse, all forces were to be subject to economic interests, especially science, which would play the role of the “leverage for dynamic economic growth”.⁶⁰ Special tasks were assigned to the social sciences, such as “stimulating workers’ activities” and “improving work motivation”.⁶¹

Even the very idea of “free time” started to be seen as suspicious. Some commentators would warn about a “civilisation of leisure and entertainment” and proposed such forms of organisation of leisure that would “build up the culture of work” and improve workers’ efficiency.⁶² The alternative proposition was discreetly undermined: “There are specific priorities in the economy, resulting from the needs of economic growth. It would be mere demagoguery to deny them in the name of some model of social politics devised

⁵⁷ Eugeniusz Olszewski, “Technika - praca - człowiek”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 60.

⁵⁸ Sommer, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu*, p. 60.

⁵⁹ Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Jezierski, “Program wychowania człowieka socjalizmu”, p. 95.

⁶¹ Jaroszewski, “Perspektywy człowieka w rewolucji naukowo-technicznej”, p. 60.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

beyond real possibilities.”⁶³ As an opponent of transforming individuals into “passive consumers [...] of the mass entertainment provided to them”,⁶⁴ Jaroszewski himself probably would have disapproved of one of the important outcomes of subordinating social needs to economic demands. It resulted from the introduction of similar mechanisms as in Western economics. Instead of shortening their working time, workers were offered a higher share in consumption, which, from the point of view of the government played two important roles: preserving its legitimacy and fuelling economic growth from the demand side, while harnessing workers to sustain the system, both with their labour and with household expenses.⁶⁵

Limits to Consumption

From the point of view of engaged intellectuals, fostering a consumerist culture for the sake of economic growth was another form of betraying the socialist ideology. Together with the reflection on commodity fetishism, the critique of overproduction, overconsumption, and capitalism as a system of waste has a long tradition within socialist thought. As pointed out by Foster, this critique was from the very beginning closely related to environmental questions. Along with the growing awareness of the environmental costs of modern modes of production and consumption in the second half of the 20th century, more and more emphasis was put on this dimension. The participants of the Jabłonna conference not only criticised the individual and social consequences of rising consumerism but also underlined the role of overconsumption in exacerbating the ecological crisis:

Even mobilising all the new advances in science [...] we will not be able to afford to waste the goods we produce on pursuit for surfeit. What is more, we will not be able to afford to litter, in the literal sense of the word, our planet [...] with various types of waste from consumption, in which packaging that is difficult to destroy, shoddy clothing and equipment that is not suitable for further use and often cannot be recycled [...], will constitute a significant item.⁶⁶

They had no illusions that Polish society would be immune to the temptations of consumerism, especially taking into account the pressure of the “patterns of consumption developed in capitalist countries that spread through the mass media, popular cul-

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ See Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living. Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso 2017).

⁶⁶ Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku”, p. 116.

ture, and personal experiences, as for example travel abroad or social influence”.⁶⁷ This question was also raised by Dennis Meadows, co-author of *The Limits to Growth*, who emphasized in an interview for the Polish magazine *Kultura* the striking similarities between capitalist and socialist states that “attach increasing importance to individual consumption”.⁶⁸ This similarity was indeed disturbing for many critically-oriented socialist intellectuals and scientists. Some of them saw the gap in the level of consumption between Poland and the Western world as an advantage in this regard. Jerzy Bukowski considered the relative “civilisational delay” of socialist societies as a positive feature, allowing them to create “a new model of life and labour, which will secure the existence of future generations”:

We cannot continue – mindlessly from the point of view of our future existence on Earth – to destroy non-renewable raw material resources, [...] we must learn to satisfy our consumption appetites, [...] according to necessary needs and not the whims that are often artificially stimulated, as is the case of the highly developed capitalist countries.⁶⁹

The question of needs and how to satisfy them was important for the participants of the Jabłonna Conference. Much attention has been paid to scrutinising how consumerist practices were immersed in and legitimised by the dominant culture. It was often illustrated by the example of car ownership. As Bogdan Suchodolski pointed out: “the decision to produce the small Fiat on a mass scale has become an expression of our acceptance of the thesis that ‘living with a car’ has special values”.⁷⁰ Dennis Meadows warned Polish readers that it will be a fateful decision, deepening social inequalities.⁷¹

Those were the reasons why questions of a hierarchy of values, ethics, and moral attitudes were perceived as so vital in the context of social and ecological crises. The call for a “new frugality”, as one of the commentators formulated it, meant reorientation in the field of aspirations and definitions of well-being, for they were inextricably linked with environmental questions. This call for moderation may be also explained to some extent by the generational experiences of people building a socialist state after the destruction of World War II. The ethos of sacrifices made for the sake of a better

⁶⁷ Jan Szczepański, “Wartości kultury, styl życia i wzory konsumpcji”, in *Kultura polska a socjalistyczny system wartości*, ed. Bogdan Suchodolski (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1977), p. 49.

⁶⁸ Andrzej Bonarski, “Granice Wzrostu – Wywiad z profesorem Dennisem L. Meadows”, *Kultura*, January 12, 1975, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Bukowski, “Nowe aspekty humanizmu w środowisku”, p. 115.

⁷⁰ Suchodolski, “Socjalistyczna cywilizacja naukowo-techniczna”, p. 25.

⁷¹ Bonarski, “Granice Wzrostu” – Wywiad”, p. 7.

socialist tomorrow was sometimes presented as opposing the “hedonistic” lifestyle of younger generations. But this call for frugality was not a call against leisure. If anyone was suspicious of entertainment, it was the party activists, afraid that excess free time will worsen workers’ productivity. Other participants in the discussions supported the development of a public leisure infrastructure. It was individual consumption and commodity fetishism they were protesting against, not people having a good time. As Włodzimierz Michajłow explained:

The need for a new quality of life [...] is rooted in environmental issues. [...] At the core of the concept of quality of life is the attitude to the living environment, workplace, residence, rest, and holidays. Therefore, the fight for a better quality of life was embraced as the slogan of many environmental movements.⁷²

Limits to Population Growth

Here we also approach an important point on which socialist thinkers would disagree with the *The Limits to Growth* authors. The Club of Rome was concerned not only with pro-growth tendencies in the economy but also with population growth. In this regard, they adopted a neo-Malthusian perspective, with all its implications. In the aforementioned interview with Dennis Meadows, we find quite a disturbing fragment in which he calls for a drastic demographic change in Poland: “A state with a socialist system has special possibilities in this respect. The administrative and social apparatus can create conditions preventing excessive population growth.” This thread was however not raised in Polish discussions. In the socialist movement, there was a long history of opposition to (neo-)Malthusianism perceived as an “inhuman theory in the service of imperialism”.⁷³ When coupled with the extractivist approach of the socialist states, this stance has indeed ecological consequences; in some periods, especially the 1950s, a huge effort was put into controlling nature and using it as an inexhaustible reservoir of resources.⁷⁴ The discussion from the 1970s that is analysed in this paper suggests, however, an important shift. Socialist intellectuals were searching for new ways to reconcile satisfying the needs of society with respecting the limits of the natural environment while also avoiding the trap of falling into neo-Malthusianism.

⁷² Michajłow, “Środowisko życia człowieka”, p. 149.

⁷³ Jiří Janáč and Doubravka Olšáková, *Kult jednoty: stalinský plán přetvoření přírody v Československu 1948–1964* (Praha: Academia, 2018), p. 75.

⁷⁴ See chapter “Stalinský plán mezi malthusiánstvím, neomalthusiánstvím a marxismem” in Janáč and Olšáková, *Kult jednoty*, pp. 75–93. On the criticism of Malthusianism among Western leftist intellectuals, see Foster, *Return of Nature*, p. 497.

Socialism at the Crossroads

In my presentation of the two Polish conferences, I put emphasis on the differences between them to reconstruct two discursive models characteristic of the public discussion during this period and two currents of socialist thought: “technocratic” and “humanist”. They were constantly permeating and influencing each other and we can trace both of them in presentations that were delivered during both of the conferences, which even shared some of the same guests (Bogdan Suchodolski).

What I would like to emphasize is that the critical assessment of the ability of the socialist state to confront the ecological crisis was delivered by renowned scientists and researchers. Unlike some of their younger colleagues, who at that time were abandoning Marxist vocabulary,⁷⁵ they were formulating their statements within the framework of socialist ideology, convinced that, after some necessary revisions, socialism remains a much more feasible project to face contemporary challenges than capitalism. Their statements, presented during an official prestigious symposium devoted to the development of the socialist culture and society, shouldn’t be regarded as dissident or marginal. And yet, although their critical predictions proved to be quite prophetic, it was the technocratic and pragmatic model, with all its shortcomings, that prevailed in official state politics, with serious consequences for the future.

Instead of interpreting it in terms of the failure of socialist ideology, I propose to emphasise the potential of this ideology to adequately recognise the nature of the ecological crisis, its causes, and its feasible solutions. Seen from this perspective, socialist thought may be perceived as consistent in delivering important ecological reflections. From Engels and Morris with their concerns about disruptive effects brought by capitalism on the natural environment, as described by Foster, to the Czech architect Ladislav Žák with his vision of “pannaturalist socialism”, to Polish philosophers and scientists discussing the ecological costs of socialist development, we can trace a long leftist tradition of environmental reflection which may enrich our contemporary thinking and activism. We shouldn’t however disregard the dynamics of power within the socialist state along with the global geopolitical and economic shifts that made the implementation of those ideas so difficult.

What Can We Learn from These Socialist Thinkers Today?

Read today, discussions from the 1970s seem strikingly relevant. The emotional, engaged rhetorics with their well-dosed irony; the accuracy of the observations made by the commentators, and the adequacy of their predictions, make those texts resonate well with contemporary readers. The findings of natural and social scientists confirm

⁷⁵ For more on the ideological shift within the left-leaning milieu, see Michał Siermiński, *Dekada przełomu. Polska lewica opozycyjna 1968–1980* (Warszawa: Książka i Prasa, 2016).

their general intuitions. The deepening planetary crisis makes this reading moving and frustrating at the same time.

I would like to point out a few key issues that might be most instructive for us. To avoid the worst consequences of the climate and ecological crisis, we need a deep political and economic transformation that will fulfil the requirements of both social and environmental justice. This transformation should be based on an equal distribution of wealth throughout the globe, which requires limitations on the use of energy and materials by the wealthy global North in order to allow it to achieve decent standards of living in other parts of the world – something that was clear already for the commentators in the seventies.⁷⁶ It means that we should rethink our notions of well-being and visions of a good life, as noted by degrowth- and sufficiency-oriented scholars.⁷⁷ The notion of human needs and various ways of satisfying them (that is, need satisfiers) is particularly salient today,⁷⁸ as it was already in Szczepański's article from the Jabłonna conference. From that point of view, a socialist sociology that develops studies devoted to patterns of consumption, ways of satisfying needs, and cultural and social norms may convey important knowledge, especially if we consider those patterns and norms as historically shaped and as being transformative over time.⁷⁹

Among the various socialist demands, one is especially deserving of our attention in the context of the ecological crisis, namely the shortening of working hours, as it addresses both social and environmental issues. As the latest research shows, prospects of decreasing greenhouse gas emissions and minimise other forms of pressure on the environment are very promising, while the benefits of working less for health and well-being are already well-known.⁸⁰

Another important matter is the question of the moral dimension of environmental politics. Socialist discourses from the 1970s did not avoid moral issues, on the contrary, they revealed the ethical dimension of various human activities. They argued that any discourse deprived of such moral consciousness becomes a tool for technocrats, allowing them to hide the social and environmental costs of their actions under the cover of rationality. That we must expose the ethical premises on which different political agendas are based: do they include the possibility of decent living for every being on the planet, or are they limited to the prosperity of privileged groups? Are they based on solidarity,

⁷⁶ See Goryński, *Mieszkanie wczoraj, dziś i jutro*, p. 306.

⁷⁷ See Doris Fuchs et al., *Consumption Corridors. Living a Good Life within Sustainable Limits*, Routledge 2021.

⁷⁸ See Ian Gough, "Climate change and sustainable welfare: the centrality of human needs", *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 39, no. 5 (2015), pp. 1191–1214.

⁷⁹ See Lina I. Brand-Correa et al., "Understanding (and tackling) need satisfier escalation", *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 16, no. 1 (2020), pp. 309–325.

⁸⁰ See Anna Coote et al., *21 Hours: Why a Shorter Working Week Can Help Us All to Flourish in the 21st Century* (London: New Economic Foundation, 2010).

or exclusion? This applies to the scientific reports on which those agendas are based as well. The participants of the discussion from the 1970s were well aware how easily science becomes a tool to legitimize the establishment and how the current balance of power influences the direction of science's development. Today, it could for instance inform our reading of the IPCC reports. It would allow us to see more clearly whose perspectives and interests prevail in the report's scenarios and to include more scenarios that would question the contemporary socio-economic status quo in future editions.

There were, however, some significant blind spots in the discussions of the 1970s that are worth mentioning in order to complete a contemporary reflection on ecosocialism. First, it is the underestimation of reproductive work that is striking. While praising the idea of shortening the working week, the commentators tended to place the areas of human fulfilment outside the sphere of reproduction and care work. Today, informed by ecofeminism and feminist economics, we see more clearly the importance of care economy and care ethics in the context of ecological crisis.⁸¹

The other omission is even more striking, as it could be expressed in the traditional vocabulary of socialism and it concerns one of its crucial issues: the organisation of labour and production. Indeed, there was a great emphasis on the shortening of the working week, but otherwise, the discussion on work organisation was limited to the question of management, while demands to democratise the control of the means of production were left unmentioned. The shift from democratic workers' control (regardless of to what extent this demand was actually implemented) to management by specialised experts may be interpreted as one of the features of the technocratic turn in socialist states. It indicates, however, an important issue that should not be forgotten in contemporary ecosocialist planning. According to Giorgos Kallis, the question of democratic control over the means of production is crucial to planning economic activities that won't be harmful to nature. In his view, the emergence of specialised classes controlling the process of production and its effects not only creates unnecessary hierarchies but also increases the risk of such forms of reinvesting the surplus that would leverage further growth.⁸²

There are many indications that ecosocialism, with its emphasis on both social and ecological justice, could be a feasible answer to the climate and ecological crisis. The more it can be informed by the preceding socialist attempts to reorganize social and economic conditions and its shortcomings, the better it will be prepared to avoid pro-growth and neo-Malthusian traps and use science and technological achievements for the sake of mankind and planetary ecosystems, while avoiding technocratic and scientist delusions.

⁸¹ See *Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice. Women Write Political Ecology*, ed. Ariel Salleh (London: Pluto Press, 2009); Zofia Łapniewska, "Etyka troski a gospodarka przyszłości", *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 24, no. 2 (2017), pp. 101–122.

⁸² Giorgos Kallis, "Socialism Without Growth", p. 9.

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A “RIGHT TO SADNESS”

Late Socialist Environmentalism
between Technocracy and Romanticism
and the Czech Nature
Writer Jaromír Tomeček*

Martin Babička

Abstract

The article examines the works of nature writer Jaromír Tomeček, his public image, and his reception by literary theory and criticism as a distinctive late socialist response to environmental concerns. The article argues that the “ecological techno-optimism” of Jaromír Tomeček was representative of the late socialist reconsideration of human-nature relations that rejected the earlier modern understanding of humans as masters of nature and tried to find a new harmony between the two, but that also rejected the “pessimistic” perspective of Western ecology. Revising the tradition of socialist realism, late socialist literature allowed for sorrow over loss (“a right to sadness”) while still giving primacy to joy over progress, negating the “existential despair” of the 1960s. It thus preserved the progressive temporal orientation tied to the socialist ideal of increasing material wellbeing while trying to reconcile technocratic rationality with romantic subjectivity. “Ecological techno-optimism” eventually materialized in the form of the nuclear energy programme as the solution to the ecological crisis.

Keywords

environmentalism, late socialism, Czechoslovakia, socialist realism, nuclear energy

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Historians of environmentalism in Eastern Europe have mostly focused on the ecological crisis under late socialism as a sort of negation of communist ideology, but there is still very little understanding of what “nature” meant in late socialist culture. Much existing scholarship has too easily presupposed that communist elites would by default be “against nature” while the opposition formed “little corners of freedom” as “a sort of antidote to the materialist logic” of the socialist state, seeing problems such as pollution simply as the result of Marxist-Leninist ideology.¹ In this vein, Miroslav Vaněk has argued that in Czechoslovakia the “lack of interest in anything outside the area [of private life] also affected the environment, in all respects – aesthetic, ecological, and intellectual”.² That itself was a view adopted from the dissidents; in 1987, Charter 77 wrote a letter to the Czechoslovak government titled “To Be Able to Breathe”, criticizing its neglect of environmental problems. Although that discourse became dominant after 1989, to understand better the meanings given to nature under late socialism it is also necessary to pay attention to discourses that were prominent in its culture but lost in later history. This article thus turns attention to the works of the author Jaromír Tomeček, active in literary circles and often appearing in newspapers and on television and radio, and his reception by literary theory and criticism. As I will show, Tomeček was considered the leading figure in the area of nature writing, whose increasing interest in the changing relations between humans and nature was seen by his contemporaries as a rightful response to the ecological crisis.

I argue that what I call “ecological techno-optimism” was a distinctive response of late socialist literature to the ecological crisis, one that combined belief in technocracy with a romantic turn to a subjective perception of nature. Ecological techno-optimism differed (yet was derived) from what is usually called “techno-optimism”, which characterized the previous periods, in its appreciation of the negative aspects of technological progress and an emphasis on renewed relations between humans and nature. Late socialism, as represented by the official literature that I examine in this article, refused the earlier modern understanding of humans as masters of nature (including the Stalinist conception of nature), trying to find a new harmony between the two. But it also rejected the “pessimistic” perspective of Western ecology. A new approach was developed that combined joy over progress and sorrow over loss; a “right to the sadness of memory” as literary theorist Josef Peterka called Tomeček’s approach, one

¹ Arvid Nelson, *Cold War Ecology: Forests, Farms, and People in the East German Landscape, 1945–1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. xii; Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachëv* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Philip R. Pryde, *Conservation in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

² Miroslav Vaněk, *Nedalo se tady dýchat: ekologie v českých zemích v letech 1968 až 1989* (Praha: Maxdorf, 1996), p. 7.

that emphasized the need to remember what was lost to the force of progress.³ The primacy of joy along with the recognition of pain from which progress was born was also a negation of the “existential despair” of the 1960s socialist reformism and modernism. A new, optimistic perspective was offered instead, which emphasized the newly found harmony of humans with nature, materialized, among others, in nuclear energy as a techno-optimistic solution to the ecological crisis.

The article thus builds on research that has seen environmentalism as being a part of the agenda of socialist experts but also draws attention to how the continuing belief in technological progress was reconciled in late socialist culture with the awareness of the ecological crisis.⁴ In one of the earliest accounts of socialist environmentalism, Joan DeBardeleben has studied East German and Soviet ecological discourses as being both a tool of political legitimacy and an advocacy for nature.⁵ She has argued that since the death of Stalin, natural scientists were not necessarily expected anymore to articulate theories that would approve of the Communist Party’s view of historical development. This allowed them “to seek explanation, rather than simply to explicate justifications”.⁶ Looking at Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, Doubravka Olšáková and Jiří Janáč have similarly argued that the Stalinist project of “transforming” nature was replaced by a technocratic management that, on the level of ideology, emphasized “control” over nature rather than its “mastery”.⁷ Moreover, Petr Jehlička and Joe Smith have argued that the technocratic rationality of late socialism was accompanied by a romantic appreciation of nature that had a long history in Czechoslovakia.⁸ They have asserted that the blend of a scientific approach to nature in education and its romantic undercurrent in the tradition of hiking culture (called *tramping* in Czech) led many people

³ Peterka did not use the “right to sadness” analytically, but I adopt it here to characterize the overall tension in late socialist literature between the individual past and the collective future that he theorized. Josef Peterka, “Téma paměť”, *Česká literatura* 33, no. 2 (1985), p. 109.

⁴ For the concept of “technocratic socialism”, see Matěj Spurný et al., “Technokratischer Sozialismus in Der Tschechoslowakei”, *Bohemia* 57, no. 1 (2017), pp. 12–24.

⁵ Joan DeBardeleben, *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism: The Soviet and East German Experience* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), p. 47. Similarly, sociologist Zsuzsa Gille has also contrasted the simplistic view of state socialism as a “wasteful economic order” with her research on waste management in socialist Hungary. Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁶ DeBardeleben, *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism*, p. 61.

⁷ Doubravka Olšáková and Jiří Janáč, *The Cult of Unity: The Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature in Czechoslovakia, 1948–1964* (Prague: Academia, 2021), p. 251.

⁸ Petr Jehlička and Joe Smith, “Out of the Woods and into the Lab: Exploring the Strange Marriage of American Woodcraft and Soviet Ecology in Czech Environmentalism”, *Environment and History* 13, no. 2 (2007), pp. 187–210.

to take an interest in the environment. However, according to Jehlička and Smith, that approach failed to provide Czech environmentalists with a systemic critique of either state socialism or capitalism. Furthermore, they have pointed out that the increasing knowledge of the bad state of the environment in Czechoslovakia before 1989 did not translate into effective policy measures. This article further explores the connections between technocratic rationality and a romantic view of nature as a potentially powerful legitimating discourse that opposed both Western environmentalism and reform socialism of the 1960s with the ambition to bridge an individual attachment to nature with the official narrative of socialist collectivism marching to a better future guaranteed by technological progress.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss at length the variety of approaches to nature in that period, but it is necessary to consider some of the most important aspects. Around 1970, there was a debate between Western capitalist and Soviet Marxist technocrats over planetary limits: while Americans like Paul Ehrlich argued that it was necessary to institute limits to growth due to the dangers of overpopulation, critics accused them of neo-Malthusian attacks on the underdeveloped world and social progress.⁹ The publication of *The Limits to Growth*, commissioned by the Club of Rome, was a great influence on Czech experts like Bedřich Moldan, who became the Minister of Environment in 1990. Many Marxist-Leninist ecologists and futurologists, however, took a strongly opposing view to such “pessimism”.¹⁰ Of course, the situation on the ground was much more nuanced and the positions of different nature advocates were hardly so clear-cut. Environmental problems were getting more attention not only from experts, but also journalists and various nature protectionists, who were mainly focused on awakening some sort of enthusiasm for nature.¹¹ The unexplored breadth of late socialist environmentalism is apparent solely from the variety of discourses of the television programmes that Tomeček appeared in: from a literary magazine celebrating the beauties of the national landscape to a documentary promoting the construction

⁹ For the U.S. debate, see Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), pp. 176–200. Although neo-Malthusians were also criticized from many sides in the West (from advocates of consumerism to anti-racist activists), they were also a frequent target in the state socialist discourse on nature and the future, see such Soviet and Czechoslovak popular scientific books as Igor’ Ivanovič Adabašev, *Život zítra - tragédie nebo harmonie* (Praha: Svoboda, 1978, 1978); Jan Bauer, *Uživí naše planeta lidstvo?* (Praha: Albatros, 1978). For Marxist-Leninist debates about the environment, see DeBardeleben, *The Environment and Marxism-Leninism*.

¹⁰ Bedřich Moldan, “Meze ekonomického růstu na planetě Zemi”, *Vesmír*, no. 52 (1973), pp. 40–42; Jaromír Tomeček, *Živly a osudy* (Brno: Blok, 1985), pp. 9–11.

¹¹ Doubravka Olšáková, “Environmental Journalism? Radio Free Europe, Charter 77 and the Making of an Environmental Agenda”, *Environment and History* 28, no. 2 (2022), pp. 203–227. For a representative example, see Josef Velek, *Jak jsem bránil přírodu* (Praha: Práce, 1980).

of a nuclear power plant as a technocratic solution to the ecological crisis, as well as an educational programme trying to raise environmental awareness.

Analysing the context and reception of Tomeček's work will thus be useful for the overall characterization of the late socialist relationship to nature, since his central, yet in parts ambiguous, position speaks to the inner conflicts of late socialism. As this article will show, Tomeček adhered to several intellectual traditions. He was influenced by the 19th century Czech tradition of nature prose, American Transcendentalism, the interwar Czech left-wing avant-garde, and contemporary Soviet nature writing. Tomeček himself emphasised his memories from the Scouts and the time he spent in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Yet he was also a member of the Union of Czech Writers, which followed the official line during the period of political consolidation after the Prague Spring.¹² Throughout his writing, he considered the Marxist conception of historical progress to be important, and he was particularly explicit about the anti-fascist, materialist legacy of the Communist Party. Particularly in his later writing, he sought to reconcile the romantic relationship of the human subject to nature, which served as a necessary escape from life in a technical civilisation, and the indispensable role of technocracy as the driving force of progress. In some ways, he could be read as a defender of unspoilt nature and a critic of modern alienation, yet he remained an advocate of a comfortable life guaranteed by the technoscientific advances of the socialist state.

To understand the significance of Jaromír Tomeček in advocating a change in human-nature relations while staying confident about technocratic socialism, I will proceed in three steps, following the trajectory from his early years to his late works. However, I will not give much attention to the main body of Tomeček's work but rather to the biographical narratives, literary interpretations, and media representations that Tomeček and others created.¹³ Rather than assessing his aesthetic merit or originality of thought as many literary scholars might do, my aim is a historical analysis of the mythology of Tomeček as an author who was making the rounds in a variety of media. Literary critics at the time interpreted his increasing interest in the conflict between humans and nature as a reflection of the ecological crisis, thus creating a new discourse around his works that will be the focus here. Firstly, I will discuss Tomeček's understanding of human-nature relations, based on his autobiographical explanations and public

¹² In 1972, when the Union of Czech Writers was established, Tomeček became a member of its control committee, keeping his position from the dissolved Union of Czechoslovak Writers. *4. sjezd Svazu československých spisovatelů (Protokol): Praha 27.-29. Června 1967* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1968), p. 202; *Ustavující sjezd Svazu českých spisovatelů ve dnech 31.5.-1.6. 1972* (Praha: Svoboda, 1972), p. 129.

¹³ For a basic overview of his work, see the entry in the Dictionary of Czech Literature: "Jaromír Tomeček", *Slovník české literatury*, accessed January 17, 2022, <https://slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=444>.

image; Tomeček repeatedly provided an interpretative framework for his work by referring to authors he admired and explaining links between his earlier life and his writings. In the second part, I will look at the reception of Tomeček in late socialist literary debates; from the 1970s, Tomeček's literary activities served to criticize and revise the early communist literature. Finally, I will examine the writings of Tomeček and his colleagues about the construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant; the 1980s thus saw a final attempt at finding harmony between technocratic socialism and ecology.

A Living Classic

Active from mid-1940s, Jaromír Tomeček wrote several books of prose dedicated to nature, with an increasing focus towards the end of his career on ecology and the relation between nature and human civilization. Beginning in the 1950s, Tomeček took part in numerous talks and debates on nature, sometimes organised by the Czechoslovak Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge, other times at the invitation of local libraries, galleries, and factories.¹⁴ He collaborated with and regularly appeared on both Czechoslovak radio and television to talk about nature. He wrote for diverse readers, both adults and children.¹⁵ One could read his short stories in newspapers, usually lyric narratives or adventure tales.

Tomeček's appearances on radio and television as well as numerous discussions with readers made him into a public figure who should not be understood only as a writer but also as an oral narrator. It is likely, in fact, that more people encountered him telling stories on radio or TV than by reading his books. He appeared in interviews, reviews, and various other news stories; for example, the daily newspaper *Práce* reported on November 21, 1958 that Tomeček brought home ripe strawberries and raspberries from his walk around Brno, adding that "he knows where to go" to get them.¹⁶ He was indeed aware of his own influence as an author-celebrity: commenting in 1963 on debates about leisure time and scientific-technological revolution, he wrote: "Well, I would suggest spending leisure time – apart from self-education – in nature. That's why I am Tomeček."¹⁷ In 1962, he began hosting a television programme whose title could be loosely translated as *Shooting without Guns* (*Lovy beze zbraní*) about nature lovers carrying cameras instead of guns. Originally envisaged as a one-off series, the programme remained on television for two decades thanks to its popular-

¹⁴ For instance, a poster advertising a talk with Jaromír Tomeček in his hometown of Kroměříž, 1956. PNP Fund Jaromír Tomeček, sg. 32/A/5, box 61, unsorted.

¹⁵ The personal archive of Jaromír Tomeček in the Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature contains 11 boxes of mostly newspaper and magazine articles by and about Tomeček that range from dailies to specialist beekeeping magazines to elite literary magazines. Fund Jaromír Tomeček, PNP, boxes 61–71, unsorted.

¹⁶ "Kam na ně chodí?", *Práce*, Nov 21, 1958, p. 5.

¹⁷ Jaromír Tomeček, "Co s volnem a Gilgamés", *Host do domu*, no. 10 (1963), pp. 194–195.

ity.¹⁸ Critics appreciated him for his focus on nature, enchanting personality, and optimism.¹⁹ Particularly later in his life, the media talked of Tomeček as "a living classic".²⁰ He would often be depicted as a poet surrounded by nature; one illustration even potentially evoked the archetypal image of Orpheus summoning animals with his music.²¹ That would mean that Tomeček, through his poetry, transcends the boundary between humanity and nature, which was indeed one of his aims.

Tomeček explained that his initial interest in nature came from his childhood experiences, especially Scouting.²² He recalled how he and his friends would collect forest fruit to bring home during World War I while pretending to be Robinson Crusoe or Winnetou, a fictional Native American hero from the novels of the German writer Karl May that were immensely popular in Czechoslovakia.²³ He joined the Czech Scouts, an organization based on an outdoor lifestyle and nature preservation as much as on ideas about moral citizenship and discipline. In addition to the influence of the British Scout Movement of Baden Powell, the Czech Scouts took inspiration from Ernest Thompson Seton, a US author active at turn of the 19th and 20th century and one of the founders of Boy Scouts of America, who combined an Enlightenment emphasis on education, woodcraft arts, and advocacy for Native Americans in his programme.²⁴ Tomeček remembered his Scouting years as a time during which he cultivated both his love for nature and writing. His first literary attempt was for a Scout writing competition, which he won, using the prize money to buy "world literature".²⁵

The idyllic landscape of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, isolated from civilization and modern technology, became the subject matter of Tomeček's first novels.²⁶ He came

¹⁸ Jarmila Cysařová, *Česká televizní publicistika: svědectví šedesátých let* (Praha: Česká televize, 1993), pp. 34–35. Two books of the same name were published based on the programme: Jaroslav Müller, *Lovy beze zbraní* (Ostrava: Profil, 1967); Jaromír Tomeček, *Lovy beze zbraní* (Praha: Albatros, 1976).

¹⁹ Josef Hrabák, *Život s literaturou* (Brno: Blok, 1982), p. 181.

²⁰ See, for instance: *A léta běží ... Jaromír Tomeček*, Czechoslovak Radio, 1986, Czech Radio Archives.

²¹ Vilém Reichmann, "Jaromír Tomeček", *Stadion*, May 24, 1961.

²² *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, Czechoslovak Radio, 1969, Czech Radio Archives, part 1, 15:23–15:37.

²³ Jaromír Tomeček, "Kalokagathia", *Zlatý máj*, 2 (1972), pp. 74–76.

²⁴ While the two later disagreed because of that, the founder of the Czech Scouts, Antonín Benjamin Svojsík, stressed both traditions. Brian Morris, "Ernest Thompson Seton and the Origins of the Woodcraft Movement", *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 2 (1970), pp. 183–194; Antonín Benjamin Svojsík, *Základy Junáctví* (Praha: Merkur ve spolupráci s Junáckou edicí Ústřední rady Českého Junáka, 1991), pp. 19–24.

²⁵ The authors included Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Thompson Seton and Henry David Thoreau. Sylva Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1981), p. 32.

²⁶ His early novels, which were reprinted throughout the socialist period, took place in Carpathi-

there in his twenties as a notary after studying law in Brno. In Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was then part of the Czechoslovak Republic, Tomeček made the acquaintance of Czech communist writer Ivan Olbracht and got his first offer to publish in *Lidové noviny*.²⁷ Tomeček was greatly influenced by Olbracht, finding the region fascinating not only for its spatial but also temporal distance from “civilization”: both the landscape and people seemed to be “from the eleventh century”.²⁸ He was fascinated by Rusyns, who populated the mountainous region, as “they believed in superstitions” and many did not know modern technology.²⁹ The image of unspoilt nature and “uncivilized” people as its part served Tomeček as a way to inspire modern humans to reconnect with nature, but also as an argument for modernization, which he saw as a necessary step towards greater material wellbeing.³⁰

Indeed, Tomeček’s desire to perceive nature affectively was linked to the Baroque religiosity of his hometown. Jaromír Tomeček grew up in Kroměříž, a South Moravian town known for its Baroque architecture that served in both autobiographical and biographical narratives to explain his ideas about human life, beauty, and the landscape: as an altar boy he was supposedly drawn to the mystique and decoration of the church that made him contemplate the mystery of life and death.³¹ Tomeček remembered that he would learn from a Catholic catechist both good manners and a relationship with nature, particularly flowers and their traditional symbolism in interpersonal relations that was important to know on his trips to the Subcarpathian Ruthenia and other regions to the East of the “down-to-earth” Czechs.³²

In that and many other regards, Tomeček reflected the notion of nature developed by American Transcendentalists, particularly Henry David Thoreau, an American author

an Ruthenia: Jaromír Tomeček, *Strříbrný lipan* (Praha: J. Lukasík, 1944); Jaromír Tomeček, *Vuř se směje* (Brno: Průboj, 1944).

²⁷ Ludvík Štěpán, “Boj o zemi zaslíbenou”, *Tvorba*, no. 40 (1976), p. 9.

²⁸ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 1, 18:18–18:28. Ivan Olbracht dedicated several works to the region: Ivan Olbracht, *Nikola Šuhaj Loupežník* (Praha: Melantrich, 1921); Ivan Olbracht, *Země bez jména: Reportáže z Podkarpatska* (Praha: Otto Girgal, 1932).

²⁹ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 2, 4:54–6:34. Although the Czech left-wing avantgarde criticized the interwar Czechoslovak Republic for its imperialism towards Subcarpathian Ruthenia, some could not resist exoticizing the local people, see Geoffrey Brown, “Blaming the Bourgeoisie: The Czech Left-Wing Response to Perceived Czech Imperialism in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, 1931–1935”, *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 46 (2012), pp. 71–90.

³⁰ Under state socialism, the image of the region was alive largely thanks to Tomeček’s generation. For example, a children’s adventure writer, František Továrek, active in the Scouts and later the Pioneers, also admired the region for both its natural beauty and former technological backwardness, which he witnessed when he was sent there as a teacher. Továrek contrasted the region’s interwar poverty and superstition with today’s “health centres” and “radio and television”. František Továrek, *Hory a lidé* (Hradec Králové: Kruh, 1985), p. 13.

³¹ Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 31.

³² *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 1, 09:30–14:01.

whose holistic vision of nature offered an experiential and transcendental understanding of the relation between humans and the natural world.³³ Much as Thoreau was fascinated by Native Americans, Tomeček found his way towards the experience of nature through Karl May stories and his sojourn in Ruthenia; both gave him a semblance of a direct, unmediated access to old traditions and nature, unspoiled by civilization.³⁴ Thus, they both romanticized indigenous peoples from a position of power as men coming from "civilization".

So if Tomeček had a particularly "baroque" sensibility, it was not so much a matter of religiosity as a Transcendentalist concern for the unity of humans with their landscape and perhaps a turn to existing local heritage.³⁵ The baroque provided him with a vocabulary of cultured landscape, human misery, and the unity of nature. In his book *The Mountain is Burning* (*Hora hoří*, 1984), Tomeček described the misery of a dying forest, with trees being called "baroque friends" and likened to martyrs.³⁶ In a rather eclectic fashion, just after the passage about "baroque" elms in *The Mountain is Burning*, Tomeček praised the romanticism of the old path he walked, which was like "leafing through Thoreau" without any fear the fumes from a car would poison his lungs.³⁷ Elsewhere, confessing his dedication to the life on Earth, Tomeček depicted the "one law" guiding humans and animals "from creation to extinction"; when one realized the law's existence, one would be "permeated with love of the ordinary day and its hardships".³⁸ Tomeček therefore did not see in nature God's creation but a celebration of life itself. In that regard, Tomeček drew upon a romantic, emotional connection with nature, similar to that proposed by the American Transcendentalists, to question some of the technological advancements of contemporary civilization: "After all, we are part of nature, and I think that if we abandon the natural way of life once, it will be a kind of foreshadowing, a vigil of the extinction of humanity, because it is impossible to live without nature. [...] [W]hen humans leave nature, nature leaves them."³⁹ Even the literary scholarship of the time noticed Tomeček's holistic approach to nature; Sylva Bartůšková explained that what separated humans from nature in Tomeček's philosophy was their insatiable desire to overcome the transience of life, which manifested itself in the conquest of nature and space. However, this separation

³³ Indeed, he noted that Henry David Thoreau was his biggest literary influence. *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 2, 24:51–26:11. Thoreau and other transcendentalists greatly influenced Western environmental thought, see Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 58–111.

³⁴ On Thoreau, see Worster, p. 96.

³⁵ Thoreau, like the Romantics, saw the "God-principle [diffused] throughout nature". Worster, p. 87.

³⁶ Jaromír Tomeček, *Hora hoří* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1984), p. 56.

³⁷ Tomeček, *Hora hoří*, p. 57.

³⁸ Tomeček, *Lovy beze zbraní*, p. 14.

³⁹ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 2, 26:46–27:52.

from nature was only apparent, Bartůšková argued, since the desire emanated from humans as a part of nature. Nature thus “extends to the whole universe”, with humans “its thinking, creative and conscious part”.⁴⁰

However, Tomeček’s romanticizing approach to nature was combined with an allegedly strong dedication to scientific accuracy, which was based on Soviet nature writing and on the realistic conceptions of socialist literature.⁴¹ Since nature was seen as constantly changing, it was as necessary for an artist as for a scientist to “look with the eyes of an expert” to gain a “current perspective”.⁴² Tomeček himself claimed to spend two thirds of his creative time exploring nature, often in the company of experts.⁴³ The blend of objective knowledge and subjective experience echoed the works of Soviet author Mikhail Prishvin, who was an author of Siberian fairy tales and travelogues.⁴⁴ Soviet criticism described Prishvin as a “unique blend of fact and fantasy, of science and art”, combining authorial lyricism with scientific data to create a cognitive truth.⁴⁵ The combination of scientific and aesthetic perspective was the key to understanding nature. Whereas science stood for objective, empirical knowledge, art brought in subjective perception.⁴⁶ As a host of a popular scientific programme broadcast by Czechoslovak Radio put it: “Every modern person should have in oneself a bit of Einstein and a bit of, say for example, Prishvin and his relationship with nature.”⁴⁷ In a

⁴⁰ Bartůšková based her interpretation on Tomeček’s novel *Disquiet*. Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 117; Jaromír Tomeček, *Neklid* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1965).

⁴¹ Literary critic Markéta Uhlířová stressed that Tomeček’s childhood in Kroměříž surely was not enough to make him a good nature writer. What he also needed was a “great sensibility” and a “very thorough knowledge of natural phenomena and laws”. Jaromír Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře* (Brno: Státní vědecká knihovna, 1987), p. 17.

⁴² Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře*, p. 105.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴⁴ At one point, Tomeček claimed that Prishvin was his “only literary role model”. It somewhat contradicts his praise for Thoreau and others elsewhere, but since Thoreau also had a great influence on Prishvin, it should be taken as a way to claim allegiance to the tradition of nature writing generally. *Kultura*, no. 28 (1959), p. 1, cited in Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 34. Prishvin was in turn sometimes compared to Thoreau, see Richard Fleck, “Mikhail Prishvin: A Russian Thoreau”, *The Concord Saunterer* 9, no. 2 (1974), pp. 11–13.

⁴⁵ The two merged in the genre of *ocherk*: Ray J. Parrott, “Questions of Art, Fact, and Genre in Mikhail Prishvin”, *Slavic Review* 36, no. 3 (1977), pp. 465–468. For the genre’s characteristics, see Hans Elvesson, “The Rural Ocherk in Russian Literature after the Second World War”, *Commentationes Slavicae Gothoburgenses* 1 (Göteborg, Inst. f. slaviska språk, Göteborgs univ., 1975), pp. 1–13.

⁴⁶ Jiří Opelík noted that Tomeček’s turn from unmediated fascination with wild nature to its perception by a “loving observer” – firstly in his book *Eternal Woods* (*Věčný hvozd*) – was accompanied by a simultaneous turn to scientific observation. Oleg Sus, *Cesty k dnešku*, vol. 2 (Brno: Blok, 1966), p. 163; Jaromír Tomeček, *Věčný hvozd* (Praha: Státní nakladatelství dětské knihy, 1956).

⁴⁷ *Meteor*, Czechoslovak Radio, April 6, 1974, Czech Radio Archives. The programme first appeared in 1968, and in 1972 it became a regular Saturday morning magazine with hundreds of

similar vein, Tomeček’s late works used elements of facticity to tackle the “subjective” causes of the ecological crisis, aiming to “send a warning” and help people find their lost connection with nature.⁴⁸

Already towards the end of the 1960s and even more so in the 1970s, there was a notable change in Tomeček’s focus from nature as an idyllic retreat from civilization to the ecological crisis caused by a conflict between technology and nature. Indeed, he explained that he abandoned the idea of idyllic nature after experiencing acid rains and seeing forest springs full of nitrates.⁴⁹ He would draw comparisons with memories from his childhood, for example, of the river Morava where he used to catch fish as a young boy that had effectively turned into an “industrial sewer” during his lifetime.⁵⁰ He conceived of the changes as nature “becoming less romantic because of civilization”.⁵¹

A “Right to Sadness”

Literary critics noticed Tomeček’s interest in environmental problems, interpreting his works as part of a broader value shift from pure productivism to ecological concerns. For literary historians, he epitomized the genre of “nature prose” (*přírodní próza*) in Czech literature, whose increasing focus on humans’ place in nature they saw as a reaction to environmental problems.⁵² The change in the perception of the human subject as being a part of nature was reflected in a focus on the introspection of human narrators. A Czechoslovak Radio host noted in 1986 that Tomeček’s “admiration for the beauty of nature turned into a warning against insensitive human interference in nature”.⁵³ Humanity and its relation to nature vis-à-vis industrial destruction was brought into focus in Tomeček’s works, as opposed to earlier aestheticization of nature devoid of social criticism.

Moreover, late socialist literary critics contrasted the turn to ecology with literature in the Stalinist period. For example, literary theorist Marie Uhlířová noted that in the 1950s nature writing was on the fringes of literature because it was deemed unhelpful in the early days of communism with its focus on production and construction.⁵⁴ In

thousands of listeners. Among its recurrent topics was the environment, see Ivo Budil, *Hlásí se Meteor: populárně vědecký magazín Českého rozhlasu* (Praha: Horizont, 1993), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Štěpán, “Boj o zemi zaslíbenou”, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Spisovatel Jaromír Tomeček hovoří o svém životě*, part 1, 26:18–27:29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23:11–23:30.

⁵² Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře*, p. 15. Literary historian Sylva Bartůšková interpreted Tomeček as a successor of Josef Thomayer, a Czech professor of medicine active at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries who wrote popularizing books, including some about nature. Bartůšková, *Jaromír Tomeček*, p. 5; Josef Thomayer, *Příroda a Lidé* (Praha: Militký a Novák pomocí Lumíra, 1880).

⁵³ *A léta běží ... Jaromír Tomeček*, 5:10–5:26.

⁵⁴ Kubíček, *Přírodní tematika v literatuře*, p. 21.

contrast to that era, theorist Milan Blahynka saw the rise of an “ecological civilizational poetry” in the 1980s, and predicted that the ecological question would soon penetrate all literary production.⁵⁵ Similarly, Josef Hrabák understood Tomeček’s work in the 1950s as ecologically vanguardist at a time when industrial production was the focal point.⁵⁶ He recalled a meeting of the Writers’ Union in Brno sometime around 1950 at which Tomeček’s interest in nature was badly received. Hrabák argued that the topicality of his work was appreciated only later when ecology and human-nature relations became the centre of attention.

Tomeček’s romantic criticism of technocratic alienation resonated with ecologists too. In 1986, the ecologist Jan Lacina wrote an article on Tomeček in the inaugural issue of the magazine *Veronica*, published by the Czech Union for Nature Conservation, pointing out that his books were published in several thousand copies and were often reprinted as he was “perhaps the most read Czech author”; this, he argued, was clear evidence that the Czechoslovak population was eager to hear about nature.⁵⁷ He also repeated the argument that Tomeček had been devoted to nature since the early years of communism, a time when most authors were interested only in writing novels about production and the building of communism. Unlike others, it was argued, Tomeček seemed to never give in to the idea of conquering and exploiting nature. To illustrate this, Lacina quoted Tomeček’s short story “The Purple Sun” (1966):

Yes, we will perhaps occupy all the stars, but we have lost the spring, we have lost the breeze, we have lost the all-liberating church’s silence of the forest, and we have surrounded ourselves with sewers, with smoke and roaring machinery.⁵⁸

In the context of the magazine’s advocacy of nature conservation, Tomeček was presented as a strong voice against a technocratic neglect of the affective role natural environment played in human lives.

But it would be wrong to read Tomeček as anti-technocratic. Indeed, his dialectical understanding of nature and technology, with humans in need of both, was in line with some of the theoretical attempts of the time to reconcile a technocratic, rational orientation towards the future with a sense of the cultural, emotional value of the past.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁶ Hrabák, “Lovec beze zbraní Jaromír Tomeček”, pp. 26–27. Later reprinted in Hrabák, *Život s literaturou*, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Jan Lacina, “Jaromír Tomeček (stále zelený)”, *Veronica*, no. 1 (1986), pp. 13–14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ See a discussion of the differences between the Marxist social-philosophical approach and the Western formal-model analysis in “anthropoecology” and human ecology, respectively, as well as the place of the cultural past in such a conception: Miroslav Gottlieb, *Poznámky k pojmu “ekologie člověka”* (Praha: Ústav krajinné ekologie ČSAV, 1976), pp. 27–33, 41.

Tomeček saw the function of literature in parallel to the escapism from city to nature; he believed that people would escape to art: "From the desert of technocracy they will resort to the ever-living water of poetry."⁶⁰ He lamented civilization's alienation from nature, and strove to reconnect children deprived of the charms of the forest with nature through his writings.⁶¹ Tomeček explained that his task was to make "new" nature as beautiful as the "old".⁶² He argued that it was possible and even necessary to see beauty in, for instance, an agricultural landscape changed by the industrial boom. He considered change a necessary step on the path to progress that guaranteed people comfort, and his task then was to help people appreciate the new beauty. His lament that children were no longer as close to nature as he had been when he was a child was not mere nostalgia but was instead intended to challenge literature to appreciate nature in a changed world.

In the 1980s, the literary theorist Josef Peterka wrote about the themes developed by Tomeček and other contemporary writers, describing them as a "right to the sadness of memory" (*právo na smutek paměti*).⁶³ He observed them in Tomeček's essay about the construction of the Dukovany power plant. In the essay, Tomeček argued that "as humans are born out of pain, the future is born out of the present in a very painful way. That nothing is for free in this world, everything has its price."⁶⁴ Using long lyrical passages, he described the emotions of "men under whose hands the concrete giants grow" as they cut the trees: "Man, remember, the spruce tells me, that I have given my place to you, that I had to fall, for you want heat, light, comfort, life."⁶⁵ Here, the intervention into nature was no longer conceived of as a celebration of its mastery, but a painful act for which humans ask nature its forgiveness.

Peterka reinterpreted the doctrine of socialist realism to emphasize sadness as a complement of joy and individuality as a prerequisite of Marxist-Leninist goals.⁶⁶ While he rejected the abandonment of "the people" as a concept in the post-Stalinist years,

⁶⁰ Tomeček, "Kalokagathia", p. 76. Similarly, some urban theorists insisted that people needed "rhythmical contrasting alternation" of both city and countryside: Jaroslav Pěnkava, Miroslav Gottlieb, and Milan Šimek, *Volný čas Pražanů* (Praha: Ústav pro výzkum kultury, 1973), p. 9.

⁶¹ *Spisovatel Dr. Jaromír Tomeček provází děti přírodou*, Czechoslovak Radio, 1970, Czech Radio Archives, 01:10–02:06.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 17:25–20:01.

⁶³ Peterka himself wrote two collections of poems that were introspective observations about life in late socialist technological civilization. Peterka, "Téma paměť", p. 109; Josef Peterka, *Autobiografie vlka* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1980); Josef Peterka, *Autobiografie člověka* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1984).

⁶⁴ Jiří Křenek, *Sklizeň světla* (Brno: Blok, 1983), p. 18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁶ For socialist realism see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 3–37; Vít Schmarc, *Země lyr a ocele: subjekty, ideologie, modely, mýty a rituály v kultuře českého stalinismu* (Praha: Academia, 2017), pp. 71–110.

since it had allegedly led to anti-socialist intellectual elitism, he also criticized seeing “the people” as an undifferentiable whole, an idealized mass. Stalinist art represented people as “an abstract collection of positive characters who only work manually [and] subtler forms of art and more complex ideas are inaccessible to them”.⁶⁷ The problem was, according to Peterka, that people as the mover of history became effectively immobilized, “as a reflection of the romantic ideas” of artists and ideologues, forgetting that there could be no people “without ordinary persons”.⁶⁸ Instead, a focus on memory would place history “inside a human”, emphasizing the “personal acquisition of time”.⁶⁹ One’s actions influenced, transformed, and were remembered through the actions of others, creating a “materialist image of human immortality”.⁷⁰ This conception of memory and time was explicitly put in opposition to the “existentialist” tendencies of reform socialism and its “nostalgic, subjectivist” memory that prevailed in the elite culture produced in the 1960s, as the 1970s saw the return of socialist realism as an official doctrine and a criticism of previous deviations from social reality.⁷¹

Peterka’s revision of socialist realism thus stood against both Western “oblivion” and 1960s reformist “existentialism”.⁷² Returning to the Marxist literary debates of the interwar period, Peterka saw socialist realism as a merger of romantic and realist approaches that would remain true to social reality and actively reuse historical tradition to create something new.⁷³ Communism was for Peterka a “civilization of memory”, whereas capitalism was a “civilization of oblivion and decay”.⁷⁴ The idea was that the preservation of the destroyed past in memory would surpass time and become part of the new – which was the task of art. Peterka described it as follows: “Vital progress

⁶⁷ Josef Peterka, *Principy a tendence* (Praha: Český spisovatel, 1981), p. 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶⁹ Peterka, “Téma pamět”, p. 98.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁷¹ Czech literature after 1968 saw the return of socialist realism as an official doctrine and a criticism of deviation from social reality, as asserted by Sáva Šabouk in his reproach of Roger Garaudy’s *Realism without Shores*: Roman Kanda, *Český literárněvědný marxismus: kapitoly z moderního projektu* (Brno: Host, 2021), pp. 222–36; Jan Mervart, *Kultura v karanténě: umělecké svazy a jejich konsolidace za rané normalizace* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2015), pp. 40–41.

⁷² Similarly in the GDR, Joachim Siebelt contrasted the historical “socialist consciousness” with the “nostalgic” and “ahistorical West”: Marcus Colla, “The Politics of Time and State Identity in the German Democratic Republic”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29 (2019), p. 232.

⁷³ See also Peterka’s works on the Marxist understanding of literary tradition, the contradictions of Romanticism and the theory of socialist realism: Josef Peterka, *Metamorfózy tradice: k ideologickým aspektům působení literárního dědictví* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1983), esp. pp. 87–106; Josef Peterka, *Teoretické otázky rozvoje socialistického realismu* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1986).

⁷⁴ Peterka, “Téma pamět”, p. 110.

brings along with joy also sorrow from the loss of unused worth that, as a rule, needs to be left [...] on the bottom of a future lake”.⁷⁵ In that way, Peterka rendered human interactions with the environment as “sad” but “necessary” aspects of a modern civilization committed to maintaining material comfort. He thus believed that being sad about the loss of the past to the productive forces constructing the future was a necessary complement to the joy of progress. For late socialist writers then, the human subject was no longer the omnipotent master of nature but instead had to find ways to reconcile technological progress and ecological crisis, which became obvious during the construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant in the 1980s that was presented as a work of technology in harmony with nature.

The Harvest of Light

By making the romantic turn to nature part of the socialist project, the ecological techno-optimism of late socialist literature legitimized the solutions to the ecological crisis proposed by technocrats. Nuclear energy was supposed to become the vehicle of a qualitative change in the relation between the human world and the world of nature, without the need to abandon economic growth, as “pessimistic” ecologists in the West were allegedly proposing.⁷⁶ In 1979, Ladislav Bohal, Director of Development of the Czechoslovak Energy Company, asserted that nuclear energy was overcoming “the earlier limiting conditions of nature” as humans were penetrating the microstructure of matter, saving labour time and increasing productivity.⁷⁷ Nuclear energy was seen as a practical application of the principle of the scientific-technological revolution and as such, it would lead to a fundamental change in relations “between humans, nature, environment and society”.⁷⁸ Older techno-scientific imaginaries combined with the new ecological discourse. As one promotional booklet put it in 1987, nuclear energy was a matter “of life and death of our landscape, forests, clean water, food safety”.⁷⁹ The Cold War idea of a “peaceful” atom that stood in contrast with nuclear weapons was increasingly coupled with the danger of environmental disaster, represented by the continuous use of heavily polluting sources of energy – mainly coal power plants.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷⁶ Jozef Štrba, ed., *Jaderná energetika a životní prostředí, Žďár Nad Sázavou, Duben 1979* (Praha: Ústřední informační středisko pro jaderný program, 1979), p. 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Pavel Vrbka, *Jaderná Elektrárna Dukovany* (Brno: Průmyslové stavby, 1987), p. 5.

⁸⁰ Michaela Kůželová, “Příroda na prahu atomového věku: obraz jaderné energetiky a životního prostředí v publicistice socialistického Československa”, *Soudobé dějiny* 24, no. 1/2 (2017), pp. 102–126.

The construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant in the early 1980s was thus accompanied by a major campaign involving writers and filmmakers, whose task was to bring to people's imaginations not only the construction itself but also to give it a meaning that went beyond the provision of electricity. Jaromír Tomeček was involved in writing the book *Harvest of Light*, authored by members of the South Moravian branch of the Union of Czech Writers. The book included short stories, reportages, poems, and illustrations. In his contribution, Tomeček asserted that the problems of polluted air and diminishing coal reserves would be solved by nuclear energy, evoking an assemblage of technocrats and comfortable homes in harmonious unity with nature. In a similar vein, the television documentary film *Dukovany at the Starting Line* emphasized both experts' "perfect knowledge of technology", guaranteeing the plant's safe operation, and the absence of "smoking chimneys, sulphur dioxide, acid rains".⁸¹ As Tomeček put it, the workers of Dukovany were more powerful than Prometheus: they brought people heat and light that they themselves extracted from the earth to power electric stoves in our homes – and (allegedly) without pollution.⁸² The power plant itself was portrayed in an organicist way – one that in a dialectical process was becoming one with its surroundings.⁸³ It was a supreme example of Tomeček's aspiration to use art to teach people to appreciate the beauty of a new nature, as discussed earlier.

The books and films were no different from other works of the time in their proclaimed focus on Dukovany primarily as a workplace, but their emphasis on ecology and negative aspects of the construction was rather novel. The television programme *The Story of Light* captured the handover of the completed book to the workers: the writers went back to Dukovany, where they had spent considerable time collecting material for the book, to reflect and read out loud parts of their work. Writer Ivan Milota remembered that when they first came, their fear of being rejected by the workers was gone in an instant as they were accepted spontaneously and even made long-lasting friendships.⁸⁴ According to the First Secretary of South Moravian Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Vladimír Herman, the publication was an "excellent example of collaboration" between the artistic intelligentsia and the working class, the former having conversations with the latter to inform their creative work.⁸⁵ To that extent, the literary project followed the convention of socialist reportage, which was

⁸¹ *Dukovany před startem*, Czechoslovak Television, 1984, Czech Television Archives, IDEC 384 451 62653, 24:10–25:14.

⁸² *Příběh světla*, Czechoslovak Television, 1984, Czech Television Archives, IDEC 384 451 52626, 23:05–23:36; Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, p. 20.

⁸³ For instance, Jiří Křenek wrote that "above the forest of cranes floats a black necklace of ravens"; and Ivo Odehnal portrayed "a vehicle with a peacock's tail of dust". Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, pp. 44–45.

⁸⁴ *Příběh světla*, 16:30–17:36.

⁸⁵ Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, p. 11.

equally applied to the shooting of the film *Atomic Cathedral*, based on Stanislav Rudolf's novel *Race of a Weary Horse*.⁸⁶ To make the plot realistic, Rudolf spent about half a year collecting material for his book to get to know Dukovany's work environment, even taking part in meetings and reading through "boring final reports and correspondence with subcontractors"; therein, he believed, lay his ability to depict problems at the workplace.⁸⁷ *Atomic Cathedral*, like other late socialist popular culture, based its veracity on showing imperfect human lives and failures of both individuals and the system, which also made it fit into Peterka's conception of the people as a collection of ordinary individuals: it showed problems and conflicts between management, the dissatisfaction of workers and the daily drama of family life.

However, South Moravian writers also innovatively focused on the landscape and its meaning, which Peterka interpreted as accounting for sorrow in the joyful creating of the new. The landscape's several layers – literary, cultural, natural, and technical – created a unique sense of time and place that stretched into both the past and the future, the material and the imaginary, the natural and the technical. To evoke the literary meaning of the place, several authors referred to Czech surrealist writer Vítězslav Nezval, a native of a village near Dukovany and member of the avant-garde leftist association of artists *Devětsil*, who was active in the interwar period. In *Edison*, one of his most famous epic poems, Nezval melancholically pondered upon life and death while celebrating technical inventions of the modern age that he compared to writing poetry.⁸⁸ Following Nezval's linking of poetry and scientific invention, Tomeček stressed the combination of poetry and hard work that was needed to bring a comfortable life to the people.⁸⁹ Similarly, the writer Ludmila Klukanová wrote that "the nuclear power plant pervades the poetic space of the inventor Edison".⁹⁰ In this way, the literary and technical landscapes merged, literary meanings piercing the natural landscape. So the writers Antonín Buček and Jan Lacina described a lizard "basking in Nezval's verses", further extolling the biological diversity of the area by naming endangered species living there.⁹¹ Lacina's activities perhaps best epitomized the connection between ecology as science and art, as he was himself a scientist who collaborated on ecological surveys of the area. Furthermore, faithful to his literary style, Tomeček presented Dukovany in a number of diverse ways: he described walks in the countryside, a railway bridge, the ruins of the Rabštejn castle, also evoking local history and a biologists' research station

⁸⁶ Stanislav Rudolf, *Běh znaveného koně* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1983); Jaroslav Balík, director. *Atomová katedrála* (Studio Barrandov, 1984).

⁸⁷ Miloš Skalka, "Lákavé téma současnost", *Květy*, February 28, 1985, pp. 38–39.

⁸⁸ Vítězslav Nezval, *Edison* (Praha: Rudolf Škeřík, 1928).

⁸⁹ Křenek, *Sklizeň světla*, p. 21.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

belonging to the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.⁹² Tomeček was describing a cultural landscape “recreated” by humans during its long history, from the first ploughmen to contemporary excavators.⁹³ In that way, the landscape of Dukovany was comprised of both natural and technological beauty, past and future, literature and science.

Memory of the landscape included the reflection of loss that echoed the “right to sadness” analysed by Peterka. Describing the landscape of Dukovany, Buček and Laci-na talked about “hillside romanticism” but also “melancholic wandering”.⁹⁴ They were observing an area where a dam was constructed: “We tried to imagine what it used to look like here, with old mills in the valley, spring paddlers in a wild river and *tramp* songs heard till late at night around campfires. And we understood the sorrow of our friends who knew the former river intimately and whose favourite places were lost to the dam, leaving them only with memories and photographs.”⁹⁵ The old and the new were contrasted and the need for progress was defended, but in a way that acknowledged the value of the old and the weight of emotional attachment.⁹⁶ Thus, the collaborative work *Harvest of Light* was a prime example of the attempt to reconcile emotional attachment to nature and the ideology of technological progress.

In that vein, the loss of the former landscape to the industrial complex, consisting of a nuclear power plant and a dam, was justified by the guarantee of a comfortable life. On 20 March 1985, a Czechoslovak Radio report from Dukovany began: “Soon it will get dark, we will turn on the lights in our homes, turn on our electric stoves and radios, and the TV screen will light up the room. At that moment, the lights on the panels in the power stations come on and the meter swings to the right.”⁹⁷ And about a year later, Jaromír Tomeček posed a rhetorical question on Czechoslovak Radio: “Do you want central heating? Do you want comfort? Warmth? Light?” Tomeček recognised the adverse effects of industrialization but asserted that it was necessitated by people’s material needs. He remained optimistic about the future, because he believed in the power of new technologies that would revolutionize relations between humans and the natural world. “There will be no need for chimneys. No octanes. No pollutants. No acid rain. [...] It will be the sun again, it will be the wind again, it will be the elements again.”⁹⁸ The new potential sources of energy gave Tomeček hope that a harmony be-

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹⁶ For example, *Story of Light* portrays a power plant behind an old house coexisting with one another. *Příběh světla*, 12:23.

⁹⁷ *O čem se hovoří*, Czechoslovak Radio, March 20, 1985, Czech Radio Archives, 0:21–0:36.

⁹⁸ *A léta běží ... Jaromír Tomeček*, 15:01–15:21.

tween increasing material comfort and nature could indeed be achieved. "We are the children of nature", Tomeček declared in the same breath.⁹⁹

It thus appears that, in the emphasis on material provision overseen by technocratic management, the discourse of ecological techno-optimism analysed here legitimised the preservation of the existing social order structured around family values and national prosperity.¹⁰⁰ The discourses on nuclear energy, for instance, focused on the idea that the children's future would be a result of the "manly" work of both construction workers and experts that guaranteed a "comfortable life" for all.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, late socialist writers saw the love of nature as a healthy manifestation of one's patriotism.¹⁰² Tomeček himself expressed a patriotic sentiment for the Czech landscape that was "more beautiful than in other places"; its beauty was both physical and economic, as Tomeček stressed the importance of the national ownership of forests.¹⁰³

Nuclear energy was presented simultaneously as something in harmony with nature and as a technological achievement that would guarantee the continuation of a comfortable life. The television programme *Pilgrims to Light* (*Poutníci za světlem*, 1985), about the benefits of nuclear energy, depicted a grandfather and a grandson on a walk in fields near an atomic power plant.¹⁰⁴ The grandfather was amazed that the boy was not looking for mushrooms, but for the power plant. The boy explained that "the atomic plant is the nature of today". The programme concluded that "the true purpose of the blue planet called Earth is to be, not to wander like a cold sphere through the endless wastes of dark space. The point is to be able to pick mushrooms and blueberries behind the walls of a nuclear power plant. It is the only way to get back to where humans started – nature. Because the moment one forgets this, one ceases to be human."¹⁰⁵ The quote perfectly illustrates how the discourse of ecological techno-optimism was in no way supposed to be a "return to nature" in the conservationist sense but rather a

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16:18.

¹⁰⁰ In other words, the reconsideration of human-nature relations under late socialism involved mainly the economic issues of production and consumption and did not result in the questioning of human nature in the ways some Western theories did, cf. some Western eco-feminist and Marxist critiques: Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

¹⁰¹ *O čem se hovoří*, 0:21–03:07. See also *Poutníci za světlem*, 0:01–4:20.

¹⁰² See the television debate about the relationship between the landscape and literature: "Vztah krajiny a tvorby", *Literární klub*, Czechoslovak Television, 1985, Czech Television Archives, IDEC 285 310 23805/0003.

¹⁰³ *Spisovatel Dr. Jaromír Tomeček provází děti přírodou*, 5:29–6:58.

¹⁰⁴ *Poutníci za světlem*, 13:52–14:06.

¹⁰⁵ *Poutníci za světlem*, 24:31–25:27.

“re-creation of nature” that would keep the progressive temporal orientation of socialist modernity. The materialist understanding of nature was supplanted by a romantic take on the human subject who would find peace in that “new nature”.

Conclusion

Tomeček never got directly involved in politics and his views of existing socialism were indeed critical at times, but he remained confident about ecological techno-optimism. Unlike many of his colleagues in the Writers' Union who took part in the debates about democratic socialism in the 1960s, what seemed to interest Tomeček more was “catching fish”.¹⁰⁶ When asked about the elections in 1971, Tomeček did not proclaim his confidence in the candidates of the National Front as did other writers who were queried but emphasized his patriotism and the need to care about nature.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps it was his disinvolvement that brought him in 1972 to the Control Committee of the “consolidated” Writers' Union. Even in the 1990s he explained that he was not interested in politics but instead cherished his home, mother, town, country, “people of good will, the sun, the moon, the stars”.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless he remained confident about ecological techno-optimism since what environmentalists preached was, according to Tomeček, surely admirable but hardly possible without “light and central heating”.¹⁰⁹

Nevertheless, the romantic turn also gave way to the discourse of individual responsibility for environmental issues that gained traction towards the end of the 1980s. It thus made complete sense that Tomeček appeared in a 1988 television programme that aimed to raise environmental awareness, emphasizing a change of behaviour on an individual level.¹¹⁰ In his book *Elements and Destinies* (1986), Tomeček criticized pessimistic ecologists of the West but also lamented that he could hardly see any change on the level of human behaviour. He took a highly moralizing perspective, reflecting on the “frightening” rate of negative changes in his own lifetime.¹¹¹ If it made sense to struggle with nature in a “backward” Carpathia at the start of the 20th century, Tomeček asserted, today's nature was ultimately defeated.¹¹² Tomeček criticized water pollution,

¹⁰⁶ When writers debated the future of their association, Ivan Kříž allegedly said: “Why should Jaromír Tomeček, who would go fishing last year and was not at all interested in the politics I was doing, lose together with me?” Kříž implied that Tomeček should not be disqualified from continuing to be active in the association, given his disinterest in politics. Ludvík Vaculík, *Nepaměti (1969–1972)* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 1998), p. 40.

¹⁰⁷ “Hlas pro socialismus”, *Tvorba*, no. 40 (1971), p. II.

¹⁰⁸ Jan Lacina and Jiří Poláček, *Odkaz Jaromíra Tomečka* (Veronica, 2008), p. 74.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹¹⁰ *Ekologie všemi pády*, Czechoslovak Television, 1988, Czech Television Archives, ep. 3, 23:25–25:14, ep. 4, 24:36–27:40.

¹¹¹ Tomeček, *Živly a osudy*, p. 9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

deforestation, and species extinction, but he also opposed experts who "announce that there is no way to help our planet, which [they say] is rushing towards destruction", as there were many people who believed in a "calm" and "joyful" life.¹¹³

As I have argued, the ecological strand of the late socialist literature mobilised the romantic tradition to reintegrate memory as part of the technological progress promised by communism. To be sure, ecological techno-optimism was not the only environmental discourse available in late socialism, but nevertheless it formed an integral, and largely forgotten, part of late socialist environmentalism that spoke to the ordering of the world that came to be seen by more and more people as a complete whole with humans making up its integral part. Perhaps most interestingly, it was an attempt to retain the technoscientific orientation towards economic growth, using the romantic relation to the natural world with its emphasis on subjective experience as a complement rather a subversion of technocratic socialism.

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¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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INTERVIEW

MARXIAN ECOLOGY, DIALECTICS, AND THE HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Interview with John Bellamy Foster by
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Abstract

John Bellamy Foster is editor of the Monthly Review and professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. Since the publication of his book Marx's Ecology in 2000 he has become one of the most significant voices in uncovering Marx's ecological thinking and developing ecological Marxism. In this interview we discuss his most recent work, the legacy of Soviet environmentalism, the long-running debate over "the dialectics of nature", and the idea of production according to need.

Keywords

Ecology, Marx, Engels, dialectics of nature, needs, socialism, science

More than two decades ago you refuted popular assumptions about Marx's relation to ecological issues in your book *Marx's Ecology*. In your recent book, *The Return of Nature*, you undertake a similar task in regard to the other founding figure of Marxism, Friedrich Engels. Why do you see it as so important to set the record straight when it comes to the popular views of Engels?

In *Marx's Ecology* and *The Return of Nature* I was not primarily concerned with refuting “popular assumptions about Marx’s relation to ecological issues”, which were of course mainly products of a profound lack of knowledge of Marx and Engels’s thought in this area. As Spinoza said, “Ignorance is no argument”. It thus hardly deserves a direct refutation. Rather the concern was the more affirmative one of unearthing the deep classical historical-materialist ecological critiques developed by Marx and Engels, as well as later socialist ecological thinkers who were influenced by them, thus providing a more complete understanding of this critical line of thought as a whole, as a methodological basis on which to develop a socialist ecology for the twenty-first century.

Marx as we know today was a foundational ecological thinker, not only in relation to his own time but also with respect to our own since crucial aspects of his method have never been surpassed. This acute understanding of ecological contradictions grew out of his fundamental materialist method and was evident in his concepts of the “universal metabolism of nature”, the “social metabolism”, and the “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism” (or metabolic rift). This allowed him, in a way that is unique in ecological thought down to the present, to develop a critique of the political economy of capital that focused on both the social and ecological contradictions of the system arising from the mode of production. His analysis in this respect anticipated and, in some ways, influenced the subsequent development of ecological thought. Today, the recovery of his ecological critique has attained a real importance with regard to both theory and practice, giving rise to a powerful socioecological critique of the planetary ecological crisis of the twenty-first century, underpinning the modern ecosocialist movement.

Engels adopted the same fundamental materialist method (if less philosophically sophisticated) as Marx, but their analyses took on somewhat different emphases rooted in the division of labor they adopted in their work. Although Marx was thoroughly immersed in the natural-scientific analyses of his time, and brought this into *Capital* at numerous points, it was Engels who more directly addressed natural science in his *Condition of the Working Class in England* (which was a pioneering work in epidemiology) and later in his *Dialectics of Nature* and *Anti-Dühring*. Engels’s materialism together with his approach to the dialectics of nature propelled his work in an ecological direction. He famously said that “Nature is the proof of dialectics”. While this has often been criticized, what he clearly meant, in today’s terms, was that “Ecology is the proof of dialectics”, a view that takes on new meaning in the twenty-first century. In “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man” (included in the *Dialectics of Nature*), Engels provided not only what Stephen Jay Gould called the most developed conception of gene-culture evolution (and thus the most advanced understanding of human evolution) to appear in the nineteenth century, he also provided one of the most powerful critiques of ecological destruction to be developed in his time and indeed up to our own.

Engels’s incorporation of Darwin’s evolutionary theory within Marxist analysis was to influence subsequent socialist analyses. His theory of dialectics as constituting what

we now call the “emergence” of new material powers through changing organization forms, or what Joseph Needham called “integrative levels”, was crucial to later work by socialist scientists, and anticipated the development of science in general. His speculations on the origins of the universe, origins of life, the origins of the human species through labor, and the origins of the family were also enormously important for later theoretical developments. The chapter in *The Return of Nature* that focuses on the significance of the Marxist natural-scientific, evolutionary, and ecological tradition embodied in the work of thinkers such as J. B. S. Haldane, J. D. Bernal, Joseph Needham, Lancelot Hogben, and Hyman Levy in the 1930s and '40s is entitled “The Return of Engels” since it was the rediscovery of Engels’s dialectics of nature that constituted the initial basis for many of the revolutionary discoveries of the period, influencing the modern environmental movement.

The point is that the recovery of Engels’s ecological thought, like Marx’s, is not so much about countering popular assumptions, but rather building on and revitalizing a critical analysis that is indispensable for revolutionary theory and practice in our time.

How can this recovery of Engels’s ecological thought change the way we understand the fate of dialectics of nature in the Soviet Union? The belief in a supposedly unbroken line of continuity between Engels and Stalinism still affects how many people in Central and Eastern Europe seem to think about this issue...

The issue of Soviet dialectical materialism is complex. And while I could discuss that at some length, I think it is most useful in this context – since a long disquisition would not be in order – to focus on the ecological aspects, which will get at many of the salient issues.

It should hardly surprise us that in the 1920s up to the mid-1930s the Soviet Union had the most advanced ecological science in the world, encouraged initially by none other than Lenin himself. Moreover, it was inspired in large part by Engels’s dialectics of nature, as well as Marx’s broad dialectical and historical materialism. Even those Soviet-era thinkers who were not Marxist were influenced by the dialectical conceptions emerging at the time. Geophysicist Vladimir Vernadsky developed the notion of the biosphere and biogeochemical cycles; geologist Aleksei Pavlov introduced the notion of the Anthropogene Period (also referred to as the Anthropocene); Bolshevik revolutionary leader and theorist Nikolai Bukharin applied Vernadsky’s concept of the biosphere to historical materialism and explored metabolism as constituting the basis of an equilibrium (although originally seen by him in rather mechanistic terms); biologist Alexander Oparin introduced the modern materialist theory of the origins of life (also developed at the same time by J. B. S. Haldane in England, who was influenced by Engels and Soviet thought); geneticist Nikolai Vavilov discovered the global sources of germplasm underlying the major crops and pioneered in genetics; zoologist Vladimir Stanchinskii was the first to develop a rigorous energetic analysis of ecological commu-

nities and trophic levels, was the editor of the USSR's first formal ecology journal and the leading proponent of the Soviet *zapovedniki*, or ecological reserves; physicist Boris Hessen introduced the sociology of science and explored the significance of Engels's focus on the relations between the transmutation of matter and the transformation of energy; Boris Zavodovsky developed a powerful critique of vitalism in science; Vladimir Nikolaevich Sukachev pioneered in ecological work on swamps that impressed Lenin in this respect. All of this was based on Marxian concepts of dialectical naturalism/materialism.

A number of these figures, namely, Bukharin, Vavilov, Zavodovsky, and Hessen, flew into London from Moscow in 1931 for the Second International Conference on the History of Science and Technology, where they had an enormous influence on socialist scientists in Britain such as Bernal, Needham, Hogben, Levy, and Haldane, leading to the tradition of red science in Britain that is explored in *The Return of Nature*. However, the impact of Stalinism (and Lysenkoism) was reflected in the fact that Bukharin, Vavilov, Zavodovsky, Hessen, and Stanchinskii were all eliminated in Stalin's purges. Their tradition of analysis lived on primarily in the work of the British red scientists who were directly influenced by them and who became what I called at one point a "second foundation" within Marxian natural science.

In the Stalin period dialectical materialism in the Soviet Union was reduced to a set of empty formulae and took various crude forms, including positivism. Nevertheless, there remained authentic dialectical thinkers in the natural sciences (and the arts) concerned with ecology who managed to survive, such as Sukachev, who introduced the notion of biogeocoenosis, constituting in many ways a more dialectical alternative to an ecosystem tied to the concept of the biosphere. Sukachev, at the head of Soviet science, was to declare war on Trofim Lysenko and eventually defeated the latter, which opened the way to the revival of Soviet ecological thought, the resurrection of the *zapovedniki*, and the rise of what I have called "late Soviet ecology" in the late 1970s and 1980s. It is at this time that the Soviet climatologists, notably those surrounding the extraordinary figure of Mikhail Budyko, played the leading role in introducing the notion of accelerated climate change, while also playing a major role in the development of nuclear winter analysis. Soviet scientists and philosophers got together to develop the notion of "ecological civilization", which was later adopted in China. In all of this we can see the power of dialectical-materialist ways of thinking despite attempts to reduce it to a positivistic dogma, the very inverse of itself.

None of this is to deny the ecological failures of the Soviet state. But just as we would not want to judge the value of all ecological and critical thought in the West by the failures of the capitalist system, which is now pointing us toward the complete destruction of the planet as a safe home for humanity and putting the survival of the species in question, we should not discount the contributions of all critical Soviet thinkers on the basis of the errors made in the Kremlin.

How can this complicated Soviet legacy inform our thinking today?

The answer lies in your reference to “the complicated Soviet legacy”. The Soviet Union (also including Soviet-type societies in general) cannot be treated as simply a monolithic society nor was its history a simple, continuous one. Rather, there were sharp breaks. In writing my article on “Late Soviet Ecology and the Planetary Crisis” in *Monthly Review* in June 2015, I looked at the three periods of Soviet history from an ecological perspective, represented by the period up to the mid-1930s, the core Stalin period beginning with the major purges, and then late Soviet ecology beginning with the thaw in the 1960s. What interested me was that not only was the opening decade and a half in the Soviet Union, as is now well understood, a period of critical ecological advance, but also that this was not entirely destroyed in the Stalin period, and there was a new flowering of Soviet ecology near the end, arising principally out of the sciences. Moreover, the dialectical and materialist forms of thinking to the extent that these persisted led to very creative ecological insights along lines quite different from the West.

In late Soviet ecology there was of course a greater emphasis on the possibilities of ecological planning as part of the overall planning process, which is very important compared to capitalism’s anarchic market approach. And there was a significant unearthing of some of Marx’s ecological ideas. The notion of the creation of an “ecological civilization” represented a kind of thinking that is hardly evident in the West even today. Budyko and the Soviet climatologists around him were in the 1950s and early 1960s the largest group of climate scientists and the most advanced in the world, though this shifted towards the United States by the mid-1960s. The emphasis on the biosphere and on concepts such as biogeocoenosis and biogeochemical cycles gave Soviet ecologists a more integrated Earth System view. It is remarkable even today to read Budyko’s *Global Ecology* from the 1970s and compare it to what existed then in the West. There was something of a socialist ecological humanism that emerged in nascent form at this time.

Of course, there were contradictions because dogmatism still persisted in core areas along with the belief in Promethean megaprojects, such as diverting rivers. But many of the ecological figures in science and philosophy broke decisively with that. The massive Soviet conservation movement was a scientist-led dissident movement that was gaining ground throughout the 1970s and ’80s and resulted in the largest conservation organization in the world. All of this went away, however, with the dissolution of the USSR itself. Since we are rapidly moving under capitalism toward the destruction of the planet as a home for humanity, threatening the demise of civilization and even the possible extinction of the human species, I think it is important to draw some lessons from the ecological scientists in the Soviet Union who tried to envision another way, breaking somewhat with the dominant tendencies of their own society, but also not succumbing to Western capitalism. It is interesting that Chinese Marxists have to some extent drawn on the ideas from this period, such as the notion of ecological civilization.

You criticize the dualism of history and nature in Western Marxism and opt for a nuanced and nevertheless ontological understanding of dialectics of nature. Why do you consider this ontological understanding important and how do you conceptualize the relation between the dialectics of nature and the dialectics of society?

The *differentia specifica* of “Western Marxism” as a philosophical tradition, separating it from other versions of Marxism, is its adherence to neo-Kantianism, wherever questions of nature and society and ontology and epistemology are concerned. Western Marxism had its origins in footnote 6 of Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* in which he said that Engels, “following Hegel’s mistaken lead”, had extended dialectics to “the whole nature”, encompassing not only society and history, but external nature too. Yet, “the crucial determinants of dialectics” in the social sense, requiring reflexivity in relation to the human subject, Lukács said, “are absent from our knowledge of nature”. From this arose what has long been regarded as the distinguishing feature of Western Marxism, in its rejection on neo-Kantian grounds of the dialectics of nature. Ironically, Lukács himself did not categorically reject the dialectics of nature. In fact, in a later chapter in *History and Class Consciousness* he indicated, in words similar to those of Engels, his acceptance of a “merely objective dialectics of nature”, while emphasizing that this was limited, and that dialectics in its full dimensions was social and reflexive. Moreover, one of the major themes in his work, following *History and Class Consciousness*, starting with his *Tailism* manuscript just a few years later and extending to his *Ontology of Social Being* at the end of his life, was the development of a dialectics of nature and society rooted in Marx’s concept of social metabolism.

Within the Western Marxist tradition itself, evolving from *History and Class Consciousness* but rejecting the dialectics of nature much more fully than Lukács, there emerged a dualistic view in which the dialectic applied only to history and society and not to the realm of nature, which was given over in its entirety to natural science and positivism. Marxism, therefore, restricted itself to an artificial “totality” that was entirely social and non-natural, divorced from the natural-material world, while excluding from this the physical universe. This conformed to the neo-Kantian view in which epistemology (or the theory of knowledge) subsumed ontology (or the nature of being), on the grounds that we could only really know (or know dialectically) the realm of the human subject and not to any extent the external nonhuman world/universe, a view that critical realist philosopher Roy Bhaskar called the “epistemic fallacy”. Such a perspective, however, was no longer consistently materialist, but tended increasingly to idealist views. The materialist conception of history came to be divorced from the materialist conception of nature. The Vician view that we could understand history because we had made it concealed a dualism in which the larger material world outside of societies was characterized as an *other*, the domain of mechanism and positivism, not Marxism and dialectics. In this view, there was no room within Marxism for a concrete analysis of nature, ecology, or

even Darwinian evolution, which all lay beyond its purview. Hence, Western Marxism was not able to produce any genuine ecological analysis, only an endless rejection of positivism, and an abstract and ambiguous critique of the “domination of nature”. This is not to deny that the Western Marxist philosophical tradition expanded our critical knowledge in many respects. But it was trapped in its own rejection of the material world beyond humanity as a universal *other*, a noumena, or *thing in itself*.

In terms of why I consider ontology important, I would have to go back to my first conscious recognition of this in the 1970s through my encounter with István Mészáros’s *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, which addressed human social ontology through an emphasis on the human being as the *self-mediating being of nature*. Mészáros of course drew this from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in which Marx, in his critique of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* at the end of the *Manuscripts*, explains that human beings are corporeal beings and thus objective, sensuous, material beings – in the sense that the objects of their needs lie outside of themselves. Through the historical development of production human beings thus become self-mediating beings of nature, also subject to self-alienation.

This is the place where the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* end, but also the place where the *German Ideology* effectively begins, thus suggesting the lack of any epistemological break in Marx’s thought in 1845–1846. It is this ontological view, associated with Marx’s theory of alienation, which is the starting point of historical materialism. But it emerges out of a deep materialist ontology. Beginning in 1850s, under the influence of the work of his friend and revolutionary comrade, the physician-scientist Roland Daniels, author of *Mikrokosmos*, Marx began to conceptualize this ontological relation in production as the social metabolism between human beings and nature, out of which his most fundamental ecological conceptions arose, and which lies at the center of Lukács’s social ontology. I came to understand Marx’s ontological analysis this way early on, in the 1970s, because of my study of Marx’s *Economic Philosophical Manuscripts*, Mészáros’s *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, Lukács’s 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, and the 1967 interviews of Lukács in *Conversations with Lukács*. My later study of Marx’s materialism going back to his doctoral thesis on Epicurus, his analysis of ecological metabolism, and Lukács’s *Ontology of Social Being*, simply reinforced these views, which also overlap with Joseph Fracchia’s work on Marx as a theorist of corporeality. Without this ontological conception rooted in Marx’s deep materialism there can be no coherent Marxist critique. Marx saw this ontological view as the inverse of Hegel’s idealistic ontology.

But couldn’t this be compatible with an approach that insists nature is knowable *through* dialectics (for example, because it is part of human history and consciousness), without insisting that dialectics is, as it were, “out there” in nature? What do you think would be lost with this approach?

I often refer to the specific realm of dialectics, involving the direct interaction of nature and society, as the *dialectics of nature and society*, since this is somewhat different from the dialectics of society or the dialectics of nature considered separately. Much of dialectical thought involving both the natural and social world, such as Lukács's *Ontology of Social Being*, can be seen as involving the dialectics of nature and society. But there are obviously aspects of nature – which can be seen encompassing all of natural history and evolution in the universe as a whole – that have existed prior to and beyond the reach of humanity. Ontologically, humanity is part of what Marx called “the universal metabolism of nature”. Our knowledge of the external natural world is the result of our interactions with (and within) this universal metabolism, through what Marx called the “social metabolism” represented by human production. The material understanding derived from these interactions is then extended through scientific inferences to aspects of extra-human nature that are not immediately available to us. Thus, if we go back far enough in the history of physics, all the way to antiquity, we find that the earliest principles with which philosophers understood the universe beyond themselves were all based on scientific inferences arising out of our own immediate material experiences, as they understood them at the time, from which they inferred the “nature of things” in the universe as a whole. The very fact that such an approach to scientific inference has a general validity from the standpoint of logic expresses the fact that nature is not simply “out there” but “in here” as well, in the sense that we are natural-material beings, and thus part of nature, as well as social beings. In fact, human society is an emergent form of nature with its own specific laws, but still subject to nature's broader laws.

Marx, building on his deep knowledge of Epicurean philosophy, always emphasized the human *sensuous* relation to nature, in which human beings were conceived as objective beings and therefore had their needs outside themselves. And, of course, Marx's notion of the social metabolism of humanity and nature through production stressed the dynamics of this relation within human history. He saw this sensuous interaction with the world as extended and the knowledge this generated as given rational form within material science. Lukács in his 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness* agreed with Engels (and Marx) that, from an epistemological standpoint, humanity can also learn about external nature through scientific experiments. Hence, the Kantian thing-in-itself tends to recede as human production, knowledge, and science proceeds. All of this reflects our growing material knowledge of the natural world of which we are a part, and in all of this a dialectical, relational perspective is crucial.

Still, it remains a reality that the universal metabolism of nature, as Marx called it, necessarily extends beyond human interaction with it, and thus any direct knowledge on our part. It would be both anthropocentric and unscientific to think otherwise. Hominins are only a few million years old, while most of the history of life and the universe precedes us and surrounds us, constituting the larger basis in which we exist. Humans thus exist alongside other forms of life and within the biogeochemical cycles of the Earth System as a whole. Understanding natural relations – which have to be

approached dialectically and not in a mechanical way – thus requires a dialectics of nature, or what Engels and Lukács called the “merely objective dialectics”, separate from direct human consciousness and action, and providing the basis for the more complete dialectic, embodying human consciousness and subject-object relations.

Hegel famously addressed the merely objective dialectic through his notion of “reflection determinations”. Human beings are both an evolutionary product of nature and, as Marx and Mészáros said, the *self-mediating beings of nature*, allowing us to perceive and act upon the world in meaningful, transformative ways. But just because of this we can also say that much of the universal metabolism of nature lies beyond our own corporeal existence, so that a “merely objective dialectics of nature”, in which humanity itself is decentered, is also necessary. The philosophy of internal relations, which is connected to dialectics, is not simply applicable to human history and consciousness but to the natural world as a whole. It was for this reason that Marx in his *Letters to Kugelmann* referred to “the dialectical method”, viewed in its most general sense, as nothing other than “the method of dealing with matter”.

In contemporary debates, it is very common to see arguments that any distinction between humans and nonhuman nature is necessarily dualistic and anthropocentric. What do you see as the limits of that approach? Your own works suggest a more dialectical view.

The type of criticism that you mention has several different forms. One of these relates to the question of distinctions between human and nonhuman animals. Here the dominant Western position arising out the Enlightenment was Descartes’s famous anthropocentric dualism in which he separated human beings with a soul/mind, on the one hand, from nonhuman animals, who he characterized as mere machines. Descartes went so far as to apply vivisection to his wife’s dog to “prove” that it had no soul. Marx strongly criticized Descartes’s view of animals as machines, insisting that this reflected the alienated, idealist viewpoint of the bourgeois order, arguing that in the medieval world nonhuman animals were seen not as machines but as “assistants” to human beings, a viewpoint with which Marx identified.

Marx was heavily influenced by the Epicurean materialist tradition, by Samuel Reimar’s theory of animal drives, and Darwin’s theory of evolution, all of which emphasized the close connections between human beings and nonhuman animals, departing from the Cartesian dualist tradition in this respect. Indeed, both Marx and Engels attributed most of the higher forms of consciousness and self-consciousness to animals, but understood human labor as a new emergent form, in which human beings, due to their social organization, became the self-mediating beings of nature on a level that was akin to – but qualitatively distinguished from, in terms of society, language, technology, and history – that of nonhuman animals. This was linked to evolutionary theory. In Engels’s “The Part Played by Labor in the Transition of Ape to Man”, one finds not only the highest conceivable estimation of the powers, including

intellectual powers, of nonhuman animals, but also, as mentioned above, the most sophisticated nineteenth century view of gene-culture coevolution, explaining the distinctive evolution of the human species. In this view there are qualitative breaks represented by human evolution, but the connections to nonhuman animals remain within what Darwin called the evolutionary “descent of man”.

In terms of broader criticisms charging Marxism with a dualism of human beings and nature, this is often based on a crude posthumanist rejection of Marxian dialectics as itself dualistic, forgetting that dialectics, and particularly Hegelian dialectics, has as its object overcoming dualism, based on an understanding of contradiction, change, mediation, negation, transcendence, and totality. Conversely, the equally simplistic (and non-dialectical) attempt to treat dialectics as simply absolute unity or a monistic worldview, merely removes the contradictions. As Lukács stated, Marxian dialectics is concerned with “the identity of identity and non-identity”, not with their absolute conflation. Nor is today’s popular hybridism a meaningful substitute for dialectics. In his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* Marx warned against the “unhappy hybrid in which the form betrays the meaning and the meaning the form”.

Some thinkers have gone so far as to criticize Marx’s dialectical theory of metabolic rift itself as dualistic, forgetting that the focus of Marx’s analysis here was social metabolism (the labor and production process) constituting the *mediation* between humanity and what Marx called the “universal metabolism of nature”, that is, nature as a whole. *Mediation* seen in relation to *totality* is of course the core of the dialectical method. In the case of the metabolic rift, we are speaking of a disruption in the metabolism, or an alienated mediation (what Mészáros called “second order mediations”) between humanity and the rest of nature, constituting a fundamental ecological contradiction. This is in fact the dialectical way in which Marx constructed his fundamental ecological critique. To say that this is dualistic because there is humanity on one side and non-human nature on the other is to forget the mediation, that is, metabolism/production, which is the essence of the relation, and the basis of contradiction and change.

As you have indicated, the “metabolic rift” is a crucial concept in your thought. In your book with Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*, you connect this to a “corporeal rift” within the human body itself. How do you understand the relationship between these two rifts? Why do they remain central to understanding our contemporary world?

Marx’s concept of metabolic rift is now so well known to socialist thinkers and activists that it does not require a detailed analysis here. It arose out of Marx’s understanding of the labor and production process as constituting the social metabolism, or the specifically human relation to the universal metabolism of nature. However, since capitalism is based from the start on the twofold alienation of nature and human labor and has as its singular object the accumulation of capital, rifts in the human metabolism of nature are an inherent part of the system. Marx first conceptualized this in terms of the soil

fertility crisis in nineteenth century England, whereby the soil nutrients were removed from the land in the food and fiber sent hundreds and even thousands of miles away to the new urban centers. These nutrients did not return to the land, which required massive attempts to repair this by importing natural fertilizers, such as guano from Peru, followed by the development of artificial fertilizers. From the very beginning, therefore Marxian ecology was based on the notion the disruption of ecological cycles that is inherent in capitalism.

The metabolic rift has often been interpreted as manifested simply in the human relation to nonhuman nature. Nevertheless, human beings themselves, as corporeal beings, are a part of nature and the metabolic rift therefore also applies to the human body. Brett Clark and I therefore introduced the concept of the *corporeal rift* to address this problem. This is in fact consistent with Marx's whole conceptual framework. Thus, Marx, in referring to Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England* two decades later in *Capital*, argued that the same general phenomenon of the disruption in nature's metabolism represented by the guano trade was also represented by the direct effects on human corporeal existence of the periodic epidemics facilitated by capitalist relations of production. We applied the corporeal rift analysis to explain how capitalism creates rifts in human bodily existence, as in what Engels in his *Condition of the Working Class* called "social murder". This allowed us to investigate in human-ecological terms such concrete historical issues as: (1) the extreme exploitation and shortening of the lives of workers; (2) the role of slavery (for example, the fact, discussed by Marx, that the slave-auction contracts between buyers and sellers of slaves often designated the life expectancy of slaves as no more than seven years); (3) the expropriation of women's labor and bodies associated with capitalist forms of social reproduction; (4) the genocide historically inflicted on Indigenous populations; and (5) the role of pandemics as with COVID-19. *The Robbery of Nature* was particularly concerned with Marx's concept of *expropriation* as underlying the metabolic rift under capitalism, and how that affected human corporeality. The human body, in this view, is a site of ecological and social destruction. Naturally, the issue of corporeality can be applied to animal bodies too, but our goal was specifically to capture the corporeal dimensions of the metabolic rift as they related to human beings.

Should we then see the concept of "corporeal rift" as extending and giving scientific grounding to the notion of alienation as it appears in Marx's early writings, perhaps in a similar way to how you describe the *German Ideology* picking up where the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* left off?

If we look at Marx's discussion in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he proceeds from his famous discussion of the alienation of labor to the environmental and physiological effects of this alienation on human beings. Thus, he writes of the industrial worker: "Light, air, etc. – the simple *animal* cleanliness – ceases to be a need for man.

Dirt – this pollution and putrefaction of man, the *sewage* (this word to be understood in its literal sense) of civilization – becomes an *element of life* for him. Universal *unnatural neglect*, putrefied nature, becomes an *element of life* for him.” Marx is here describing a *corporeal rift* in human life resulting from the alienation of labor but extended to the degradation of the entirety of human existence, all that is associated with life.

Interpretations of Marx’s theory of alienation are often too narrow, focusing on the alienation of labor by itself, while failing to recognize the connection of the alienation of labor to the alienation of nature, and, with respect to humanity, the estrangement of human beings from their corporeal organization, as living, breathing beings. It was this relation, which pervades all of Marx’s thought, which led Brett Clark and I to introduce the concept of corporeal rift to get at the metabolic rift as it affects human corporeal organization, recognizing that what we call ecological destruction is properly applied not only to external nature, but to human beings as natural beings as well. And all of this is of course related to alienation in its material dimensions.

Your work argues – with Marx – that the metabolic rift can only be overcome in a society where the associated producers rationally regulate the metabolism between humanity and nature. In this context, how do you see the relationship between scientific knowledge and democratic control? In the current moment, we repeatedly hear calls to “listen to the science” that are combined with a technocratic mindset that is often suspicious of and hostile to democracy. How can we avoid this trap?

A rational science is incompatible with the logic of capital, which also means that science, although often corrupted and formally subsumed under capitalism, can never be absolutely subsumed by capital, and thus it frequently reemerges as an anticapitalist force. It is important to remember that Marx’s *Capital* was a scientific project as well as a critique. Much of *The Return of Nature* is concerned with socialism and the development of ecological science. The method of science in the broadest sense, that is in the way in which Marx and Engels referred to *Wissenschaft* as a system of learning, knowledge, and science, is the intellectual basis of all critique. In the historical materialist view, moreover, major breakthroughs in science tend to come from the bottom and from viewpoints outside the established system – if only because of the irrationalisms imposed on science by bourgeois society, including the role of idealism.

J. D. Bernal’s 1939 *The Social Function of Science* and the social relations of science movement in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s, which was supported by a majority of British scientists at the time, most of whom were on the left, was a major attempt to challenge the system from the standpoint of science. It was Bernal who introduced the phrase “Science for the People” in his 1952 *Marx and Science*. It was in this period that Hogben and Haldane destroyed the genetic theory of race and eugenics in response to the racial distortions of science and ecology by figures like Jan Christiaan Smuts in

South Africa. The modern ecological revolt began in the 1950s when figures like Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Linus Pauling, Bernal, and Barry Commoner organized against atmospheric nuclear testing following the disaster at Castle Bravo. Rachel Carson came out of this same movement in science. Commoner's *Science and Survival*, which raised the issue of global warming in the 1960s, was also part of this struggle. Science for the People movements emerged in the 1970s in the United States and in Britain. In the United States this was associated with such leading radical scientists as Richard Lewontin, Richard Levins, Stephen Jay Gould, and Ruth Hubbard. In Britain, Hilary Rose and Steven Rose played leading roles.

The revolutionary scientific discoveries with respect to climate change were developed by scientists in the Soviet Union and the United States, and immediately generated radical questions about contemporary production. The definitive studies of nuclear winter within atmospheric science over the last thirty years have been opposed by and suppressed by the Pentagon in its own treatments of the effects of nuclear war, but nonetheless the science cannot be denied. Genuine science has self-criticism as its basis, something that runs against the power of ideology.

That does not mean of course that science cannot be corrupted in various ways or manipulated by the system or employed in an elitist and technocratic manner, which is a big part of our reality. But that is exactly why struggles over the social relations of science are necessary. It is therefore extremely important that Science for the People as an organization and also a magazine has been revived in the United States in recent years. Without critical science there would be no science of ecology and virtually no possibility of an effective ecology movement. Marxists who see natural science as inherently technocratic, positivistic, and elitist are in many ways giving up the struggle, which cannot be carried out independently of science. It is worth looking at the very different attitudes toward science in Cuba, as represented by figures such as molecular immunologist August Lage Dávila, e. g., in his article "Socialism and the Knowledge Economy" published in the September 2006 issue of *Monthly Review*.

And we also see these elitist and technocratic approaches emerging in discussions of COVID-19...

In terms of COVID-19, we do see the manipulation of science by the establishment in various ways, sometimes to cover up failures. But we also see major advances in science coming to the fore. The work of critical epidemiologist Rob Wallace and his associates within Structural One Health, coming out of the historical materialist tradition, have been extraordinarily important in bringing out the historical roots of the pandemic in capitalist global agribusiness and the circuits of capital, as well as the social factors that have led to its disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable sectors of society. We can in fact draw on a long history of socialist contributions to epidemiology from

the time of Engels and Marx to the present – as Brett Clark, Hannah Holleman, and I explained in an article in *Monthly Review* in January 2021 entitled “Capital and the Ecology of Disease”.

In this context, you write about the importance of transcending the capitalist form of value and emphasize the necessity of producing use values that meet genuine human needs. Is there a danger of technocracy when it comes to determining and promoting these needs? To use the language of another hero of *The Return of Nature*, William Morris, how do we determine the difference between “the vast quantity of useless things” produced by capitalism and that which meets real needs?

We live in a technologically mediated civilization, so the danger of technocracy is always something to guard against. But much of this derives from the class-basis and hierarchical structure of our society itself. Socialism in the twenty-first century demands substantive equality and ecological sustainability, both of which militate against hierarchical technocratic structures and capitalist monopolistic market mechanisms. We must remember that our most pressing problems today are not conducive to purely technological or technocratic solutions but have to do mainly with social relations. Widespread education and active control from the bottom of society are key.

In terms of how we determine what are useless things, we have to be able first to analyze how various commodities fit into the structure of production and social needs. This is not as difficult as one might think. Marx was the first to refer to the “hierarchy of needs”, not Abraham Maslow in the 1950s. In his “Notes on Adolph Wagner”, Marx wrote of the “hierarchy of his [man’s or humanity’s] needs”, which can clearly be given “a certain rank ordering”. This starts of course with our bodily needs. In the United States three individuals own more wealth than the bottom 60 percent of the entire population. The inequality is so vast that the so-called “masters of the universe” at the top of the class pyramid have numerous private jets and can take trips into outer space for the thrill of it, while much of the population in the United States lacks clean water, clean air, adequate and nutritious food, housing, access to health care, transportation, decent education, connectivity, etc. Individual acquisition is put ahead of community relations and needs.

It is certainly possible, in a society that emphasizes substantive equality and ecological sustainability, to determine that production should first satisfy the basic needs of all and to move forward from there. Needs, moreover, do not come just in the form of commodities, but in the form of community, social relations, education, health, aesthetic enjoyment, human empowerment, etc. Use values are essentially qualitative and not simply representations of economic value, as in the case of exchange values. William Morris decried the vast waste in society and the fact that people were compelled to carry out useless labor producing useless things and thus waste their working lives away. There is no doubt we can move more in the direction of rational,

ecologically sustainable production, given the extreme forms of waste and destruction in the contemporary economy that exist only to absorb the enormous economic surplus of capitalism and to keep it going. In the United States, trillions of dollars are spent on marketing every year for the purpose of convincing people to buy things, resulting in a situation in which people neither need what they want nor want what they need.

Could we say then that democratic control from below is itself a need, or perhaps that it is a necessary requirement for articulating and identifying our needs for social relations, community, empowerment, etc.?

I agree with this in general terms, but such “democratic control from below” is impossible under capitalism. Nor, clearly, was it achievable in Soviet-type societies. From a long-range socialist perspective, it will be necessary to return to the notion of the “withering away of the state”, viewed as a hierarchical structure standing above society. In his recently published posthumous work *Beyond Leviathan: Critique of the State*, István Mészáros calls for the “progressive requisition of the alienated powers of decision-making” by society as a whole as represented by the “self-managing freely associated producer”.

In recent years it feels like politicians and theorists of the radical left have finally begun to catch up with the climate crisis, and there is a lively debate about both strategy (green new deals, degrowth, climate jobs, ecological Leninism) and tactics (direct action, electoralism, etc.). Where do you see the most hope for repairing the metabolic rift today?

In terms of “theorists of the radical left finally catching up with the urgency of the climate crisis”, it is important to understand that thinkers on the left were leaders with respect to addressing the climate crisis as far back as the 1960s and 1970s. One can point to socialists like Barry Commoner, Virginia Brodine, Charles Anderson, even Jürgen Habermas, who emphasized the dangers of climate change in the late 1960s and '70s. Anderson's book, inspired in part by Commoner, was entitled *The Sociology of Survival* and took global warming seriously. Of course, the greater part of the left ignored the question at the time, as did society as a whole. Still there is no sense in which socialist thinkers were behind in the development of ecological ideas, which arose particularly from the left.

I dealt with climate change and the whole question of the disruption of the earth's ecological cycles in my book *The Vulnerable Planet* in 1994 and have expanded that analysis ever since. Climate change of course is simply one part of our planetary ecological crisis, which is marked by the crossing of numerous planetary boundaries beyond which the planet is no longer a safe home for humanity. That means that the Anthropocene crisis goes well beyond climate change itself.

In terms of the debate on strategy, a lot of it doesn't get to the urgency of the issue or the scale of the change that is necessary. The notion of a Green New Deal actually

started within the mainstream liberal/neoliberal tradition and was heavily promoted by certain business interests. Barack Obama even included it in his program when he ran for president in 2008, but then dropped it after being elected president. Generally, it is seen as a form of green Keynesianism. It was given a more radical form, emphasizing a just transition and frontline communities by the U.S. Green Party and then in a watered-down form by left Democrats. A more revolutionary version is conceived in terms of a Peoples' Green New Deal as originally proposed by Science for the People, which I supported in an article entitled "On Fire This Time" in *Monthly Review* in November 2019. Max Ajl has done a service in promoting the notion of a global People's Green New Deal. Perhaps the deepest, most all-encompassing perspective along these lines is to be found in the *Red Deal* by the Red Nation, arising from Indigenous socialist activists in the United States.

The degrowth analysis has similarly varied between approaches that illogically perceive it as compatible with capitalism (such as Serge Latouche), all the way to eco-socialist approaches. We have just recently published "For an Ecosocialist Degrowth" by Michael Löwy, Bengi Akbulut, Sabrina Fernandes, and Giorgos Kallis in the April 2022 issue of *Monthly Review*.

Andreas Malm has been advocating a war communism and ecological Leninism strategy since 2015, as evident in an essay he wrote on the subject for a book entitled *The Politics of Ecosocialism*, edited by Kasja Bornäs – a book to which I also contributed. His approach is certainly provocative and is superior to other approaches in that it is premised on recognition of the full gravity, immense scale, and unprecedented urgency of the problem and the idea that the only way out is a vast revolutionary transformation.

My general approach of addressing the threat of the planetary rift, for example in my book *Capitalism in the Anthropocene*, to be published by Monthly Review Press in 2022, differs from, but is not in conflict with, the more radical strategies above. I have been less concerned with advocating a particular political-institutional mechanism than at looking at what has to be done if civilization and humanity is to survive and emphasizing the need for an ecological and social revolution, one which would necessarily extend beyond anything that humanity has ever seen before. Such a planetary ecological and social revolution would have to be based on what I have called an "environmental proletariat" reflecting a broader and deeper material struggle, embracing not only the working class in the broadest terms, and focused on environmental (urban and rural) as well as workplace struggles, but also including the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil and similar movements, the international peasantry, and the Indigenous. The environmental proletariat seen in these deep materialist terms is most likely to emerge first as a vital revolutionary movement within the Global South and not within the fortresses of capitalism in the Global North. Yet, the nature of the planetary environmental crisis is such that the terrain of struggle will not be limited to any particular part of the planet. Nor can workable solutions be found on a plane-

tary level unless humanity everywhere is mobilized to combat capitalism's tendency to produce an "irreversible rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism".

The scale of the struggle before us, which will eclipse all previous movements and revolutions, is so enormous, necessarily mobilizing hundreds of million and even billions of people, that there is no sense in going too far in mapping out particular state-oriented, institutional solutions, which will be a product of the struggle itself and will vary from place to place, representing many different revolutionary vernaculars. Nevertheless, it is likely that the struggle, at least in the capitalist core, will have two phases, the first of which will be ecodemocratic aimed at a kind of ecological popular front directed at the fossil fuel companies and financial capital, but pointing in an ecosocialist direction; the second of which will take a form in which ecosocialism is dominant – if there is to be any hope at all. What is certain is that we have to abandon capital accumulation as the driver of society and adopt, as the leaked 2022 IPCC climate mitigation report stated, low energy solutions, requiring vast changes in the structure of social relations.

The latest IPCC reports (the three partial reports making up the Sixth Assessment Report of 2021–2022) have indicated that even in the most optimistic scenario the next few decades will be catastrophic for much of humanity all over the earth. The force of climate change is now bearing down on the world population. It is still *possible*, given revolutionary-scale transformations in production, consumption, and energy use, to avoid irreversible climate catastrophe, which would require that carbon dioxide emissions peak this decade and that we reach zero net emissions by 2050. The object is to stay *well below* a 2°C increase in global average temperature and remain on the 1.5°C pathway (which means not overshooting it until 2040 and getting back down to a 1.4°C increase by the end of the century). Still, even then, the catastrophes threatening much of the world's population will be unprecedented compared to all previous human history. In these circumstances, we have shifted our emphasis in *Monthly Review*, as represented by our July–August 2022 issue, from simply emphasizing the mitigation of climate change to what communities and populations need to do to protect ourselves in the present and future, employing radical and revolutionary ecosocialist strategies. Our hope is that as people mobilize against the environmental conditions produced by the present social system that increasingly threatens their lives, they will also take the steps to protect the earth as a home for humanity, carrying out a world ecological and social revolution – the actual form of which is still to be determined. This is the great struggle of the twenty-first century: a struggle against ecological murder.

TRANSLATION

WORLD REVOLUTION NOW

On the Latest Publication
of the Club of Rome

*Wolfgang Harich,
introduced by Andreas Heyer*

Abstract

In the following translation, long-time East German dissident Wolfgang Harich presents his Marxist ecological perspective in a reflection on a 1991 report by the Club of Rome. Introduced by Andreas Heyer and translated by Julian Schoenfeld.

Keywords

Marxist ecology, de-growth, Club of Rome, environmental revolution

WOLFGANG HARICH'S MARXIST ECOLOGY *Andreas Heyer*

Wolfgang Harich (born December 9, 1923 in Königsberg, died March 15, 1995 in Berlin) experienced the end of the Second World War in the illegal anti-fascist resistance in Berlin. His importance in the movement is suggested by the fact that the “Ulbricht Group” of leading Communist figures quickly sought contact with him after its return to Germany, as Wolfgang Leonhard reported in his book *Die Revolution entlässt ihre*

Kinder. In autumn of 1946, Harich became the only German to join the editorial staff of the Soviet-licensed *Tägliche Rundschau*, where he was very successful as a theatre critic and feature writer.

In the 1950s, Harich worked at Humboldt University of Berlin, became an editor at the Aufbau publishing house, and became editor-in-chief of the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*. He also found himself repeatedly in conflict with the party. Early on he championed Bertolt Brecht, and in 1953 he and Brecht both expressed positive views on the workers' uprisings and worked for the fall of the repressive State Art Commission. Lectures given by Harich on Hegel at Humboldt University in 1952 and 1955 became political issues. He was also the only prominent figure in the GDR (German Democratic Republic) to stay away from the funeral service for Stalin. His close ties to Georg Lukács and his close collaboration with Ernst Bloch came under early criticism from the SED (the Socialist Unity Party, the ruling party of the GDR). On November 29, 1956, amidst uprisings throughout the Eastern Bloc, he was arrested and sentenced the following year to ten years in prison for "forming a conspiratorial group hostile to the state". He was released on December 18, 1964 on the basis of an amnesty on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the existence of the GDR. During his years in Bautzen prison, Harich was in solitary confinement for a long time, and only from 1963 on was he allowed to read selected books again.

When he was released from prison, the Stasi made it clear to him that political and philosophical statements from him were no longer desirable. Nevertheless, he did not leave the GDR, but remained in "his" Berlin until its demise – always hoping to see divided Germany reunited. Harich did not abide by the ban on writing. He worked, without his name ever being mentioned, at the Akademie publishing house on the new Feuerbach-Ausgabe (one of the most important Marxist publishing projects in the GDR). Above all, he quickly produced his own texts, published and unpublished. His commitment to literary studies, philosophy, and criticism of the present age during these years is still known today: Let us recall his great book on Jean Paul (the only monograph he was able to publish in the GDR), as well as his reflections on the GDR's understanding of heritage, and, closely related, his own understanding of culture oriented towards the classical period and against modernist tendencies. In this last area one can see a point of convergence between the philosophies of the three most important figures who inspired his own approach, and whom he held in high esteem: Nicolai Hartmann, Georg Lukács, and Arnold Gehlen.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Harich began to work intensively on the ecological issue. In 1975 he published his highly controversial book *Communism without Growth?* (*Kommunismus ohne Wachstum?*), a pioneering Marxist monograph on ecology. At the end of the 1970s, Harich realised that the GDR was completely refusing to address the ecological question and, against all his convictions, he asked to leave the GDR. This at first appeared to be out of the question for the SED, but on the initiative of Erich Honecker Harich was granted a permanent visa, which he used to promote his ecological

concept from 1979 to 1981 in Austria, the German Federal Republic, and Spain in the ranks of the emerging Green and Alternative movements there.

The central thesis of *Communism without Growth?* is that only a worldwide communist state can halt and reverse the industrial growth of humankind. For only communism possesses sufficient means to enforce critical measures: from one-child marriage to the resettlement of entire population segments, from rationing to the renunciation of the exploitation of nature. During his years in the German Federal Republic, Harich not only got to know many leading ecologists of the time; he also realised that he had to expand his state-centred model to include individual and cooperative components, and he realised that ecology was far more fundamental than he had thought. It also meant the emancipation of all people, especially women. And it meant peace and equality – without exception. At the end of 1981, Harich returned to the GDR.

In the 1980s, Harich worked intensively on his studies on Nicolai Hartmann and waged a fierce battle against the preoccupation with Nietzsche in the GDR. Ecology took a back seat, to some extent, in the process. After the collapse of the GDR and German unification however, Harich was able to return to his main topic. In December 1989 he wrote, among other things, a “Draft Programme for the Green Party of the GDR” which, however, did not gain acceptance. His last major publication on ecology was a review written in 1991 of the most recent report of the Club of Rome. This article is reproduced below, translated for the first time.

Harich spent the years until his death committed to the social, ecological, and left-wing shaping of German unity. He died in Berlin on March 15, 1995 as a result of heart trouble that worsened when not treated during his years in prison. One of his last letters on ecology was written on June 14, 1992 to his friend, the Polish philosopher Adam Schaff. It says: “Admittedly, I no longer like the word ‘socialism’. I spent my childhood and youth under ‘National Socialism’ [...]. ‘Real socialism’ is compromised by the Gulag, etc., and socialists like Kreisky, Mitterand, González, Palme have certainly not overcome capitalism. On the other hand, communism has never existed anywhere, nor has anyone ever claimed to have realised it anywhere, and if it is true that, on a world scale, the overcoming of commodity production (and not only of capitalist ownership structures) is on the agenda, then why not strive for a ‘El Comunismo de Futuro’¹ right away?”

Translated by Julian Schoenfeld

¹ In (slightly incorrect) Spanish in the original. (Editors’ note)

WORLD REVOLUTION NOW

On the Latest Publication of the Club of Rome*

Wolfgang Harich

Until only three years ago¹ the Club of Rome did not consider it to be at all judicious to speak with one voice. “Although we are united in our common concern for the future of mankind, the origins, ideologies and approaches to the solution of problems are so diverse among our members that the effort to reach a consensus would inevitably have to lead to an insubstantial, even fatuous, compromise in the assessment of the world situation.” Thus wrote Sir Alexander King in his introduction to the report *Beyond the Limits of Growth*, which in 1988 Eduard Pestel, as usual, had submitted to the Club, but without claiming to speak in its name. In the meantime, the (now) one hundred members have changed their minds. For the first time, they are all united behind the latest report, *The First Global Revolution*,² which has just been published. The precarious world situation has made them “look beyond their differences on individual issues to agree on a common analysis and proclaim common goals”.

Common goals – this is also something that, in principle, is new in terms of content. This means a lot. At the very least, it will help put an end to those prophecies of doom that – seemingly – sound like Cassandra’s. For Cassandra predicts *unstoppable* doom. The reports to the Club of Rome, on the other hand, have always only rung the alarm bells about what might happen if nothing is done to address the fears that are expressed in the reports. In this, their authors resemble the biblical prophets calling for conversion, whose – to speak with Ernst Bloch – “*activating* thunder sermon” is not so much a prediction of fate as an instruction on how to avoid it, and consequently has an almost “anti-Cassandra effect” (for which the most suitable symbolic figure would be Katrin playing her drum in Brecht’s *Mother Courage*). Systems-Analytics prognostics speak,

* Translated with permission from, Wolfgang Harich, “Weltrevolution jetzt. Zur jüngsten Veröffentlichung des Club of Rome”, *Schriften aus dem Nachlass Wolfgang Harichs*, vol. 8: *Ökologie, Frieden, Wachstumskritik*, ed. Andreas Heyer (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2015), pp. 290–301. First published in *Z. Zeitschrift für marxistische Erneuerung* 2, no. 8 (1991), pp. 63–72. Thanks to Tectum Verlag for permission to translate the text.

¹ That is until 1988, which Harich notes that Pestel submitted his report to the Club of Rome. Pestel’s report itself was published in 1989. (Editors’ note)

² Harich cites the German text: Alexander King and Bernard Schneider, *Die globale Revolution: Bericht des Club of Rome 1991* (Hamburg: Spiegel, 1991).

more prosaically, of “alternative assumptions in the model”, of which, according to Pestel, “procedures of the type ‘If ... then’ or the type ‘What ... if’ are used”. In addition to such non-fatalistic foresight, there is now an appeal to purposeful intention and action that knows how to take influenceable factors into account. And people can be influenced, because they are not bound by instinct, and because on top of that they are capable of learning, while at the same time constantly maintaining their instinct for self-preservation.

Through both of these new “facts”, the main point, which is reflected in the title to the book, is given its full weight. As late as 1988, Pestel, then Minister of Education in the CDU-ruled state of Lower Saxony, gave a retrospectively scathing rejection to those who thought in the 1970s that “the world was ripe for a revolution”. At the time, the demand for zero growth, imputed (!) to the Club, to the detriment of the cause, “came in extremely handy as free ammunition against the establishment”. This was probably directed against Manfred Siebker’s views, for example, and certainly meant the idea of some sort of growthless, homeostatic world communism, derivable from premises such as those contained in the attention-getting 1972 MIT study *The Limits to Growth* by Dennis Meadows and others. Now, in 1991, the Club *in corpore* apparently considers the world to be “ripe for a revolution”. How else to understand its expectation of a “great revolution on a global scale” – obviously “world revolution” would be just another word for it – and its warning on the very next page about the devastating consequences that “would result from the unchanged continuation of economic systems and human behaviour” should the capitalist economic system continue to exist.

Leftist attitudes are met, consciously or unconsciously, with further insights: market mechanisms alone would not solve global problems “if they require a long-term strategic approach or if they are problems of distribution”. Moreover, the forces at work in a market economy could have “dangerous side effects because they are not based on the general interest”, with international financial speculation being “a particularly striking example of the excesses of a capital market” that is “dominated by the insane principle of profit at any price”. The market does not care “about long-term consequences, about the well-being of future generations or about resources that are common property”. It promotes self-interest and greed. If left unchecked, its brutal effects lead to “exploitation, neglect of social tasks, destruction of the environment” and the waste of goods that are vital for the future. The Club similarly exposes the problems of the common overestimation of pluralistic democracy. It is not a panacea, does not get everything under control, and does not know its own limits. “The complexity and technical nature of many of today’s problems do not always allow elected representatives to make competent decisions at the right time.” The activities of political parties revolve too much around election dates and rivalries, governments too short-sightedly favour solutions that yield the most obvious benefits at the expense of long-term perspectives. “Governance degenerates into regularly recurring crisis management, into stumbling from one emergency into another.”

The Club's historical understanding of its own genesis proceeds along the same lines. The "great turning point" was 1968. Coinciding with the end of a long post-war period of rapid economic growth in the industrialised countries, with social unrest and student revolts, with signs of alienation and cultural-critical protest, with "the first beginnings of a broad, publicly articulated environmental consciousness", a group of independent thinkers came together precisely at that time to complement the work of public organisations by addressing more long-term and fundamental problems. This must sound blasphemous to some, who, having too narrow an epochal consciousness or an anti-communist resentment, would prefer to reserve the term "great turning point" for 1989, the most representative date for the collapse of "actually existing socialism" in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The Club of Rome, on the other hand, soberly puts into perspective the significance of these events by stating that until recently the CMEA (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) countries had not played a major role in the world economy. On the other hand, the Club, without a sense of triumph, recognises the ambivalent nature of the CMEA's debacle, as it holds opportunities but also risks: the risk not only of destabilising this part of the world, but also that of a further deterioration of the situation of the developing countries in the South, and at the same time the opportunity for "truly global commitments", especially regarding disarmament. It is "unlikely that history will offer us another opportunity as comprehensive and promising as this one, and it is therefore crucial that humanity uses it wisely". Conditions are "extremely fluid", there are hardly any more constraints, and from their consolidation could eventually grow "the restructuring and renewal of a much larger region and perhaps the entire world system".

Whether the world revolution ever had a basis in real socialism is more than doubtful today, even for non-Trotskyists. It seems certain that in the future it will have to completely and definitively renounce such a basis in the form of some other "socialism in one country". The question is how, with what concrete task, the revolution will now have to be set in motion anew, as it were *ab ovo*, if the spontaneity of the processes objectively driving it – or to be stopped by it – is not to lead to total, worldwide chaos. The Club of Rome estimates that the schizophrenias of the current state of the world are so enormous, entangled and threatening that it is actually necessary to "grab a thousand bulls by the horns at the same time". However – and followers of Lenin may see themselves almost confirmed here in their familiar doctrine of the "main link in the chain" – it singles out three areas from the entire world problem that must be tackled immediately: 1) "Swords into ploughshares", that is, disarmament with transformation of the production of all military-industrial complexes into a civilian economy. 2) Stopping the climate catastrophe, especially global warming, while dealing with the related energy problems. 3) Overcoming world poverty and the glaring differences between countries, not least with the aim of stopping the population avalanche in a morally legitimate, humane, and dignified way.

In this context, the sequence enumerated above does not represent differentiated priorities. One is as urgent as the other. The most fundamental importance is in fact attached to the second area. But since, for example, saving the remaining forests – namely the tropical rainforests in the poverty zones of the South, which are of enormous importance for stabilising the climate – presupposes that the most pressing need of the population living there is quickly remedied, for which in turn the budgetary resources of all states spent on armament purposes are needed, there can be no question of an order of priority for the requirements that are interlocked in this way. Or, putting it the other way: because the conversion of armaments, which is so indispensable for the lasting preservation of peace, would only cause even greater economic and ecological damage if, “instead of tanks automobiles were built, instead of warships and submarines merchant ships and tankers”, the proper approach to the first task depends on the constant consideration of the second.

The “central link in the chain”, therefore, is already complexly interwoven. Even with a strict selection of the most urgent issues, it is no longer possible to concentrate on a single, absolutely central concern. Lenin’s tactically wise advice therefore needs contemporary enrichment. And those “thousand bulls” do indeed show up, as soon as one grabs the three wildest from among them firmly enough by the horns. Maybe like this: the necessary aid for the former Third World is joined by that for the former Second; mass migrations will otherwise be on their way from the East and South. Or: behind the ecologically highly recommendable closure of even most civilian-oriented engine plants, with the inevitable consequence of closed petrol stations and car repair shops, the problem of ever more widespread unemployment looms large. Or: general and complete disarmament will foreseeably not only meet with resistance from the corporations profiting from the production and sale of weapons, but, hardly less risky, will again affect numerous workers and, moreover, highly qualified scientists of little renown, whose prestige, not to speak of income, is based on “success in the competitive struggle within an isolated profession”. And so on and so forth. One thing always leads to another.

The Left, the Green one as well as the Pink and the Red ones, including communists of Stalinist and Trotskyist origin, can undoubtedly politically affirm the three aforementioned core tasks of the global world revolution with the best of consciences. It should therefore find its way out of navel-gazing, despondent lethargy, and mutually exclusive disputes over direction in order to place itself, ready for unity of action and a policy of alliances, devotedly at the service of these three tasks, and thus going on the attack again. Of course, it will only succeed in this if it grasps the meaning of the “new thinking” in its full scope, recognises it, takes it seriously and brings it to bear in its own actions. This includes: the subordination of special interests to more general ones, especially proletarian interests to general human interests – which, however, are certainly not identical with the hyperspecial interests of the big bourgeoisie. Furthermore, it includes the resolute renunciation of violent methods of struggle and, among

many other things, the rejection of any theories of dictatorship of an undemocratic kind. The last-mentioned point must be particularly emphasised here insofar as the said idea of a growthless, homeostatic communism – in its original, only known version – was contaminated from 1974 onwards with the idea of an eco-dictatorship, and the reference to the Club of Rome's understanding of democracy suggests the (erroneous) suspicion that it is still being adhered to here.

Within “actually existing socialism”, Brezhnev and Honecker were naively wooed by the suggestion, which appealed to their sense of responsibility, that they could use the instruments of power at their disposal, and even justify them if they used them, rejecting Western consumer norms as a precaution against the deadly dangers of the future; yet they never even considered the suggestion, whether because they could not or did not want to. They have suppressed, persecuted, and slandered that offer like they would any other dissident action. After their system collapsed, anti-democratic concepts, detached from their non-capitalist socio-economic basis, could only encourage imperialist, possibly extreme right-wing, dictatorship. It is possible to conceive the fascist distorted image of an eco-dictatorship which, with the help of short-lived technological pseudo-solutions, would create a nature reserve, still thriving at best in the medium term, as a pretty environment for the master race, which, entrenched behind walls and barbed wire, would keep at bay a flood of people desperately surging forward from the South and East, if necessary by nuclear genocide. No thank you!

The idea of an eco-dictatorship was, by the way, inspired by a historically insufficient memory of the beginning of the Second World War. From one day to the next, on September 1, 1939, food and other consumer goods were strictly rationed in Hitler's Germany, car owners were forbidden to drive their cars; they also no longer got any petrol. If the population accepted such restrictions – and they were the only bearable, not to say pleasant, things about the war at that time – in order to achieve goals of criminal aggression, then it hardly seemed absurd to ask for analogous measures from a red dictatorship, one that was committed to goals that were the polar opposite of the brown Nazi dictatorship, in view of the ecological crisis and so that the self-destruction of *Homo sapiens* would be stopped. Even today, the Club of Rome itself declares that people need “a common motivation, a common enemy” as an incentive; that new enemies, no less real than the earlier ones, now “threatened the whole of humanity” and that these enemies were “environmental pollution, water scarcity, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy and unemployment”. The association of a (world) saving “war communism”, including a dictatorship, to be deployed against these adversaries of human welfare may once again suggest itself.

But thinking like this is fundamentally wrong. Even the historical starting point is wrong. The British in their war of 1939 – an exceptionally just war at that – imposed the necessary restrictions upon themselves in a broad consensus of Conservatives, Labour, and Liberals without abolishing democracy, and the Club of Rome is urging democratic

consensus-building of all political forces to rid ourselves of the rising threats of global catastrophe. Leftists may find it repulsive when Pestel even brings up, in this context, the paternalistic consensus-building tradition in Japan, which he suggests should be extended to the environmental challenges. In any case, it should be acceptable to leftists that the authors' collective of the *Global Revolution* says: "Different value and moral concepts exist everywhere in society, and we must also conclude here that only through an overriding common ethic of the survival of humanity and our planet can divergent interests be harmonised or at least mutual tolerance be achieved."

Old communists will hardly find this completely unfamiliar; younger ones, connoisseurs of their party history, will know it. Democratic consensus against fascism was once the aim of the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern. Admittedly, the policy of the People's Front initiated by it was quite heavily and damagingly burdened with Stalinism. It came far too late to have been able to thwart Hitler's rise to power in Germany. Afterwards, restrained by Soviet foreign policy, it blocked the movement's promising transition to socialism in France and even more so in Spain. This class betrayal, in turn, was secured internally in the Soviet Union by Stalin with bloody, pre-emptive terror against the Trotskyists and their followers. And when all his misjudgements and wrong decisions, together with the crimes that flanked them, boomeranged terribly on the Popular Front, it was to remain paralysed for almost two years by the Hitler-Stalin Pact. This much is unfortunately true.

Nevertheless, from 1935 onwards, communists all over the world had achieved much in terms of their policy of making alliances and working cooperatively in partnerships, exactly as Pestel means, which would be very beneficial to them today as comrades-in-arms of the global, world revolution if they would remember this lesson and restrain any ulterior motives for hegemony. "New thinking" may inspire them to do so, all the more so as they no longer need to take into account the constricting imperial interests of a "fatherland of all workers". The global character of the three cardinal tasks ahead could give new impetus to their internationalist tradition, giving it a new, more dignified quality in keeping with the signs of the times. Communists would be able to leave their moping motives behind, and their cooperation would be in demand, ever and again.

Who should be the subject of the global revolution? Answer: Everyone! Because the existence of all is at stake, it must be possible to bring each individual to the point where his or her elementary egoism sees itself challenged and can thus be won over and mobilised for a "globally enlightened and common self-interest" of humanity as a whole. For most people, this egoism is now "not limited to their own lifespan, but extends to that of their children and grandchildren, with whose existence they identify", which is why it is not *a priori* hopeless to work "egoistically" towards conditions that will enable future generations to have a dignified and truly human existence". The class interest of the ruling classes may not be specifically addressed in this argumentation of the Club of Rome, but it definitely does not put forth the illusion that it can be ignored. To take

ruling class interest into account without illusion, to consider it capable of the worst, to see how it is conditioned according to laws given by the capitalist system, and to bring it to its concept, is something that Marxist thinking is at liberty to do.

The social analysis of Marxism, rightly understood – namely in a Leninist way – has never led to fatalism, and therefore the appeal of the Club is perfectly compatible with it, which demands that any special interest that contradicts the preservation of life on earth, the salvation of human society, be confronted with the accusation of being secretly sworn to the most diabolical, most vile of all ulterior motives, the “devil-may-care” maxim. It is easy to see that there cannot be a more effective method of forcing capitalism to make an admission of failure with scientific justification. And this is exactly what the logic of “new thinking” demands. The offer of consensus in partnership and cooperation to all, including the most reactionary and destructive forces, leaves them no choice, as things stand, either to turn back or to show an absolutely fatal moral weakness. Probably, as a prelude to raising awareness of this alternative, a worldwide referendum would need to be organised, putting to the vote the continued existence of human beings and their flood-inducing addictions and habits.

The global challenges have undeniably been increasingly diverted from public attention by the events of the last few years. The resurgence of nationalism was and is probably the most responsible for this. Much as the Club of Rome, that Aeropag of noble humanists and cosmopolitans, disapproves of it, it is not discouraged by it. It is a sign of its wisdom that, in this context, it even sees good sides to the powerful ethnic egocentrism that is stirring up, despite its often not at all unrecognisable narrow-minded features, because it seems to it to favour the shift of political responsibility away from the centralised nation-state to the local base, in the sense of the second part of its slogan: “Think globally, act locally!” In a vertical upward direction, the Club also wants to see competencies that affect global survival problems shifted away from the nation state and up to a newly organised United Nations. Almost all of the statements on this subject, including the thoughts regarding more modern qualifications for politicians, are extraordinarily clever, meaningful, and helpful. The creation of a UN Environmental Security Council is suggested, in which “not only the members of the existing UN Security Council, but also the developing countries should be strongly represented”. (Presumably the postulated body would have vetoed the Gulf War, perhaps with the successful result that there would be no burning oil wells in Kuwait).

Other proposals include world development conferences, perhaps along the lines of the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades) tariff reduction rounds, a “comprehensive world project for the development of alternative energies”, to be organised along the lines of a network, which would be preferable to the “usual bureaucratic inflexibility of a conventional international centre”, and studies regarding the energy problem in agriculture, with the aim of reducing its energy consumption and its emissions of greenhouse gases. In flexible and dynamic institutions – often only provisional and temporary, elastic rather than stable, capable of adapting to changing demands

– a policy of new ethical and adaptive quality should come into play, enlightened by interdisciplinary scientific knowledge, motivated no longer by the enjoyment of power and the privileges that go with it, but by “the satisfaction of being allowed to serve society”.

According to the Club, these and other virtues should be embodied in the Secretary-General of the United Nations above all other public figures, an office which, incidentally, it is hard to see why it has always been entrusted only to men: women have not even been considered as candidates for it. A first, faint hint of feminism is perceptible here, but this can in no way be regarded as sufficient. The biological link between motherhood and worries about the future, the different role of women in the diverse cultures of the interdependent world, the programme and perspective of a general feminisation of society, the advantages of a new matriarchy are topics for which the book regrettably fails to muster any interest.

It is to be hoped that the Club of Rome would be inspired by such reflections as those already made by Françoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s and, accordingly, would decide to include disputatious feminists among its members. Another deficit to be criticised is the lack of a cultural-political dimension. It would be urgent to remedy this in the future in view of the questions of a meaningful life raised by unemployment and the reduction of working hours. Philosophy and the humanities, poetry, fine arts and music, enjoyed receptively, actively pursued, discussed with ambition and a willingness to learn, the mass acquisition of classical humanistic education in interaction with the development of the creative potentials of the individual, could turn the bleakly depressing agony of the feeling of being superfluous, not needed, into a joyfully affirmed leisure for higher activities and purposes and, on top of that, help to push back the compensatory needs that are usually coupled with material demands and can hardly ever be satisfied without wasting raw materials and a polluting behaviour. And what could be more suitable to teach us to imagine and understand the poverty and barrenness of a universe in which the earth, uninhabitable for humans, would drift along its elliptical orbit around the central star of our planetary system, what could most inspire us to not allow this under any circumstances, at no price, than an intimate familiarity with the crowning achievements of high culture! (We owe it to the galaxies of the cosmos that Raphael and Rembrandt, Shakespeare and Goethe, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, Aristotle and Hegel, Balzac and Tolstoy should not ultimately have lived in vain, that we should do everything we can to ensure their continued effect until the sun cools off.)

To these objections, I would like to add a final consideration that globally-oriented thinking might consider too specific to be the basis of justified objection, but which is nonetheless missing in the book. It concerns the revolutionary auspices of the national dilemma of today's Germany. There is no doubt – and the Club of Rome states this with thankfully ruthless frankness – that the solution of the world problem will demand many material sacrifices from the present generation of Germans, especially in the industrialised and affluent regions. The initiative to awaken the necessary readiness for this and to provide a model for it is to be hoped for above all from the now reunified

Germany, and this for the simple reason that the West-East prosperity gap persists here in a state whose constitution prescribes equality of living conditions in all its parts, to be established not in two or five or ten years, but immediately.

But all efforts to overcome this deplorable state of affairs by raising the standard of living in the territory of the former GDR to West German levels are diametrically opposed to the intentions of the Club of Rome. It would be correct and sensible, in accordance with its advice, to take the opposite path: that of a downward levelling, with drastic material losses for the old federal states, combined with more social security (at an equally modest level) and improved *quality* of life for all. This would be along the strategic line of the life-saving global revolution and would also be revolutionary in the traditional sense: peace to the huts, war to the palaces (non-violent “war” of course)! For what would be the consequence of imposing patriotically justifiable renunciation on the less well-off masses of the people in West Germany, where, according to wealth statistics, 40 billionaires and almost 90,000 millionaires reside, where the rulers draw salaries and the members of parliament get allowances of shameful immoderateness?

To ask the question is to answer it. If Germany were to achieve this revolutionary feat instead of an ecologically undesirable economic miracle in the East based on the model of the 1950s, then those who were too rich would rightly lose out, but the rest of the world would be done a service that cannot be valued highly enough: it would experience that it is possible to proceed in this way, and this would once again set a precedent everywhere. Only then could the international community forgive the Germans for all that Hitler’s fascism did to it during the darkest twelve-year period of German history.

Seen in this light, Germany has a key role to play in the global, world revolution. The German left is therefore advised first and foremost to devote itself to a thorough study of this new publication of the Club of Rome, to develop the teachings and proposals in its own way and to link them with the indispensable, enduring, time-transcending truths of the Marxist tradition, in order to put the synthesis of both achievements of the human spirit into practice as soon as possible. And if the Club of Rome realises its plan to set up national associations in about thirty countries on five continents – and perhaps it has already done so – then here in particular the left must not allow itself to be outdone by anyone in establishing associations with it, in seeking its advice on an ongoing basis, in bringing to the Club the issues that are driving the left.

Translated by Julian Schoenfeld

MATERIALS

ANDREI PLATONOV: THINKING NATURE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

Monika Woźniak, ed.

Abstract

In the three presented newspaper articles from 1920s, Soviet writer Andrei Platonov criticizes the exploitation of the earth and human alienation from nature in the context of the Russian famine of 1921–1922, pointing to solar energy as the basis for socialist development. Introduced by Monika Woźniak and translated by Thomas H. Campbell.

Keywords

Andrei Platonov, Soviet environmentalism, socialist development, dialectics of nature

NEITHER GREAT, NOR ABUNDANT

The Image of Nature in Andrei Platonov

Monika Woźniak

Introduction

Andrei Platonov's literary status as one of the most important Soviet writers is well-recognized; he is often praised as a master of language or even, in the words of Slavoj

Žižek, as “an absolute writer of the 20th century” (along with Kafka and Beckett).¹ But while there appears to be a consensus about Platonov’s literary genius, there is far less consensus regarding his political and philosophical positions. Platonov was clearly critical of many Soviet shortcomings, and he struggled with censorship throughout his life, especially after Stalin personally denounced his writings as anti-socialist. Because of that, the first wave of reception of his most important works was, understandably, connected to dissident circles. In this context, Platonov was often read in a dystopian or even satirical light, and many researchers emphasised existential motives and his links to the pre-revolutionary religious thought of Nikolai Fyodorov.

With the emergence of revisionism in Soviet studies, and with the appearance of a new, post-socialist left, some Platonov scholars began to research new contexts and themes, and to propose new interpretations of Platonov’s work.² The publication of Platonov’s archival material, primarily his notebooks, provided further impulse for that reorientation, as it revealed Platonov’s non-superficial attachment to the socialist ideal. Researchers pointed to Soviet literary and aesthetic currents, both avant-garde and realist, of which Platonov was a part or with which he was in dialogue.³ Moreover, while liberal interpreters have tended to focus on Platonov’s reflective and alienated heroes, the attention of “revisionists” shifted to collectives and themes of camaraderie and new post-revolutionary subjects.⁴

Nevertheless, Fredric Jameson is right when he speaks of Platonov’s narrative as one “to which Utopian and anti-Utopian can appeal alike”.⁵ His combination of utopian and tragic elements, not shying from depiction of revolutionary violence and dire failures of the new society, can be challenging for both liberal and socialist interpretations.

¹ Slavoj Žižek “Introduction”, in Oxana Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 1–8, here 2.

² For an overview of existing literature see, e.g., Maria Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies and the Materialist Ontology of Poor Life: Andrei Platonov, Alexander Bogdanov and Lev Vygotsky” (PhD diss., Kingston University, 2017), p. 40ff, <https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/38850/>. See also Joan Brooks’s article, which analyses examples of post-socialist interpretations and offers some remarks on the earlier reception of his work (“Postsocialist Platonov: The Question of Humanism and the New Russian Left”, in *The Human Reimagined. Posthumanism in Russia*, ed. Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), pp. 218–243).

³ See, e.g., Igor’ Čubarov, *Kollektivnaâ čuvstvennost’. Teorii i praktiki levogo avangarda* (Moskva: Izdatel’skij Dom VŠĖ, 2016); Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies”; Robert Bird, “Articulations of (Socialist) Realism: Lukács, Platonov, Shklovsky”, *e-Flux* 91 (May 2018), <https://e-flux.com/journal/91/199068/articulations-of-socialist-realism-lukcs-platonov-shklovsky/>; Pavel Khazanov, “Honest Jacobins: High Stalinism and the Socialist Subjectivity of Mikhail Lifshitz and Andrei Platonov”, *The Russian Review* 77, no. 4 (2018), pp. 576–601.

⁴ See, e.g., Jonathan Flatley, “Andrei Platonov’s Revolutionary Melancholia: Friendship and *Toska* in *Chevangur*”, in *Affective Mapping. Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 158–192; Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies”.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 105.

Platonov's most renowned writings – *The Founding Pit*, *Dzhan (Soul)*, and *Chevengur* – seem to affirm simultaneously the most intense longing for communism, its urgency or even necessity, as well as the most poignant recognition of how far communism is from being realised, and of how difficult, bordering on impossible, the realisation of communism appears to be.

In the following look at Platonov's image of nature, I contribute to the "revisionist" current in Platonov's reception by emphasising its relationship with Platonov's concern for a specifically socialist form of development. In doing so, I will pay special attention to Platonov's non-fiction writings from the 1920s and 1930s, three of which are translated here. As I argue, the central element in Platonov's depictions of nature is the theme of scarcity – nature's "stinginess" or "harsh arrangement" – and the need for building a socialism that takes into consideration nature's limits and the metabolic balance between humans and nature.

Nature in the Voronezh Articles

The theme of nature was present in Platonov's writings from the very beginning; it is one of the central themes of his newspaper articles from the 1920s. At that time, Platonov contributed to several Voronezh newspapers; he wrote about a number of topics, covering both the most recent events and publications – for example the civil war – as well as more general, philosophical matters, such as the role of science, the critique of religion, and proletarian aesthetics. His texts from that time reveal very clearly the impact of the ideas of Proletkult and Bogdanov, primarily in his understanding of proletarian culture and his cosmological vision.⁶ He was also active on the Voronezh literary scene, writing poems and short stories.

This period was interrupted in 1921 when a severe famine broke out, aggravated by a drought. This was a formational moment for Platonov's image of nature and for his entire life history. "Henceforth our grief and enflamed soul will cool down not in the form of art, but in the form of work transforming matter, turning the world", he declares in one article,⁷ and indeed in the following years he gave priority to the practical struggle against drought and the tasks of irrigation rather than to his literary work.⁸ He

⁶ See, e.g., the chapter "Consciousness and Matter: Platonov in Voronezh and Tambov (1917–1926)", in Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov. Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 32–55; Seifrid, *A Companion*, p. 38ff.; Chehonadskih, "Soviet Epistemologies"; Natal'â Bočarova, "Tvorčestvo A. Platonova i èstetika Proletkul'ta" (PhD diss., Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj pedagogičeskij universitet im. A.I. Gercena, 2004).

⁷ Andrej Platonov, "Žizn' do konca", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2 (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2004), pp. 180–183, here 180. Platonov was educated in engineering (he graduated in electrical technology from Voronezh Polytechnic Institute in 1921), and his work as an engineer on land reclamation, amelioration, and electrification informed many of his writings.

⁸ Instead of irrigation, Platonov uses the word "hydraulification" (*gidrifikaciâ*) in a search of a "more communist" word. This can be also interpreted as an effort to use a word that more

was still a prolific contributor to Voronezh periodicals, albeit focusing mostly on topics related to the drought, calling for the creation of a system of organisations devoted to the struggle against the drought with the help of irrigation. This newspaper campaign reached its peak in the winter of 1921 and led to practical results, albeit much smaller than Platonov's initial expectations. In January 1922, the Voronezh Provincial Land Department established a commission for hydraulification (in the following months the commission was renamed and reorganised several times), which he headed. The newspaper articles from 1922 and 1923 are connected mostly to the activity of the commission.

The beginning of 1920s is often described as the Promethean or utopian period of Platonov's thought. Indeed, his articles often praise human consciousness and reveal a belief in the cosmological mission of science. During the 1920s, Platonov speaks of the "kingdom of consciousness" as the essence of proletarian culture and social revolution. He opposes consciousness against animal, instinctual life, and describes the former as the "highest form of organic energy"⁹ and the greatest weapon of the proletariat in its struggle against nature. As Maria Chehonadskih notes, however, this "earlier, oversimplified Bogdanovism that conceives of the new human as a state of pure consciousness" is abandoned by Platonov around 1924, giving place to a more complex image.¹⁰ Thomas Seifrid is also correct in noting that the 1920s articles are not fully coherent, and Platonov often combines this praise of consciousness with strongly materialist notes.¹¹

Nature is mostly portrayed in the 1920s articles as being the proletariat's biggest enemy. "Nature is a White Army man", Platonov says plainly in "Earth-cheka",¹² and in "Black Saviour" he adds: "The bourgeoisie is a puppy. The real enemy is nature, the universe, which is still admired and sung about by blinded, foolish poets."¹³ Some articles are techno-optimist, presenting big projects of transforming nature by, for example, changing the temperature of Siberia by transforming its landscape with the help of explosives.¹⁴ Finally, Platonov describes the earth as a machine, and elsewhere

resembles "electrification". See the editors' commentary in Platonov, *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 313–314.

⁹ Andrej Platonov, "U načala carstva soznaniâ", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 143–146, here 145. On the kingdom of consciousness see also other articles in the same volume, especially "Golova proletariata", "Dostoevskij", "Proletarskaâ poëziâ", and "Slyšnye šagi (Revolüciâ i matematika)".

¹⁰ Chehonadskih, "Soviet Epistemologies", p. 144.

¹¹ Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov*, p. 38ff.

¹² Andrej Platonov, "Zemčeka", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 206–208, here 208.

¹³ Andrej Platonov, "Černyj spasitel", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 156–157, here 156.

¹⁴ See Andrej Platonov, "Ob ulučšeniâh klimata", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 306–308. The employment of explosives was also praised in a different text, see "Velikij rabotnik (O razvitii v Rossii vzryvnoj kul'tury)", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 248–250.

portrays the latter as a “miracle” and “brother” of people, as humans’ improved and perfected image.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Platonov is hardly one-sided in his proclaimed hostility towards nature. At the same time – sometimes even in the same texts – he cries over the alienation of people from their natural environment. He is well aware of the importance of the metabolic balance and concerned about the consequences of modern agriculture. The earth, he writes, cannot be exploited without limits by monoculture farming, but needs restoration and fertilisation. In his 1924 text “Struggle with the Desert”, Platonov calls the modern system of agriculture “a predation in its essence and destruction of the productive forces of the land”¹⁶ (the idea is later repeated by one of his heroes in the story “The First Ivan”,¹⁷ and similar accusations are present in “Revolutionary Council of the Earth”, translated here). In the same text, he points to desertification as the effect of human activity. In “Agrarian Issues in Chinese Agriculture”, Platonov speaks of the “circulation of substances” (*krugovorot vešestv*) that should be improved. The ways to do it can be searched for in traditional methods of farming, such as using excrement to fertilise earth that “needs to be fed too in order to feed us”.¹⁸

Moreover, despite praising machines and the development of productive forces, Platonov understands well that technology is not something ideologically innocent. Already in “Light and Socialism”, translated here, he sees, in a deeply materialist manner, “coal and iron” as an inherently capitalist form of energy, postulating the need for the conscious search for socialist technology. In the 1920s, he repeatedly points to renewable energy as the key to solving the contradiction of growth and balance. His main hopes were usually connected to the sun, the most democratic source of energy in that it was relatively evenly distributed and available, limitless, and renewable.¹⁹ “The earth must

¹⁵ Andrej Platonov, “Da svâtitsâ imâ tvoe”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 39–40, here 40. At that time, he sometimes even points to automation as the key to abolishing labour.

¹⁶ Andrej Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustynej”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 276–278, here 276.

¹⁷ The story, constructed mainly from his earlier newspaper articles (including “Struggle with the Desert”), was presented in the form of a dialogue between a journalist and some workers and was published in 1930. For more on its history and relationship with Platonov’s engineering activity in the commission, see Tomas Langerak, “Ob odnom ‘tehničeskom’ proizvedenii Andreâ Platonova. Očer’k ‘Pervyj Ivan’”, *Russian Literature* 46, no. 2 (August 15, 1999), pp. 207–218.

¹⁸ Andrej Platonov, “Voprosy selskogo hozâjstva v kitajskom zemledelii”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 235–236. Mieka Erley links this text to Marx’s reflections on social metabolism, see Mieka Erley, “‘The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum’: Andrei Platonov’s *Dzhan* as the Environmental History of a Future Utopia”, *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (2014), pp. 727–750, here 742 (footnote); *On Russian Soil: Myth and Materiality* (Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, 2021), p. 158 (footnote).

¹⁹ He sometimes also points to other renewable sources, such as water, which is closely connected to his experience of building hydroelectrostations. See Andrej Platonov, “Voda – osnova socialističeskogo hozâjstva (Sila rečnogo podpertogo potoka kak osnova ènergetiki hozâjstva budušego)”, in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 254–256.

be intact and pristine, and all the lush life of mankind shall be entirely at the expense of the sun”, he says in the “Struggle with the Desert”.²⁰ The sun can be the source of the surplus which otherwise would have to be obtained by exploiting the limited forces of the earth and the workers. Moreover, Platonov thinks of the universe as consisting of light. His thinking combines here scientific inspiration (interest in the relationship between matter, light, and energy was quite common at that time) with mythological elements. As Maria Chehonadskih writes about the presence of the latter in Platonov,

He reminds us that in almost all ancient religions life originates from the light. Therefore, Platonov, a follower of Bogdanov, believes that intuition was the first step of knowing, and now the old myths took on a scientific shape. [...] This is the reason why there are so many popular myths about the sun in his works.²¹

Platonov’s ideas are also closely connected to the traditions of Russian cosmism; both large irrigation projects and solar power appear in Fyodorov’s writings.²² Platonov might have also been familiar with works linked to what is often described as the scientific current of Russian cosmism, such as the writings of Vladimir Vernadsky, author of the concept of the biosphere and the precursor of environmental studies.²³

While many of the ideas in Platonov’s articles on nature and technology are grounded in his own experiences during his years in meliorating institutions and attempts at technological innovation (he acquired a few patents), a machine that was central to his concept of solar energy – the electromagnetic resonator transformer – remained unrealised. The process of inventing it (both successful and unsuccessful) is portrayed in his early literary works, in which the theme of electricity is of great importance. The inspirations for that machine are unclear; Konstantin Kaminskij convincingly argues that it might be related to works of Wilhelm Ostwald, translated into Russian in the first decades of 20th century.²⁴

²⁰ Platonov, “Bor’ba s pustynej”, p. 276.

²¹ Chehonadskih, “Soviet Epistemologies”, p. 159 (footnote).

²² See, e.g., Nikolai Federov, *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task*, trans. Elisabeth Koutaissoff and Marilyn Minto (Lausanne: Honeyglen Publishing/L’Age d’homme, 1990), pp. 33–37, where they are discussed in the context of the 1891 famine in Russia.

²³ See Seifrid, *A Companion*, p. 56. The affinities between Vernadsky and Platonov are developed mostly by the Russian scholar Konstantin Barsht. A core of Platonov’s thinking was, nevertheless, formed before the publication of Vernadsky’s *Biosphere* in 1926.

²⁴ See Konstantin Kaminskij, *Der Elektrifizierungsroman Andrej Platonovs: Versuch einer Rekonstruktion* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), p. 122ff. See also his argumentation against Valery Podoroga’s idea to link it to Tesla, and Konstantin Barsht’s idea to link it to Max Planck.

As Thomas Seifrid argues, Platonov's early writings are not univocally optimistic, as is often thought.²⁵ Despite praising science and human consciousness, Platonov is well aware of the limits of our knowledge and the complex character of nature. Humanity cannot change the laws of nature, but needs to know them in order to use nature; the only way of conquering nature is to adapt to it and use an indirect, roundabout way. In "On Science", a 1920 article, he writes:

Man turns on nature using its own means, he strikes it with the tools of its laws. He does not take it by force, but adapts to it. Having recognised the dead power of the forces of the world, man directs them, unable to change them directly, against other forces hostile to life – and thus subdues them, indirectly changes them, defeats them.²⁶

The process of knowing nature, however, is not an easy one; nature is complex and cannot be reduced to one principle; such generalisations are characteristic of the idealist science of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, Platonov seems to feel the need to go beyond a mechanistic treatment of nature; in "Life Until the End", he sketches out a vision of a new age of agriculture, in which one would study individual plants and even their parts, and intimate knowledge of their "character, soul, needs, and sicknesses"²⁷ will replace approaches that treat all of life in a uniform manner. Then, in an image of plenitude and harmony between the cultural and the natural, "bread will grow in flowerpots", adds Platonov. This vision of a non-alienated, humanised relationship with nature, is all the more striking considering its placement between the shocking depiction of hunger and Platonov's technical instructions on irrigation.

In his 1920 essay, "The Culture of the Proletariat", Platonov notes:

I recently read an old book by a well-learned physicist, where he says almost with certainty that the essence of nature is electrical energy. I'm not a well-learned man at all, but I've also thought as hard as I could about nature, and I've always hated such absolute conclusions. I know how easy they are, and I also know how unimaginably complex nature is, and that it is too early for man to bestride the truth, he has not earned it, and there is no master more stingy with wages than nature.²⁸

²⁵ Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov*, pp. 41–42.

²⁶ Platonov, "O nauke", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 33–34, here 34. Cf. critique of generalisations in the article "Kul'tura proletariata".

²⁷ Platonov, "Žizn' do konca", p. 181.

²⁸ Andrej Platonov, "Kul'tura proletariata", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 90–100, here 92–93. One might notice, however, that this did not save Platonov from similarly general formulas in his own journal articles.

In *Happy Moscow*, written more than a decade later, Platonov will repeat this distaste for easy formulas: “nature was too difficult, by his own reckoning, for such an instant victory and could not be confined within a single law”,²⁹ the narrator will say about Sartorius, opposing him to the naïve Sambikin, who thinks he has understood the essence of things. The idea of the miserliness of nature will return in the 1930s too, reconceptualised as the “harsh arrangement” of nature.

The Dialectics of Nature in the 1930s Articles

In 1934 Platonov wrote his philosophical essay “On the First Socialist Tragedy”, which is sometimes described as an “environmental manifesto”.³⁰ The essay was intended for a volume of commentaries planned as a supplement to a monumental collective publication celebrating the completion of two five-year plans. The initiator of this unrealised publication was Gorky, who at that time played a complicated role of censor and protector in Platonov’s life and had a decisive role in the fate of his publications.³¹ Gorky decided to include Platonov in the volume, and sent him with a writers’ brigade to Turkmenistan to observe and describe the building of socialism there, including projects involving the irrigation of the Kara-Kum desert by diverting the Amu Darya river. This trip resulted in a short story “Takyr”, which was successfully published, ending the period of full prohibition on Platonov’s publishing (and which allowed him to join the Soviet Writers’ Union. Platonov described his experiences in a short article, “Hot Arctic”, and he gave them a more general, philosophical meaning in the essay “On the First Socialist Tragedy”.³² The publication of the latter was rejected by Gorky on the basis of its pessimism; the unpublished text was later condemned within the writers’ union.³³

In the essay, Platonov sketches out a specific dialectics of nature, based on the idea of balance. It shifts the emphasis from the cosmological mission of man to the question of the limits of technology and nature. Alluding to traditional texts portraying Russian land as “great and abundant”, he declares:

Nature is not great, it is not abundant. Or it is so harshly arranged that it has never bestowed its abundance and greatness on anyone. This is a good thing, otherwise – in historical time – all of nature would have been plundered, wasted, eaten up,

²⁹ Andrei Platonov, *Happy Moscow* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), p. 58.

³⁰ Erley, “The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”, p. 738.

³¹ Nina Malygina, “Iz istorii otnošenij M. Gor’kogo i A. Platonova: kontekst i podtekst”, *Filologičeskij klass* 2, no. 52 (2018), pp. 83–87, here 86.

³² One should also mention the novel *Soul (Dzhan)*, written after Platonov’s second trip to Turkmenistan in 1935.

³³ On the history of the essay, see, e.g., Erley, “The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”, as well as the commentaries of the editors to the Russian publications of both versions of the essay (see below).

people would have revelled in it down to its very bones; there would always have been appetite enough. If the physical world had not had its one law – in fact, the basic law: that of the dialectic – people would have been able to destroy the world completely in a few short centuries.³⁴

Because of that “harsh arrangement”, technology is born – an attempt to outsmart nature, break its law of equal exchange, and attain a surplus. However, the dialectical law preventing nature from being destroyed cannot be defeated. Technology’s only victory is a pyrrhic one; as Platonov states, nature, in the form of mass death and suffering, took its revenge³⁵ for the development of productive forces, which suggests that the development of productivity is linked to the imperialist phase of capitalism. Although he points to socialism as the possible solution of the conflict between technology and nature, the text ends on a rather pessimistic note; the only suggested solution seems to be restraint, patience, and moderation.

In fact, the text can be seen as a polemic with Gorky’s views on nature. In the 1930s, Gorky published a series of texts proclaiming human superiority and a struggle with nature, understood very literally. In one of these texts, for example, Gorky proposed destroying everything that does not have a direct utility for people:

Cover the sandy steppes with greenery, plant forests on them, irrigate the arid lands with river water, etc. It is necessary to breed nurseries everywhere [...]. The spontaneous force of nature creates masses of parasites – our rational will should not tolerate it – rats, mice, and gophers cause huge damage and losses to the economy of the country, probably amounting to hundreds of millions of rubles. [...] Nature’s blind striving to reproduce all kinds of useless or definitely harmful trash on earth – this striving must be stopped, blotted out of life.³⁶

The theme of struggle with nature and the radical transformation of nature in the spirit of extreme anthropocentrism was present also in the work of other writers during the 1930s.³⁷ Against this background, Platonov’s concern with the limits of nature seems

³⁴ Andrei Platonov, “On the First Socialist Tragedy”, trans. Tony Wood, *New Left Review* II, no. 69 (1 June 2011), pp. 31–32.

³⁵ This might be an allusion to Engels’s “The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man”, discussed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s (see Erley, “The Dialectics of Nature in Kara-Kum”, p. 737).

³⁶ Maksim Gor’kij, “O bor’be s prirodoj”, accessed November 6, 2022, <https://gorkiy-lit.ru/gorkiy/articles/article-173.htm>.

³⁷ F. R. Shtil’mark and Roberta Reeder, “The Evolution of Concepts about the Preservation of Nature in Soviet Literature”, *Journal of the History of Biology* 25, no. 3 (1992), pp. 429–447, here 431ff.

exceptional. We should remember, however, that even if Soviet writers were primarily Promethean, many scientists at that time, including Vernadsky, openly expressed their concerns about the limits of the exploitation of natural resources.³⁸

We should also remember that “On the First Socialist Tragedy” exists not in one variant, but in two, and the comparison with the second, longer version reveals great differences.³⁹ The technological question is nearly answered: instead of emphasizing the difficulty of exploiting nature, in this version socialism is depicted on the eve of a truly rational regulation and transformation of the world, of an absolute power over nature. And in place of nature’s stinginess, Platonov emphasizes the question of ideology. Is socialist society ready for that technological shift, he asks, or will the shift lead to ultimate catastrophe? In this version of the text, what is at stake is not the practical possibility of victory over nature, but the challenge of moral upbringing, the possibility of finding a “socialist heart” (this theme was present already in the 1921 short story “Markun”, where the hero of the story acknowledges that his egoism led to the failure of his invention). The discrepancy between the two versions of “On the First Socialist Tragedy” reveals Platonov’s hesitation regarding the possibility of socialist development and his shifting between ontological and moral interpretations of socialism’s difficulties.

Even Burdocks Yearn for Communism: *Poor Life* as the Core of Platonov’s Revolutionary Ecology

Platonov’s image of a “harshly arranged” and stingy nature is rooted in his experience of suffering and impoverishment. Nature as we know it – the nature we build communism in – is cruel, marked by death and suffering. As Oxana Timofeeva notes,

Platonov wrote a great deal on life and its poverty. *Poor life* is the life of animals and plants, but also of people who build happiness and communism precisely out of this life. Poverty is a condition in which life is supposed to be the main or even the only possible material resource, a universal substance of existence, which is used in the production of everything.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 44–45.

³⁹ The manuscript variant was published in Russian in 1991 under the title *On Socialist Tragedy* (“Iz neopublikovannogo”, *Novyj mir* 1 (1991), pp. 145–147); it was published in English in 2011 by *New Left Review*. The second existing version, a typescript, significantly longer and considered as a later, more developed variant was published in 1993 (“O pervoj socialističeskoj tragedii”, *Russkaja literatura* 2 (1993), pp. 200–206). The English translation of it is included in the volume with the 2013 edition of *Happy Moscow*, see Andrey Platonov, “On the First Socialist Tragedy”, trans. Robert Chandler, Elizabeth Chandler, Angela Livingstone, Nadya Bourova, and Eric Naiman, in *Happy Moscow* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), pp. 153–157. Gorky was familiar with the longer version.

The concept of poor life offers a key to understanding the apparent contradictions between Platonov's environmental sensibility and his Prometheanism. When he calls us to the struggle with nature, "nature" signifies a harsh arrangement of life, one that we have the obligation to change. In Platonov's writings, animals, plants, and the earth itself are labouring, exhausted beings, just like proletarians:

Chepurny touched a burdock – it too wanted communism: the entire weed patch was a friendship of living plants [...]. Just like the proletariat, this grass endures the life of heat and the death of deep snow.⁴¹

Humans might be sometimes described by Platonov as the crown of life,⁴² but they come from earth and remain a part of it. There is no dualism of human and other living beings; this fluidity is often emphasised in Platonov's description of various metamorphoses, where animals become anthropomorphised and humans animalised.⁴³ For Platonov, animals are not Cartesian machines; they suffer as much as humans, or – since they lack the distracting abilities of consciousness – even more.

Moreover, we live only thanks to the generosity of non-human life, which is ready to share its life, flesh, and soul with others: in repeated descriptions of meat-eating, Platonov claims that animal flesh feeds not only our bodies, but also our souls, because an animal gives away its soul and body.⁴⁴ In *Soul*, Platonov repeatedly returns to the idea that humanity needs living creatures around, both physically and spiritually.⁴⁵ Their value, however, cannot be reduced to just that:

the blackthorn is imbued with a scent, and the eyes of a tortoise with a thoughtfulness, that signify the great inner worth of their existence, a dignity complete

⁴⁰ Oxana Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy*, Bloomsbury Collections (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 154.

⁴¹ Andrei Platonov, *Chevengur*, trans. Anthony Olcott (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), p. 198.

⁴² See, e.g., Andrej Platonov, "Poslednij vrag", in *Sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 22.

⁴³ Platonov does not only portray suffering animals' human faces, but sometimes also paints animals as active in the process of building of socialism, as is the bear in *Kotlovan*, who works as a hammerer in a smithy and clears the village of kulaks. There are also instances of the opposite process, where human beings become animal-like in the inhuman environment (the clearest example is in *Garbage Wind*, set in Nazi Germany).

⁴⁴ See Timofeeva, *History of Animals*, p. 157.

⁴⁵ This is also present in Platonov's diaries of that period (see Andrej Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki. Materialy k biografii* (Moskva: Nasledie, 2000), p. 155). One should note, however, that animality sometimes has a negative tone in Platonov, especially connected to sexuality. See Hans Günther and Sergey Levchin, "A Mixture of Living Creatures': Man and Animal in the Works of A. Platonov", *Ulbundus Review* 14 (2011/2012), pp. 251–272, here 268–270.

in itself and needing no supplement from the soul of a human being. They might require a helping hand from Chagataev, but they had no need whatsoever for superiority, condescension, or pity.⁴⁶

It would be wrong, however, to link Platonov to deep ecology, as Robert Chandler does.⁴⁷ Oxana Timofeeva is right when she reads Platonov against deep ecology and points to revolutionary humanism and the transformation of nature as a central idea of Platonov's images of animals.⁴⁸ It is telling that Chagataev, the main hero of *Soul*, speaks of animals' dignity immediately after arguing that animals are not always unhappy, and that their wretched state must be an abnormality. The passage should be read in a light of another from the same novel:

The desert's deserted emptiness, the camel, even the pitiful wandering grass – all this ought to be serious, grand and triumphant. Inside every poor creature was a sense of some other happy destiny, a destiny that was necessary and inevitable – why, then, did they find their lives such a burden and why were they always waiting for something?⁴⁹

That happy destiny, necessary and inevitable, but at the same time painfully unrealised – is communism. Platonov understands the latter primarily as the non-alienated form of relating to the world, universal camaraderie and friendship.⁵⁰ The question of communist subjectivity that is able to express solidarity with others, to not only share in others' lives, but to live their lives, is present also in late works of Platonov, such as *Happy Moscow*.⁵¹ While this understanding of communism as universal camaraderie and the humanisation of the world might seem abstract or lofty, Platonov never neglects its material aspect, as he occupies himself with the question of exchange and distribution of energy and is very sober about obstacles to the process of building communism.

The universal camaraderie that is at the very core of communism extends not only to humans and other living beings, but even to inanimate objects, both natural and artificial. The vision of the machine as a perfected image of man, present in Platonov's early articles, gives way now to descriptions of machines and artefacts as defenceless,

⁴⁶ Andrey Platonov, "Soul", in *Soul and Other Stories*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler (New York: Review Books, 2008), pp. 3–146, here 120.

⁴⁷ Robert Chandler, "The Last Caspian Tiger", *Index on Censorship* 34, no. 1, pp. 120–124, here 122.

⁴⁸ Timofeeva, *The History of Animals*, pp. 165–166.

⁴⁹ Andrey Platonov, *Soul*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ Flatley, *Affective Mapping*.

⁵¹ See Platonov's notes for *Happy Moscow* in Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, passim, especially p. 175. See also: Khazanov, "Honest Jacobins".

fragile things which – unlike living things – are not able to regenerate.⁵² It is worth remembering, however, that in *Chevengur* Platonov counterposes a universal solidarity that includes beings and things (embodied by Sasha Dvanov) with an escapist submersion into the world of pure artefacts (illustrated by Zakhar Pavlovich before his encounter with Proshka).⁵³ Machines can be seen as images of the world of the future, a “world fully alive”, as Platonov notes in 1940s,⁵⁴ not because they are superior to humans, but because they are dead matter that became alive thanks to human beings. It is human labour that gives the machines their meaning.

*

While Platonov’s image of nature clearly changes over time, two elements remain constant: an awareness of the limits and complexity of nature, and the need to transform nature in order to guarantee the material basis for communism. This leads the young Platonov to declare war on nature – a stance that cannot be understood without considering the context of the 1921–1922 famine (as well as the influence of Proletkult ideas that opposed nature to labour). Even then, however, Platonov is well aware that the transformation of nature must take a roundabout path, showing respect for the arrangement and metabolic balance of nature, and with care for the soil and the environment.

As we have seen, in the beginning of the 1920s the young Platonov saw the hope that solar energy could make it possible to attain the surplus needed for a new, full life. While the photoelectromagnetic resonator transformer disappears from his writings (much as analogous ideas disappeared from the engineering projects of that time, we might add), the sun as a source of energy was still on his mind in the form of photosynthesis. In a notebook remark in 1944, Platonov praises plants as the noblest beings precisely because of their ability to produce life from inorganic substance, moving beyond mere exchange.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, his cosmic-scale technological vision is replaced in the 1930s by a concern for the ultimate consequences of technological development, and by calls for moderation, empathy, and patient socialist labour. While this might be seen as resulting from Platonov’s difficult experiences as an engineer and his growing disillusionment with Soviet reality, it was to a certain degree consistent with general shifts in the discourse of that period, as interest moved towards the “soul”, “cadres”, and everyday life.⁵⁶

⁵² See, e.g., Platonov, *Chevengur*, p. 13; Andrej Platonov, “Among Animals and Plants”, *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2007, <https://newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/22/among-animals-and-plants>.

⁵³ Zakhar Pavlovich starts to see machines as unable to care about people and their suffering. Platonov, *Chevengur*, pp. 34–35; Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, for example pp. 168–169, 173.

⁵⁴ Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, p. 240.

⁵⁵ Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, p. 255.

⁵⁶ The theme of engineering of souls, present in the longer version of the essay, can be seen as an argument for the latter interpretation, but these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Cf. Khazanov, “Honest Jacobins”.

In his thought on nature, Platonov develops concepts that closely resemble two main ideas regarding nature in Marxist classics: namely, Marx's idea of metabolic rift and Engels's idea of the revenge of nature. The first is developed primarily in Platonov's early essays on agriculture, while the second is developed in both versions of "On the First Socialist Tragedy". It is hard to determine with certainty whether Platonov's ideas were influenced directly by Marx and Engels, or indirectly through the reception of Marx and Engels in Soviet sources, or whether he developed them independently. The idea of metabolism and balance was developed in Bukharin's famous *Historical Materialism* (1921), and both Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* and Marx's concept of soil depletion, inspired by Liebig, were present in the Soviet discussions in the 1930s. Whatever the direct source, both of these ideas show the dialectical potential of Platonov's thought on nature, as well as his acute awareness of the main problems of socialist development.

What Platonov sees very clearly are also the disastrous consequences of capitalist development, which exploits the earth, plants, and animals and results in war. "A world without the USSR would undoubtedly destroy itself of its own accord within the course of the next century"⁵⁷ he states in "On the First Socialist Tragedy", and we are seeing those words fulfilled, even if we cannot share his hopes regarding the Soviet Union. His preoccupation with how to avoid these consequences in a socialist country – going from the postulates of a specifically socialist form of energy to suggestions of restraint and moderation – could not be more relevant to our discussions regarding development today.

The disappearance of an optimistic and triumphalist tone – one that was present, but definitely not univocal in Platonov's early journalism and stories – should not be seen as a simple rejection of dreams for a better life. While it might be tempting to read Platonov's pessimism as disillusionment not only with Soviet life, but socialist project in general, the tragedy and melancholy is linked here to the specific status of utopia in his works. In *The Seeds of Time*, Fredric Jameson remarks that for Platonov utopia is "the collective expression of need in the most immediate form rather than some idle conception of the perfect that can be added on to what is tolerable or even what is not so bad".⁵⁸ This tragic element in Platonov's utopia is precisely what distinguishes his from more traditional utopias that merely "test" alternative realities: for Platonov, life is unbearable and poor, but communism must be built from it.

Platonov's thought on nature, formed by the experience of drought and mass hunger, can be said to share these characteristics: it is both tragic and utopian, because it is born out of immediate need. Moreover, as Jonathan Flatley shows, for Platonov loss is a fundamental source of longing for communism. Platonov's unhappy endings can be seen in that light as evoking this urgency of communism in the reader, while simultaneously re-directing this urging beyond the world depicted:

⁵⁷ Platonov, "On the First Socialist Tragedy".

⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 101.

as the book ends, it evokes sympathetic, imitative emotions, stimulating our desire for human contact, and then leaves us nowhere to go with that desire. We are left hanging, as it were. We thus leave the novel with a *toska* for the very friendship the book has modeled and solicited, before it withdraws the offer in a final moment of loss. We are thereby disabused of any compensatory pleasures we might have gained from *Chevangur*. Just as Zakhar no longer felt in the company of his bolts and manometers after the fog of his love for machines had blown away, so too Platonov propels us away from the world of books, reminding us that in the final analysis books, like Zakhar's trains, will not help us. Instead, it is to other people and to the practice of making friends that we must turn.⁵⁹

This is probably what interests post-socialist readers of Platonov the most: in the time where an (eco)socialist future seems as necessary as it is unimaginable, the intimate connection between melancholy and socialism, present in his writings, offers a way out of the ban on imagination decreed by capitalist realism.

At the same time, Platonov's focus on the "harsh arrangement" of nature – which so far has been neither great nor abundant – can be treated as an antidote for projects such as "fully-automated luxury communism", which assume abundance and pin hopes on technology without recognising the threatening side of the development. While we might want to treat the contradiction between nature and development as the first tragedy of a specifically *Soviet* version of socialism, built of arguably underdeveloped materials, this interpretation today would be merely self-deception. The contradiction between the need for a material basis of socialism on the one hand – a need that has to be taken seriously – and nature's limits on the other hand, is *our* tragedy too. This contradiction, however, can be resolved only by us, by practising camaraderie and following the dialectics of nature – which we can know, as Platonov reminds us, because we are a part of it.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Flatley, *Affective Mapping*, p. 190. I would like to add that this strategy is confirmed by Platonov in his polemics with critic Strel'nitskaya, where he points that the unhappy ending of his short story should be treated as the call for practical transformation. "The ending is not in literature, but in life", he says there. Andrej Platonov, "Protiv halturnyh sudej", in *Fabrika literatury. Sobranie* (Moskva: Vremâ, 2011), pp. 56–61, here 60.

⁶⁰ Platonov, *Zapisnye knižki*, p. 79.

REPAIRING THE EARTH*

Andrei Platonov

What is the earth?

The earth is the whole world with its croplands, flowers, people, rivers, and clouds. The earth is where we are from and where we return, where we live, rejoice, and struggle. That is what ordinary people think, and it is right. But what is the earth in our sense, in the peasant sense?

It is a means for growing grain, producing fodder for livestock, and so on.

That is, it too is a machine, only it produces food for humans, as, for example, a loom produces fabrics for clothing.

Like any machine, the earth requires repair, tuning, and replenishment of the vital forces that it expends producing plants.

For thousands of years, man has been feeding the earth with his labor, and the earth returns this labor to him with a large surplus. It is only thanks to this surplus that life on earth flourishes, and man's powers grow and improve.

But the earth has been terribly depleted over those thousands of years. Its life-giving forces have been impoverished because its sap is sucked from it year after year.

Energies are also continuously pumped from industrial machines, but they are immediately replenished.

No one replenishes the earth's energies (except the sky, but it is unreliable), and so our fields yield less and less grain from one year to the next.

The same is true abroad, in other countries, but they take more diligent care of the land there and do not allow yields to decline. Despite their bourgeois way of life, they have both science and the whole of society helping the husbandman in his struggle with nature for grain.

Until now, the Russian peasant has been left all alone, with no knowledge or support, ignorant and unhappy. Deal with it as you like, he has been told, but supply us with grain every autumn.

It is another matter nowadays. The peasant and the worker are the chief people: everything is in their power.

If the earth is tired and exhausted, we shall fix it, repair it, and sate it with new strength.

The means for this exist, and they are wholly at the peasant's disposal. Those means are knowledge, the science of agriculture.

When the peasant has learned to wield them, he will find no task fearsome. Hunger will be forever banished from the world.

* Translated from Andrei Platonov, "Remont zemli", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2 (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2004), pp. 25–26. First published in *Krasnââ derevnâ* 75 (9 June 1920), p. 3.

Science has already found excellent ways to restore the earth's energies and even to increase them.

Armed with knowledge, man turns deserts into blessed fields of grain. Armed with science, the peasant will turn the Russian soil, good as it is, into a mighty source of human nutrition, and thus into a source of universal culture, the socialist culture borne by our revolution.

For the rich, intense, beautiful life of the future, we need lots of grain, lots of all the things that the earth yields.

It is given to us by an earth fertilized by knowledge.

Fields are machines, peasants are workers.

We will repair them. We will set them into motion with unprecedented speed. May they give rise to great forces worthy of a great humanity.

We shall renew the decrepit, emaciated croplands. May they become young and powerful, as we have become.

A REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL OF THE EARTH*

Andrei Platonov

The woe of the new human soul is that man's bonding, unity, and sensitivity with nature have weakened.

The new, urban, machine man feels less and less kinship with the world. The book of the universe is less and less comprehensible to him. Man has forgotten how to read it: he has become deaf to the wind, and blind to the stars. What I have said is confirmed by most people's bovine indifference to the great, deadly disaster that time is pushing us towards – the future drought of 1922 and the following years (maybe only with small intervals of moisture).

The earth speaks of itself to the person who lives at one with nature. For him, it takes off its clothes – time. One must be born with great love in one's heart for everything. The loving person is the son of every woman, of every blade of grass, and welcome on every road. How can a loving person not know and not see, when the heart is the largest and clearest eye?

* Translated from Andrei Platonov, "Revsovet zemli", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2 (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2004), pp. 197–198. First published in *Naša gazeta* 47 (25 November 1921), p. 3.

And when the world got worried and sick, the common folk also got sick worrying about the future.

The winters have been poor, with little snowfall, and the grass has started to grow in a way it had not grown in previous years. Something in the world has faltered and broken – it has been wounded. In response, a wound and pain has opened in man.

We predicted this year's drought in the spring.

It was not me who spoke – it was the world resonating inside me.

But no one believed it then. Everyone who was listening was sated and indifferent. "To hell with him!" they said.

Summer came, and the rye caught fire in the Volga region and in most of the southern part of our province.

Sorrow, vexation, and death were unleashed on Russia.

Hydraulification was then discovered and considered as a means of combating drought on behalf of life, that is, on behalf of grain. After a prolonged hullabaloo in the newspapers, the center (Moscow) finally responded. It transpired that there were likeminded people there who agreed with us and now they are fighting for the creation of a revolutionary agricultural council, a shock task force to combat the heat, poor farming methods on the part of the peasants, and hunger – and to fight for bread crops and satiety among workers and peasants, to fight to save the revolution from defeat and the people from extermination.

The drought can be defeated only as we defeated Kolchak and Wrangel – with all the effort, sacrifice, and talent of the great leaders of labor and ingenuity.

A revolutionary council of the earth will probably be created one of these days, and man's mighty mortal struggle with the forces of nature will come to a head.

We sense a great catastrophe, but we have a brain and vigor in our blood. We know how to make tools to tame and fetter nature.

We will organize million-man armies of workers and deploy them to the fields and steppes and workshops – to the plows, the pumps, the dams, the motors, and the lathes.

We declare all-out war against heat and hunger. Long live the revolutionary council of the earth! Long live man's mind and machine!

LIGHT AND SOCIALISM*

Andrei Platonov

The creation of socialism is underway all over the world. And yet, the socialist equivalents of physics, chemistry, engineering, biology, and so on, must be created (and are being created). Socialism is unthinkable and impossible otherwise.

We shall focus here on socialism's technological equivalent.

Socialist technology must find and utilize such energy that it would almost automatically create for humanity the colossal quantity of products of which capitalism has no clue. Socialism needs a physical force that is its equivalent. Socialism would by means of that force become a solid thing and establish its global dominion. But it must be a boundless power, available everywhere, always ready for production, a power that liberates man from the most menial forms of labor.

Capitalist society's productive power has consisted of coal and iron and the corresponding social organization. The uneven distribution of natural fuel reserves over the earth and the small number of such energy reservoirs have been the natural conditions that substantiated the capitalist mode of production.

Electrification partly overcomes these natural conditions, unfavorable for socialist production, and severs energy's dependence on geographical location. But only partly.

We need a complete solution to the issue. Only then can socialism be made, having been defined in advance, when we know what physical force will be harnessed to socialist production and how it will be harnessed.

This force is light.

According to the latest hypotheses, space is electromagnetic in nature. Space functions physically as an alternating electromagnetic field, for light is an alternating electromagnetic field with a very high frequency, approximately 500 trillion hertz. Electromagnetic light waves are approximately 0.6 microns in length.

There is thus no fundamental difference between the electricity operating in a lamp and light. In Voronezh, the power plant generates an alternating current of fifty hertz and a wavelength of three kilometers. (As far as I can remember – I cannot vouch for the exact accuracy of these figures.)

Distant from all poetic verbal excrement, we say that we see, feel, and know: the only physical function of space that we know is light, which is an alternating electromagnetic

* Originally written in July 1922. Translated from Andrei Platonov, "Svet i socializm", in *Sočineniâ*, vol. 1, part 2 (Moskva: IMLI RAN, 2004), pp. 218–220. First published in *Russian Literature* 23, no. 4 (1988), pp. 387–389.

field with a terrifyingly high frequency and an incredibly short wavelength. Light and electricity are the same thing.

Space and time constitute everything we know about the world. The combined functions of space and time are all that we know.

Electricity is everything we know about, so to speak, “pure” space – ether.

Because pure theory is a prejudice of the outgoing era, we are not delving into theoretical realms. The material product interests us more than the truth, the fact of hegemony more than justice.

We are simply saying that socialism should be built on the physical power that is the cheapest and most widespread, and whose reserves are incalculable. (There is as much light as there is space.) That is, communism should be cast and chiseled in light and from light.

The whole universe is, precisely speaking, a reservoir, an electrical energy battery, because the universe is primarily space, and space is primarily an alternating electromagnetic field. If we regard history as the practical solution to the sole issue of energy – an issue whose ultimate solution is man’s complete, one hundred percent use of the universe without any expenditure of manpower – we can say that the use of light in industry is the perfect solution to the energy question of our time. Let us remember that light is the base of the plant world and let us make light the base of the human world as well. All technology should be reduced to photic engineering, and all physics (maybe chemistry) to electrical engineering.

Photic engineering must design the mechanism that turns the sun’s light into an ordinary operable electrical current, suitable for our electric motors. This mechanism is already half constructed.

It is called a photoelectromagnetic resonator transformer. Its purpose is to transform the heavenly current of light into an earthly, human current. If this technical problem is successfully solved (we are not going into its details here), light – and the entire universe with it – will become humanity’s “proletarian” for many inexhaustible centuries, and humanity will not exhaust this energy with any machines, resistances, or facilities. Even the energy of the atom, split by Rutherford, is nothing compared to the photic ocean’s energy.

The basis of human creativity under socialism is not mood, chance, inspiration, or intuition, but consciousness. So, if the photoelectromagnetic resonator transformer has not yet been made, it must be consciously willed into being, because it is necessary for utilizing light, and light is necessary for socialism. For light must form the basis of socialist production, or there will never be socialism, but only a perpetual “transitional era”. Socialism will not arrive earlier (but a little later) than the introduction of light as the engine of production. Only then will photic production give rise to a socialist society – the new man as a being replete with consciousness, wonder, and love, and communist art as universal sculpture and planetary architecture. Only then will humanity’s coupling into a single physical entity be consummated, and art, as it is now

understood, will not be needed, because art is the correction of revolutionary matter in reactionary consciousness, but matter and consciousness will be one under communism.

In the age of light, interstellar transport will be powered by means of the self-same light, and we will know (because it will have been remade to its ultimate depths) electricity – the key to knowing the universe and the sword for achieving victory over it.

Translated by Thomas H. Campbell

DISCUSSION

WHY CONTRADICTIONS?

A Belated Manifesto

Joseph Grim Feinberg

Abstract

In the following essay-manifesto, Contradictions editor Joseph Grim Feinberg lays out his view of the journal as a platform for confronting the central contradictions of post-communism, working through the problems of Central and Eastern Europe in global context, and seeking the continued contemporary relevance of the history of emancipatory and critical thought. Contradictions, he writes, should enable philosophy and its neighboring fields to engage with this region, at this moment, while telling world history something that no other time or place has told it before.

Keywords

Post-communism, Central and Eastern Europe, Communist history, history of ideas

As *Contradictions* enters its second half-decade, it's time to point to a few of the principles that frame our work. In other words, what are we trying to do here?

In the brief editorial statement that accompanied volume 1 in 2017, we expressed our intention to “critically engage our history and our current moment”, to “move beyond the simple dichotomy of East vs. West”, and, finally, to “go beyond the limits of what is known as ‘post-communism’, not by ignoring the specificity of this region, but by placing it in global historical context”.¹ In other words, three simple areas of coverage: *our moment, our region, world history.*

¹ “Editorial”, *Contradictions* 1, no. 2 (2017), p. 5.

We specified, a little:

Examining our present *moment* meant facing “the contemporary problems and contradictions of neoliberalism, that is, of capitalist society in the specific form it took during the period when Communist Party rule in East-Central Europe ended”.² It was here, after all, that neoliberalism during its heyday was at its barest and boldest. From here the neoliberal world could be observed from the shoulders of its vanguard. And even now, more than three decades after the region’s Communist Parties slunk away or donned more fashionable garb, after new political waves have beset the now-hunched and weary champions of neoliberalism, the condition known as “post-communism” refuses to die. The present continues to be shaped by a repeated refusal of a misremembered past.

Examining this relationship to the past meant, then, examining the *region* where our journal is based, because this region is largely defined in the cultural imagination by the experience of Communist Party rule, and of the historical trajectories that led to it and ultimately away from it. But we charged this journal also with the goal of opening up historical narratives, in order to understand the history of Central and Eastern Europe as something more than a succession of more and less repressive regimes. Our authors have explored the emancipatory and critical forms of expression that emerged in the region, in the movements that preceded the Communist-led regimes, within the contradictory structures of those regimes themselves, and in those regimes’ chaotic and equally contradictory aftermath. Looking back at the region’s intellectual history, we saw how many inspiring and incisive thoughts remain “half-forgotten”,³ still buried under the rubble of failed upheavals, strayed revolutions, ambivalent emancipations, and pompous acts of reaction.

We expressed the conviction that, in looking back on these often-neglected traditions, our authors would “contribute to the development of emancipatory thought on a global scale [...], bringing the specific perspective of East-Central Europe into contemporary discussions of radical critical thought, developing a dialogue between traditions, and providing a platform for this dialogue”.⁴ In other words, we aimed to reclaim a place for the critical thought of this region within *world history*.

In the hurry of the moment, however, we left a few things unsaid. We asserted that “post-communism” offers an excellent vantage point for understanding neoliberalism, but we did not delve into the contradictions inherent to the post-communist condition. We hinted that the spatial reality of “East-Central Europe” (or, more inclusively put, Central and Eastern Europe) is determined by the geography of Communist Party rule and by the attempts to rewrite this geography under post-communism, but we did not

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

draw out the specific contradictions that have resulted from the ideological clashing of “East”, “Center”, and “West”. We declared our intention to rescue half-forgotten traditions from oblivion and introduce them into contemporary theory, but we said nothing about the methodological implications of such a move.

Five years on, it's time to fill in the blanks – to provoke debate on what's at stake and to clear paths for future work.

The Contradictions of Post-Communism I. After a Post-Communism That Refuses to End

The time is clearly ripe for a critique of post-communism. The time might even be over-ripe, since by many accounts post-communism is already old and rotting. After all, one of the most penetrating critiques of the social situation in this part of the world, Boris Buden's *Zone of Transition* from 2009, bears the subtitle “*On the End of Post-Communism*”.⁵ If only Buden's provocative implication had already come to pass! Yet communism, more than thirty years after its own reported death, continues to haunt the region's politics. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, neoliberal reforms are still carried out in the name of fighting communism, while corrupt capitalist politicians are pilloried as “communists”. In Poland and Hungary, meanwhile, anti-liberalism is pursued under the same anti-communist banner. This spring, the Cold War itself seemed to have returned, when a struggle against the imperialist capitalist regime in Russia was presented in the Western and Central European media as a struggle against residual communism – even while Russia's ruler proclaimed that he was the one struggling to overturn the Soviet legacy, which was allegedly responsible for favoring non-Russian nationalities at the expense of Russians.⁶ It appears that even after communism ceased to exist, the world had to reinvent it as an ever-lurking revenant.

There can be no doubt that a serious crisis has come over the social and cultural formation that spread after 1989 from East-Central Europe to the whole world. There are signs that the post-communist *dispensation* – that is, the generalized arrangement through which power relates to humanity⁷ – is coming undone. Its economic doctrine was undermined by the crash of 2008, and its liberal-conservative political hegemony was undermined by the rise of illiberalism soon after. Throughout Europe and North

⁵ Cf. Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs – Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009). See Neda Genova's review of the book: “The End of Post-Communism?” *Contradictions* 2, no. 2 (2018), pp. 225–232.

⁶ See, e.g., Putin's “article” from July 12, 2021, in which the Russian president (or a ghost writer) offered historical justification for the eventual annexation of parts of Ukraine, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁷ Cf. William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013); see chapter 1, “Performative Dispensation: The Elementary Forms of Mass Publicity”.

America, the political elites of triumphant liberal democracy and open markets have seen their grip on power loosen, and throughout the world national elites have been seeking new allies, weakening their dependence on the Western powers that briefly seemed to rule the world unopposed. There was an epoch when neoliberalism imposed itself by declaring all else dead; now that epoch itself shows symptoms of terminal illness.

Yet even as that epoch's political legitimacy passes, the central categories that structured it remained largely as they were in the early 1990s. In the new, post-communist dispensation, labor and class were conceptually excised from society, and when they later reappeared, they were not confronted as questions of malleable social organization, but were re-categorized as aspects of deep-seated personal identity, markers of belonging to a hard-working nation and markers of distinction from allegedly non-laboring ethnic minorities and cultural elites who disrespect national tradition. Even society itself largely disappeared as an entity of its own, conceptually replaced by aggregates of individual citizens, associations, and ethnicities. In place of the social, the category of the political took center stage, sometimes supplemented by categories of politicized culture. Politics was denigrated as a sphere of immoral machinations, but at the same time it was held up as a space for potentially moral action, for exercising freedom as an end in itself; the social conditions and social results of policy became an afterthought. Because the political was primarily about individual morality, social utopia was banished from the polis, and there emerged in its place a counter-utopia that was supposed to be simple, pragmatic, and realistic, not governed by any vision that looked too far ahead. Moral individuals were given license to overlook the plight of society as a whole, because grasping society as a whole requires formulating the idea of "society as a whole", something seemingly too hard to grasp and too risky to try to ameliorate.

As a result of these processes, the leading ideas of post-communism were applied within a narrow range of acceptable politics, prevented from operating as terms of deeper critical critique: "democracy", "civil society", "freedom", and "human rights" were increasingly emptied of their historically significant emancipatory content, removed from the realm of legitimate debate, and mobilized selectively as ideological justifications of the established order. These ideas, developed in response to problems of an earlier period, were never updated to respond to their present. Eventually, in their emptied-out form, they offered a convenient foil for the illiberal conservatism that would present itself as an alternative to neoliberal post-communism, even while it maintained the fundamental categories that shaped post-communist power. Ascendant nationalism and xenophobia may question some tenets of liberal orthodoxy, such as minority rights and open borders, but they do so in the name of other principles that have dominated post-communist discourse, such as the celebration of the citizen (who is called to defend himself against non-citizens) or asocial democracy (redefined as the rule of the cultural majority over minorities, but still refusing to acknowledge questions of social order or conditions of labor as relevant topics of democratic debate).

Contradictions, as I see it, is not here to offer calm, disinterested analysis of this state of affairs. The journal has an interest, a social aim, and this aim should be made manifest: we take part in the search for what comes after the “end” of post-communism, and our work helps ensure that what comes next is not worse than what it is replacing. At a time when few people still believe in the essential emancipatory mission of the unbridled market, even fewer people are willing to offer a coherent vision of how to bridle it. The political horizon has been fixed in place by post-communism; only a critique of post-communism can enable political mobilizations to see beyond that horizon.

But because post-communism draws its governing power from temporality – from its negation of the past – the critique of post-communism must also involve a critique of what post-communism came after.

The Contradictions of Post-Communism II. After a Communism that Never Was

We are told that since the revolutions of 1989–1991 we have been living “after” communism. Insofar as this statement has truth value, it is not because communism once really existed as a social system and then ceased to exist. It is because post-communism exists in the present as a declarative negation of an imagined (yet simultaneously unimaginable) past. In the current dispensation, communism exists as a symbol of whatever post-communist governance wants to be ended. The specter of communism can be invoked to induce horror at public ownership, private poverty, women’s emancipation, retrograde traditionalism, social equality, old-fashioned hierarchy, dangerous foreign ideas, benighted local ideas, Russian and Ukrainian immigrants, Western youth activists, excessive idealism, cynical corruption, worker control, workers themselves – whatever is more easily defeated by conjuration and exorcism than by argument.

This is not to say that nothing “really” changed with the onset of post-communism. There can be little doubt that the beginning of “post-communism” marked a major historical transformation. But the work published in *Contradictions* shows that this change is not understood best as an economic or political transition away from communism as such; the alleged communist character of the old regimes should be a question for debate, to be answered concretely with regard to each site and moment, in relation to the play of forces that sometimes realized and sometimes inverted historic demands of the socialist movement. What ended *as a whole* in 1989–1991 was not communism as a configuration of society, but rather a reality in which communism was *imaginable* as a point on the political horizon. What came into being was a new reality where communism was imaginable no longer. If the terms “communism” and “post-communism” are relevant to us today, it is because they draw attention to shifting social categories, which reconfigured social understanding of the possible and the desirable.

The post-communist dispensation is, in an important sense, a “condition”: It conditions what we are able to imagine and what will be heard when we speak. It conditions our political horizon, making alternatives to the present invisible and closing off spaces of

potential emancipation. It conditions our experience of the past and future, associating radical reimaginings of the future with an already-rejected past. In this condition, communism appears as nothing but the frightening negation of the possible and reasonable, which takes the form of a warning against excessive desire. The communism of post-communism appears as a desire for pure good that becomes inverted as evil. This is a figure of negative theodicy, which justifies the evil of the present by pointing to an evil that supposedly derives from the unbridled desire for something better. Communism becomes sacralized as taboo, repeatedly exorcized from the order of the real.

Under post-communism, communism disappears as a *movement* and a player in *history*. Lost from view are the real contradictions of communism as a set of organized desires and practical experiments, the peripeteias of a movement that moved repeatedly against itself, but continued to move. And so the critique of communism (or pre-post-communism) is obviated by the sacral ban placed on it. Today, a proper critique of communism, one that breaks the sacral ban on desiring something better, can finally clear the way for new visions that draw on the past without demonizing it or repeating it.

Looking at the social systems that legitimated themselves with the ideal of communism, we can ask how those systems functioned, how they emerged and (mostly) “ended”, how they were criticized, and how the legacy of opposition to them can challenge our contemporaries to think of alternatives to post-communism in new ways, envisioning possibilities more adequate to the future because they take into account the past. As we look back on the circuitous and often tragic historical developments that led to “communism” and its “end”, we can also look back on the ideas and aspirations that accompanied this history. Rather than delegitimizing these ideas and aspirations *a priori*, we can look at them in their complexity, asking how some ideas took hold but were transformed, how other ideas may have always contained the seeds of their own eventual negation, how still other ideas were at least partially realized while others were marginalized and never had the chance to be tried.

The Contradictions of Central and Eastern Europe I. Where Is *Contradictions*?

The post-communist dispensation encompasses the world, and every critique of the present must be, in one way or another, a critique of post-communism. But there is probably no better place to look into the depths, genealogy, and aftermath of post-communism than at its unfortunate center, the region where the phenomenon popularly known as “communism” so abruptly lost its status as a global force thirty-some years ago. This is also a good place to look into post-communism’s missed alternatives, ideas that long confronted the reality of Communist Party rule but were summarily discarded when post-communism arrived and declared itself immutable and irreplaceable.

Contradictions appears in one of the centers of this center, in a region often referred to as “Central Europe”. This is both a blessing and a curse. The term sounds out as a curse when invoked by those who would place themselves above the more backward “Eastern Europe”, which seems always to begin just a little way beyond where the speaker

happens to stand; since Central Europe is not quite Western, all sorts of deficiencies can be blamed on its incomplete Westernness. At the same time, since Central Europe is not quite Eastern, its proponents can renounce their connections with Europe's allegedly primitive oriental margins. But these ambiguities also open possibilities: Central Europe provides a vantage point for critical engagement with both West and East – and with the ways in which the idea of centrality has been invoked to privilege (or “centralize”) certain ideas while marginalizing others. By confronting the term, we can begin to understand the specificity of the whole region that has been struggling for centuries to negotiate its position beside a hegemonic West; this has sometimes meant establishing counterhegemonic powers and ideas in the East, while at other times it has meant racing to become more Western than the West.

This vantage point allows *Contradictions* to focus its critical lens on the East, while granting due attention to the West as an area that continually influences the East – and which, much more than is usually noted, is itself shaped by the East. The thematic range of *Contradictions* is not enclosed within the borders of Central Europe. The ambivalent, border-filled space of Central Europe merely offers a frame through which to see what goes on all around. In addition to all those parts of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe ruled by Communist Parties for much of the twentieth century, we should draw attention to the ambiguous position of places like Finland, Austria, Germany, and Greece, which are typically subsumed under the “West”, yet bear significant marks of their historic entanglements with territories of the “East”.

But even this geographical delimitation is not enough. Prague is a window to Central and Eastern Europe, which is a window to the world, a window that shows the world in a specific (and not always flattering) light. Because this region is entangled in the world, the whole world belongs to our geographical domain – the whole world, as seen from this part of the world, and every part of the world, as seen beside this part.

This is the region's perverse advantage: it has grappled with capitalism and anti-capitalism in some of their most problematic forms. Social critics in Central and Eastern Europe have experienced brutal fascist governments and powerful socialist movements. They have analyzed, based on intimate personal knowledge, the systems of governance that took on the name of “socialism”. And they have lived through an imposition of market capitalism that took place with unprecedented speed on an unprecedented scale when the region's allegedly anti-capitalist governments fell. They lived through revolutions that overturned all manner of ordinary thinking, opening up possibilities that may have later been foreclosed, but were never exhausted; today they can look back on such revolutionary moments, not as fixed models to be mechanically repeated, nor as pure ideals that remain untouched by later betrayals, but as impulses to think beyond the close, dark horizon of the present.⁸

⁸ And these revolutions, however opposed to one another they may appear, cannot be separated. As one observer puts it: “the postsocialist horizon forces us to restructure our desire for commun-

The Contradictions of Central and Eastern Europe II. Caught between Center and Margins

A claim to centrality can be a claim to superiority or an acknowledgment that one lives amidst others; it can be a claim to purity or a recognition that one lives at the heart of a maelstrom of colliding influences. Do we live in the center of the world or in the overlapping margins between other centers?

Central and Eastern Europe has become a center for one-sided cosmopolitanism and for one-sided xenophobia. It has led attempts to erase local difference and assimilate to Western models (justified by the claim that we are at the “center” of the world’s most important continent), and it has led attempts to build walls around national culture or an idealized “East”, eliminating all that does not belong (justified by the implication that when one is in the center of the world, there is no need to look elsewhere). In spite of this, but also because of the challenge set forth by this dubious legacy, Central and Eastern Europe has also historically been a center for reflecting on the problem of internationalism. It is often forgotten that it was here that the world socialist movement held its lively early debates on how to navigate the Babel of languages and traditions that threaten to divide humanity, how to find a way of living and fighting together without eliminating the differences between us. It was here that so-called Austro-Marxists – including socialists of many nationalities in the Habsburg lands – worked out concrete proposals to grant national cultural autonomy without dividing up multinational communities. It was also here (when Stalin was in Vienna and Lenin in Krakow) that the Bolsheviks began working out an alternative policy calling for territorial autonomy and national self-determination. It was in the southeastern part of Central and Eastern Europe that Yugoslavia launched one of history’s most ambitious attempts at internationalist organization within a single state. If these programs have been largely annulled and these theories ignored, giving way to the patchwork of feuding nationalisms that run much of the region today, this should be reason enough for investigating this history and asking what could be done better.

This task is made all the more urgent by the new war in Ukraine, the most violent expression of competing national claims in recent times and the most damning sign of the post-communist dispensation’s failure to resolve international tensions in the region, guaranteeing independence and equality for national and cultural groups. For all Russian talk of anti-fascism and cross-border solidarity, and for all Western

ism as an inverted echo of October’s tragic outcome. Instead of rejecting the Russian revolution for its failures, suspending it in any number of counterfactuals about the post-Leninist phase, or – conversely – mythologizing it as a glorious historical rupture while disregarding its later fate, the postsocialist communist recognizes her formation in the fires of a different revolution entirely. Our connection to the event of 1917 must inevitably pass through the neoliberal revolution (or counter-revolution) of 1989/91.” Jonathan Brooks Platt, “Postsocialist Platonov: The Question of Humanism and the New Russian Left”, in *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia*, ed. Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018), p. 220.

talk of multicultural coexistence, throughout the post-communist period none of the great powers permitted Ukrainians to act autonomously, to associate freely with their neighbors, and to choose on their own whether they should take sides or avoid taking sides. The calamitous approaches of all international parties in the lead-up to the war of course does not change the fact that only one party launched a deadly invasion, and there can be no equality in responsibility or blame. But we can ask why Ukraine was not even considered a “side” in the pre-war period at all, but was treated as a third party in negotiations over its own land and society.

The post-communist dispensation did not permit Ukraine to have its own history and simultaneously be a part of Western and Eastern history. The world powers competed in offering Ukraine bad economic deals and empty military proposals, while punishing Ukraine each time it began to work more closely with the other side. On a cultural level, Ukraine was never enabled to consolidate itself as a multilingual, multiethnic state. World powers portrayed Ukraine’s major languages as symbols of competing allegiance, and Ukrainians were never given the freedom necessary to develop their languages as their own, sheltered from the hegemonic claims of Russia or “Europe”.

Instead of working through the real problems left by Soviet nationality policy, proponents and critics of Russian influence simply equated communism with Russia. To be clear, there is some truth to the assertion that Putin is attempting to revive Soviet territorial claims and to enact Soviet policies of Russification. But this is a half-truth. It is true that Lenin’s program of anti-imperialism was beset by contradiction and eventually transformed into its own type of imperialism. But Soviet policy was still marked by the attempt to overcome earlier imperialist policy. Although the Ukrainian national movement (*pace* Putin) was born entirely independently of the Bolsheviks (it was generally more agrarian-populist socialist than proletarian-Marxist in its early period), the Bolsheviks responded to it by granting Ukraine the status of an autonomous republic in union with Russia, and this status, though practically undermined by later Communist Party practice, became the basis of Ukrainian independence when the Soviet Union dissolved.

The Soviet Union formally supported but practically denied political autonomy to its constituent nations. Even when it periodically displaced or starved non-Russian nations under Stalin’s rule, and even when it incentivized Russian assimilation (after renouncing Stalin’s most violent methods), making the Russian language a mark of prestige and a means of career advancement, the Soviet Union never stopped promoting cultural autonomy as a matter of principle. This was a volatile set-up, which encouraged non-Russian national sentiment and simultaneously suppressed it, while the weight of power always favored Russian over non-Russian culture. But this was not quite the same as one-sidedly forced Russification. (By way of comparison, with due attention to great differences of context and method, the United States and Canada have assimilated and eliminated minority cultures – including the culture of millions of Ukrainian immigrants – far more completely than the Soviet Union ever did.)

Ukraine emerged from the Soviet Union having been encouraged to be both independent-Ukrainian *and* Russophone-Soviet. The delicate balance of Soviet nationality policy had collapsed, but no viable new idea came in its place, no new approach that really learned from the failures of Soviet policy and sought to reconcile those contrasting cultural orientations and models of governance. Add to this the refusal of all power blocs to actually guarantee Ukraine's security, even while they happily provoked one another, with each side declaring its desire to eventually bring Ukraine under its wing – and add to this the desperate thirst of Russia's humiliated post-communist elites for international glory and domestic distraction – and it was a recipe for disaster. A disaster with no internationalist solution yet in sight.

But the war in Ukraine has at least forced the West (for now) to recognize Ukrainians as people bearing a complex history and intermingled cultural traditions, rather than as backward Easterners who are “White but not quite”, to use the phrase of anthropologist Ivan Kalmar.⁹ The war has drawn attention to the layered chauvinisms that allow the Central European attitude, wherever it happens to be, to dismiss whatever lies farther to the east, while counter-chauvinisms arise to violently confront that dismissal. The war (at least one may hope) has opened up the possibility of seeing the centrality of Central and Eastern Europe differently, as a kind of marginal centrality, which offers a vantage point in between other centers and margins. People in Central and Eastern Europe, reflecting on their position at the margins of the center, may be able to recognize the marginality that is present everywhere, because every center is shaped by its margins, and nothing can be central without being located between other centers, located at the intersection of their overlapping margins.

In *Contradictions* we can continue to push at the boundaries of what Central Europe means and what is relevant to it. Our pages can be open to all such central peripheries and peripheral centers around the world. From this standpoint, then, we can offer a space for the development of critical and emancipatory theory that is Central and Eastern European but also worldly, arising out of the critical assessment of situated and global iterations of “communism” and “post-communism”.

The Contradictions of Central and Eastern Europe III. Finding Ideas in a Region without Ideas

And yet, what insight might one expect from a place that has often been seen as a region that borrows its plans and visions from abroad, implements them unchanged, pursues them with dogmatic faith – and then, after growing disappointed, turns abroad again?

Habermas notoriously characterized the revolution of 1989 in East-Central Europe by its “total lack of ideas that are either innovative or orientated towards the future”.¹⁰

⁹ Ivan Kalmar, *White but Not Quite* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022).

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, “What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left”, *New Left Review I*, no. 183 (October 1990), p. 5.

His dismissal of the revolution's intellectual accomplishments, while partly justified, misses the point. Lea Ypi captured the revolution's significance much better when she called it a "revolution of people against concepts".¹¹ It was not that the revolutionaries simply forgot to come up with new ideas; rather, they passionately defended the remarkable idea that ideas as such were the problem, that fancy concepts should be replaced by basic common sense, lofty vision replaced by a cynical recognition of lowly human nature, complicated social theory replaced by unvarnished and obvious truth. This is how G. M. Tamás characterized the post-communist attitude in 1996, when he was growing tired of the views of his erstwhile anti-communist comrades: In their understanding, communism

forced people to accept ideology in preference to felicity. Communism is philosophic, yet free societies are pragmatic. [...] Communism forced secular, agnostic, critical discourse on pious peasant populations. Communism imposed high modernism onto traditionalist, deferential, naive moujiks. Communism was the work of a bunch of intellectualist adventurers in leather trench coats. Communism was the work of a heroic élite of doctrinaires. The source of all our troubles is ideas.¹²

Not the most propitious starting point, it would seem, for a journal devoted in large part to the history of ideas.

Yet at other moments in history this region has been the site of remarkable intellectual ferment. It was in the ambivalent space where Western and Eastern Europe overlap that Kant ruminated on cosmopolitanism and perpetual peace, Herder developed his philosophy of multi-national humanism, and internationalists later duked it out with nationalists. In between one-sided Westernizers and reactionary Slavophiles, a space also opened up for agrarian-populist socialists who mixed models of folk communalism with revolutionary modernity. If Hegelianism was perhaps born in the western half of Central Europe, it was in the east where it was most successfully popularized and reinterpreted in competing national and socialist movements. If Marxism was born largely during its author's long Western European exile, it was in many ways a product of Marx's reflections on Germany's ambivalent position between East and West, its development of philosophy as compensation for underdeveloped politics, its belated but rapid economic growth, its attempts to become a hegemon of the East (competing with Austria and Russia) even while it was denied full admission to Western sources of power and *civilisation*. And of course it was in Austria and eastern Germany, at a time when the areas' Westernness could still not be taken for granted, that psychoanalysis, phenomenology, Austro-Marxism, and logical positivism were born.

¹¹ Lea Ypi, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), p. 151.

¹² G. M. Tamás, "Ethnarchy and Ethno-Anarchism", *Social Research* 63, no. 1 (1996), p. 169.

Even so-called “Western Marxism” took much of its initial impulse from Central and Eastern Europe. György Lukács’s turn to Marxism was among other things a result of his experience in the short-lived Hungarian Council Republic of 1919, after which he attempted to synthesize the Eastern European revolutionary experience with Central and Western European philosophical traditions. His legacy was carried on and reinterpreted, then, not only in the Frankfurt School, but also by his students in the so-called Budapest School, such as István Mészáros, Ferenc Fehér, and Ágnes Heller, and by Karel Kosík in Prague. Even Karl Korsch, Antonio Gramsci, and the members of the Frankfurt School – those progenitors of Western Marxism who actually operated in the West – rebelled first of all against the established orthodoxy of Marxism in its *Western* form (as represented above all by the Second International), which they sought to rethink in light of the radical democratic impulse of the October Revolution.

But “Western Marxism” has no exclusive claim to critical and emancipatory thought. “Eastern Marxism” should be counted also among the many traditions to be taken seriously. Although Marxism-Leninism was codified as a legitimating ideology of oppressive states, it also contained moments of emancipatory insight. It was repeatedly rethought and invoked against itself by critical figures in Central and Eastern Europe, and many of the ideas of “Eastern” or “orthodox” Marxism remain open for critical interpretation and reappropriation. So too with the multiple varieties of anarchism, Social Democracy, non-Marxist socialism, and progressive populism that have passed through the region, as people tried to imagine alternative futures during sudden upheavals and to look for the fissures in apparently unchangeable systems during long periods of stagnation.

Critical and emancipatory theory, of course, can never be the exclusive property of one region or another. Our purpose should be to understand how critical theory has emerged from the interaction of experiences both marginal and central to world affairs. We should show that critical theory never needs to be borrowed wholesale or invented from scratch, because it develops in a continuous process of rethinking in light of new intellectual encounters and new historical experience.

The region of Central and Eastern Europe, though perennially seen as a backwater from the world’s centers of power, has repeatedly served as a testing ground for cutting-edge political-economic technology. The testing has historically taken two different forms, and the tragedy is that the first form, which keeps yielding negative results, keeps getting repeated, while the second, whose results are less negative, is still banished in the name of avoiding “dangerous social experiments”.

The first kind of experimentation applies a formula established elsewhere, only more rigidly and more ruthlessly, treating local societies as blank slates, taking advantage of their relative weakness in pushing back. This was the approach that applied the Soviet developmental model in Central Europe, where it was honed and standardized still further for export to Latin America, Asia, and Africa (and, as is so often the case, the variety selected for export was formally attractive, but of low substantive quality). Then, even after the age of experimentation was declared over in 1989, the region

became a laboratory for neoliberalism. The new doctrine had already gone through a testing phase in Latin America before being imported to Central and Eastern Europe, but it was still unproven; once applied here it was repackaged with the added value of post-communist ideology, which greatly contributed to its export still farther afield.

The second kind of experimentation, by contrast, avoids rigidly applying imported models, but finds in the liminal position of Central and Eastern Europe the possibility of trying *new things*. In this list we may count the workers' councils of 1905 and 1917, the experiment in internationalism and workers' self-management in Yugoslavia after 1948, the Prague Spring in 1968, and even some aspects of Hungary's pragmatic and liberalizing "goulash communism" after 1956; if we are loose enough in our demarcation of the region, we might add the creative urbanism of Red Vienna after 1918.

Most of these experiments – with the arguable exception of Red Vienna – ended in some sort of failure, but every experiment fails in its own ways and should teach us something new. Yet today, instead of learning from failed experiments, policy makers in Central and Eastern Europe have perpetuated the worst features of all the failures, while ignoring most of the successes. The specters of half-failed experiments are exorcised in order to make room for living monsters.

The Contradictions of History I. Historicization and Radical Anachronism

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx famously wrote that "[t]he tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living".¹³ The "nightmare" Marx invoked, more precisely translated as "mare" (in German, *Alp*, a sort of night-elf), is a demon that appears in dreams to sap the dreamer's life force away. Such "spirits of the past"¹⁴ divert revolutionaries' attention from new things, pulling them from contemporary reality into deathly sleep. Marx stood against his demons, declaring that "[t]he social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future".¹⁵ He had a point – but what should we say to the revolutionaries of the twenty-first century, whose future has been taken away? What should we say to those whose only remaining future seems to lie hidden in old, recurring dreams?

Yes, when we now look back at the past, it is full of demons, far more numerous and more frightening than in Marx's day. But given the real possibility of imminent global climate catastrophe or nuclear war, the demons of the future are hardly less terrifying. At the same time, we also meet livelier ghosts whose melancholic sighs tell us (in the voice of Enzo Traverso) that melancholy might just offer a path back to forbidden optimism,¹⁶

¹³ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 595.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 597.

¹⁶ Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

and whose eternally dying breaths whisper (in the voice of Svetlana Boym) that nostalgia just might have a progressive future.¹⁷ Of course, we have no need to be nostalgic for the concrete reality of “really existing socialism”; nor should we be melancholic when we contemplate *its* end. This is precisely why we should look to the past by way of dreaming – if readers will permit this reinterpretation of Marx’s dream-demonology. The dreamer-historian approaches the past as something open, unfixed, something that has not yet revealed all its secrets. The dreamer does not simply describe the superficial appearance of past events, their manifest content as befits established narratives, their officially recognized heroes and villains, whose actions brought the waking world to where it is today. The dreamer-historian also dives into the latent content of the past, willing to encounter not only those spirits that dominated past epochs, but also those that rebelled, were exorcised, perhaps were silenced in the act of rebelling, or perhaps hid themselves away in their epochs’ inner workings, registering without fanfare the slow and faltering steps of emancipation. The dreamer-historian, in other words, can look on the ghosts of the past as a part of living history, as figures that continue to speak to the present, with today’s researchers as their mediums. This is how we can make the history of philosophy, as Karel Kosík put it, into its own form of philosophy.¹⁸

Methodologically speaking, this means refusing to affirm the past or the present it created, refusing to see history as a smooth succession of necessities, but looking instead at each historical moment for *contradictions*: conflicting tendencies, internal tension, multiple paths forward. This is what can make even the history of ideas materialist: the recognition that ideas are not contained in rationally determined iron laws of development, independent of society, but move as socially embodied contradictions. Contradictions push substance forward in time, but always in more than one direction at once. Admittedly, it is not usually considered to be the task of historians to tell us what *did not happen*, but that is precisely the point at which a critical historiography can become political-philosophical, excavating buried hopes, suppressed dreams, and also, perhaps, overlooked demons who threaten to return. A philosophical historiography can bring old dreams and fears into the present, where they can be worked through again before an uncertain future. This approach also means doing justice to the actors of history, who did not know where events would take them; and it means remembering that even our haughty knowledge about the trajectory of the past does not tell us where events will take us tomorrow.

On this point, the radical historicization of ideas meets deliberate anachronism. We know that all ideas develop in historical context, but we also know that ideas can outlive their context and change when their context changes, and we know that writing about

¹⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

¹⁸ Karel Kosík, “Dějiny filosofie jako filosofie”, in *Filosofie v dějinách českého národa. Protokol celostátní konference v Liblicích ve dnech 14.–17. dubna 1958* (Praha: Československá akademie věd, 1958).

ideas in history is part of the process of the historical development of ideas. Ideas can speak to us years after they were born and even after they seemed to die, but at each moment they speak differently. Sometimes it takes powerful historical forces to revive them; but without the smaller efforts of subversive memory, those historical forces would find nothing to revive.

The Contradictions of History II. The History of the Present as Philosophy

But *Contradictions* is not a journal for pure historians. The present is as much our domain as the past. When our authors look at the present, they can examine how one version of the past is sedimented in the present, how contrary explorations of the past can upset the present and send it flying in new directions. They can also look for those critical perspectives and emancipatory visions that are still here, but are maligned or misunderstood or hidden from view, due to the structures of post-communism. This approach opens our pages up to anthropology and literary or cultural studies that place ideas in their changing socio-cultural context; to sociology that is truly social, attempting to grasp the form of society beyond trends and statistics; to economics that recognizes all economic policy as enmeshed in competing social visions; to political science that recognizes the whole world as political.

And in the study of the present as much as in the study of the past, the empirical analysis of contradictions should also be a contribution to philosophy. *Contradictions* seeks philosophy that is political, insofar as it attempts to understand how the world has changed and can change. It also seeks political philosophy that is *social*, insofar as it grasps the political as one dimension of broader social configurations, thus moving beyond the limited personal-moral approach and its apolitical analytical counterpart that established themselves under post-communism. By reflecting on empirical developments, philosophy should continually make itself *adequate* to its context; but by recognizing that each empirical moment is wrought with tension and conflicting tendencies, philosophy can avoid being *trapped* in its context. The ideas of post-communism have suffered from ignoring rather than confronting the history of socialist ideas. Now, when critical and emancipatory thought is finding a growing audience, it too will suffer if it merely ignores dissident and post-communist ideas. A philosophy that hopes to speak to the future should confront both the best and worst ideas of its past.

Philosophy should be able to speak to the world by finding something that concerns the world as it is, right now; but instead of telling the world what it has already heard, philosophy should tell it something new; it should make the world concerned in new ways. This, I think, is what *Contradictions* can do: In *this region* at *this moment* it can enable philosophy, along with all the theoretically inclined empirical work that surrounds philosophy, to tell world history something that no other time or place has told it. And to help make sure the next phase of history is less bad than the one that came before.

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REVIEWS

TO DISMANTLE INJUSTICE YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND ITS ROOTS

Alf Hornborg, *Nature, Society, and Justice in the Anthropocene: Unraveling the Money-Energy-Technology Complex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 242 p. ISBN 9781108554985

Alf Hornborg is one of the key figures defining the field of human ecology, which focuses on the very foundations of human-environment interactions. His latest book provides readers with an overview of his main research interests. Through a multidisciplinary inquiry, he explains the roots of the ecological crisis that we are facing and provides an analysis for the political struggle against it. The analysis of the “holy trinity” of money, energy, and technology tackles the very foundation of the current hegemonic ideology based as it is on the abstraction of the free market. To call this “holy trinity” a complex (as in the “Money-Technology-Energy Complex”) is important because it helps us to understand how all three of its pillars historically coevolved to form its current complexity, all the while without losing its roots in appropriation and exploitation. To discard this complex, a just socio-economic transformation must be committed to a degrowth and postcapitalist scenario.

Hornborg grounds his analysis in contemporary ecological Marxism, political ecology, ecological economics, and posthumanism. The anthropological background of the author is notable in his curiosity in exploring how the complex of money, energy, and technology that we take for granted works. He traces the origins of the complex to the Industrial Revolution, when faith in the abstract idea of the economy was established. Money allows us to place trust in exchange during trade and avoid the relations of moral obligation between actors on the market. At the same time, money becomes a fetish and makes goods appear as commensurable. In this sense, it does not serve purely as a token but works also as an object of trust, instead of there being trust between people. Machines become fetishes too, as invention is detached from the flow of the materials in which they are deployed.

Ecologically unequal exchange is what puts this “global magic” to work. The foundations of the global market were established alongside the emergence of colonial exploitation. The Atlantic triangle market was built upon the exploitation of the labour of African

slaves and the dispossession of land for cotton plantations in North America and set the unequal biophysical flows precisely to accumulate the embodied resources through trade in the imperial centres of Europe. The textile industry technologies fuelled by coal were not just an effective invention, they were created with the underlying objective of imperial domination over the bodies of slaves and the expropriation of land. These dynamics of asymmetric exchange from the beginning of capitalist industrialisation have expanded to the current globalised economy, where the comparative advantage of cheap and disposable land and labour supply the accumulation of embodied resources among the few who actually benefit. A recent study by Dorninger et al.¹ empirically quantifies the net import of embodied materials, energy, labour, and land of the high-income countries over the period 1990–2015 and thus supports the EUE theory. With a larger amount of harnessed energy, the complex appropriates more time and space and grows in complexity. Therefore, some people dissipate a substantially larger amount of energy than others.

However, the complex cannot grow infinitely. Hornborg explains how the complex is bounded by biophysical limits. Dematerialisation of the economy is illusory because it is built on the accumulation of embodied energy and requires further expansion. Transgressed planetary boundaries indicate that the bubble is about to burst. The way out of this problem is to redesign the artefact of money to reflect the way that it is bound to energy and space. To increase sustainability and diminish inequality at the same time, Hornborg suggests that each state should issue a complementary currency (which would allow purchasing only local goods and services) and should distribute it as a basic income to all its residents. In a very clear manner, he offers answers to twenty-seven frequently asked question about his proposal. For example, the effects of the proposal in very different local conditions would according to the author lead to variations of consumption patterns and calibration of resource endowments, or in the less fertile regions the radius that is used to define a region should be larger than in fertile regions. We can understand this as an attempt to limit the economy within the ecologically sane boundaries of the metabolic resource flows while simultaneously fostering the ability of local communities to fulfil their needs in a specific and appropriate way.

Hornborg makes his writing approachable through personal accounts, for example of his farming endeavours (115) and anthropological research (200, or 217). Another characteristic of his writing is devotion to the clarity of the arguments.

The anthropocene, the unprecedented situation of a socially transformed global environment, could according to Hornborg have various understandings, many of them emphasizing the blurred lines between the intertwined social and natural aspects. Nevertheless, for the author it is ultimately important to maintain ontological distinctions between nature and society as well as between subject and object. The

¹ Christian Dorninger et al., “Global patterns of ecologically unequal exchange: Implications for sustainability in the 21st century”, *Ecological Economics* 179 (January 2021).

specifically human ability to produce and use symbols constitutes languages. In the end, this unique ability enables people to make arbitrary cultural choices.

Similarly, the Cartesian dualism between subject and object, in which sentience and agency are relevant only to the subject, remains analytically important for Hornborg, especially for the notion of fetishism, a form of attributed agency to objects, which is nevertheless socially created. Hornborg criticises the posthumanist tendencies to melt down boundaries between the object and subject as well as between society and nature, locating in these tendencies a political incapacity to focus on specifically human subjects, and especially their economic activity, which is ultimately what is wreaking environmental havoc on the Earth.

Hornborg's criticism of posthumanist authors like Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway targets the obfuscation of boundaries that complicates our understanding and makes it, needlessly, more difficult to identify the roots of current crises and in the end stand in the way of tangible political solutions. In the process of assuming the human-nature relation as an always-changing amorphous hybrid described with a fancy vocabulary, we lose the ground below our feet that is necessary for a sound strategy. On page 194 he criticises a literary style that is "personal and anecdotal, the engagement with theory is journalistic and superficial", or even implying, that "academic success may be inversely proportional to clarity". The criticism of key authors of posthumanism, notably Bruno Latour, for avoiding political positionality might have been read today in a different light after the publication of Latour's *Down to Earth* in 2018, which specifically goes in the direction of clarity and political positioning.

Hornborg criticises several "false solutions" to the crisis, which might make the book difficult reading for many people already involved in environmental activism. For example, activists in the global North might be torn between promoting politically unfeasible policies for degrowth on the one hand and personal lifestyle choices that do not provide a way out of the current crisis on the other. Lifestyle choices alone cannot be a solution because they are partially produced by historical inequality and are not universally accessible. For the same reason, even modern industrial workers in the core regions serve more to sustain capitalism than to act as its antagonists. Precisely in the current moment we can observe the debates about just transition and the socially sensitive phase-out of coal industries in the EU. The attempts to provide regions with loads of cash, promising new green jobs and more material prosperity falls short of reversing ecologically unequal exchange precisely because it fosters the idea of economic progress. This conundrum is illustrated by Tadzio Mueller,² who argues that to make a transition just it needs to be firstly based on a large-scale and rapid cut of carbon emissions and not on a compromise with labour representatives, who serve rather the

² Tadzio Mueller, "'As Time Goes by...': The Hidden Pitfalls of the 'Just Transition' Narrative", *Just Transition Research Collaborative* (14 June, 2018), <https://medium.com/just-transitions/mueller-fc3f434025cc>.

interests of the captains of industry. In this light it seems illusive to look for a common ground between mine workers and the ecological movement in the form of higher wages, because it would keep the profoundly unjust design of the economy locked in.

Morover, we simply cannot get out of the trap of ecologically unequal exchange by a solely technological fix, for example by replacing all fossil fuels with renewables. In this case, the globalised capitalist economy would still remain exploitative, just pushing towards different commodity frontiers based on different minerals. Although it might be possible to slow the rate of carbon emissions, the Money-Technology-Energy Complex would still concentrate the embodied land and labour in the centres and in no way could we talk about sustainability.

What is interesting in Hornborg's argument is its resemblance to the theory of the imperial mode of living described by Brand and Wissen.³ The imperial mode of living shares with ecologically unequal exchange the background of ecological economics and political ecology, providing a connection between the abstract economy and the global biophysical materiality of production. Unlike Brand and Wissen, Hornborg does not engage in the political science perspective on hegemony, something which could have enriched the political viability of his analysis.

The suggestion of basic income in complementary currency supposes a functional democratic state, nowadays a globally rare condition, located perhaps only in Scandinavia. What kind of basic income are people escaping from failed states and currently living in refugee camps on the border of the European Union entitled to? Hornborg opens up the debate, which we can see unfolding for example in degrowth conceptualisations of the state.⁴ It is worth noting that Hornborg's key message of redesigning the artefact of money is not accompanied by a similar effort to redesign technology in a way that makes it possible to escape the pitfalls of an ecologically unequal exchange. Although not present in the book, the debates about the redesign of the state as well as redesign of technology has profoundly developed in recent years within the degrowth community.⁵

The current coronavirus crisis opens up previously unthinkable horizons and a certain form of basic income is now being proposed, for example even in an editorial of the *Financial Times*.⁶ The plea for localisation of economic activity is central to Hornborg's political argument, and redesigning money to reflect spatial dependency

³ Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Limits to Capitalist Nature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).

⁴ Giacomo D'Alisa and Giorgos Kallis, "Degrowth and the State", *Ecological Economics* 169 (March 2020).

⁵ See, for example, Christian Kerschner, Petra Wächter, Linda Nierling and Melf-Hinrich Ehlers, "Degrowth and Technology: Towards feasible, viable, appropriate and convivial imaginaries", *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197, no 2 (2018), pp. 1619–1636.

⁶ "Virus lays bare the frailty of the social contract", *Financial Times* (April 3, 2020), <https://ft.com/content/7eff769a-74dd-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

is its key condition. He is far from promoting isolated islands of positive deviance. The changes he suggests call for a rupture that would open up a path to the imaginaries of postcapitalist society. His analysis offers a solid analytical apparatus to distinguish sustainable propositions from hijacked ideas that, in the end, only serve to foster the current ideology based on exploitation.

Mikuláš Černík

RETHINKING FORGOTTEN THOUGHTS

Onur Acaroglu, *Rethinking Marxist Approaches to Transition: A Theory of Temporal Dislocation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 238 p. ISBN 9789004436664

Onur Acaroglu declares his intention to examine the possibilities of thinking about transition from a Marxist perspective. Needless to say, his intention can in no way be considered banal. It is not only in the East Central Europe region that transition predominantly refers to either a capitalist transformation of economy or a liberal-democratic turn in political imagination. Acaroglu attempts to approach transition through a somewhat *longue durée* Marxist prism, thus opening the problem of transition from capitalism to socialism. His argumentation, rather than focusing on historical analysis, helps us reinvent various seemingly extinct or overshadowed discourses on socialist transition, liberation, and pursuits of egalitarian societies.

Balibar Reading Althusser

In the introductory parts of the book, transition is localized within Marx's legacy. Convincingly, Acaroglu highlights the very possibility of the continuity of thinking about transition within the Marxist tradition, thus rendering the notion of tradition viable in accounts of today's crises predicament while also able to produce tangible intellectual environments to get out of those very crises. In his definition, transition is simply something inherent to political thought, at least since Hegel, despite attracting little theoretical attention. In this book, transition is, broadly speaking, primarily understood as an aspect of rupture at the transition moment which is embodied within the contingency of the space of possibilities.

After a short introduction to Althusserian interpretations of super-structural preconditions for the very thinking of transition, Acaroglu turns to Étienne Balibar's readings of Althusser. Balibar attempted to analyse transition within the aforementioned ruptured realm. He maintained that only at moments of overlap between class struggle and economic trauma is it possible to account for a transition that goes beyond capitalism (40). What he does in claiming so is actually to contest the rather vaguely interpreted idea of class struggle as the sole driver of history. According to Acaroglu, one particular feature of Balibar's thinking helps us shape the thinking of transition in what could

be described as a non-revolutionary manner. Balibar speaks of a “transitional mode of production”, such as the system of manufacturing that emerged at a moment between feudalism and capitalism where there was only formal submission to capital, while the symbolic order remained feudal. By symbolic order, he mainly refers to the ideological superstructure. Similarly, we can think of Koselleck’s *Sattelzeit*, a transition period between the Early Modern and Modern where key concepts such as citizen, state, and family developed new meanings. More generally, we can use Balibar’s approach to use such frames as analytical realms for understanding transitions. Needless to say, any such abstraction and generalization of the notion of transition comes at the expense of historicization and, thus, requires further specification and contextualization. Therefore, Acaroglu calls on Antonio Gramsci’s notions of historical and local understanding of the ruling classes’ practices with this aim in mind.

Gramsci’s contribution to the transition debate resides in a negative conveying of sorts. Gramsci observed that the bourgeois elites of his day, by introducing a vision of a good society, a narrative of a linear teleological string of events, and some sort of “natural” mode of existence that would be preserved throughout this narrative, attempted to prevent the transition to socialism. This attempt took the form of a return of “history”, where a notion of history proceeding without fundamental change made it possible to narrate history without transition. Among many manifestations of such a discourse there stands out a popular sort of a pseudo-Smithian argument that human nature and the inherent desire to acquire wealth led to the establishment of a capitalist society, after which no further transition is imaginable.¹

According to Acaroglu, Gramsci’s thought is unavoidable when examining transitions because, in contrast to universalist readings of Marx, Gramsci emphasized political and cultural factors, rooted in historical context, in addition to economic structures. In doing so, Gramsci populates with actors realms that had been left relatively vacant by classic historical materialism, and at the same time he intertwines their acts with particular historical and cultural backgrounds. More importantly, Gramsci recognizes differences between the “East” and the “West”. This could not have been done without him acknowledging the differences in outcomes in historical developments in Italy and in Russia. What is especially valuable when it comes to thinking transition – and this is a point on which Gramsci and Althusser would agree – is a notion that subjects carry “a sedimented set of historically constructed viewpoints and behaviours” (57).

The Discursive Turn: The Post-Marxist Gramsci of Laclau and Mouffe

As Acaroglu proceeds to post-Marxist approaches, he builds on Gramsci’s experience of the historical failure of the socialist transition in Italy. His emphasis on populism-re-

¹ Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 496; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London and New York: Verso, 2017), p. 224.

lated arguments, mainly those provided by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, contextualizes transition.

One aspect of this contextualization is Acaroglu's attempt to move beyond the ever-recurring debate on who is the emancipatory class-subject, that is to say, the subject capable of enacting transition to a more emancipated society. Within this realm, Laclau provides a direct response to the failed endeavours of the mostly European/American intellectuals gathered around the New Left to define the proletariat. His Argentine, more broadly Latin American, experience served as a vital refreshment of the Marxist discourse. This regional tradition allowed Laclau to speak of "the people". According to his line of thought, class struggle is subsumed under, or rather exists within, the popular struggle. One has to point out the trickiness of such a definition, since with the benefit of hindsight we can see how the current nationalist conservative or right-wing populist movements succeeded, at least temporarily, in hijacking the badge "we the people", as was implicit, for example, in the slogan "All lives matter" and was explicit in the discourse of German pre-AfD movements such as PEGIDA, which embraced the motto "Wir sind das Volk". Perhaps, together with Žižek, we should hear a note of caution whenever there is a popular movement, even a leftist one, because some of their demands could easily be uttered by a fascist too.² Laclau, addressing this possibility, warned that the working class failed to "hegemonise popular struggles and fuse popular-democratic ideology and its revolutionary class objectives into a coherent political and ideological practice" (62). Put differently, this is why Walter Benjamin claimed that behind every rise of fascism there is a failed revolution.

Acaroglu's main argument in the first part of the book is that transition is worth retaining as a sociologically grounded concept, and that there is value in using it in understanding perpetuations and disruptions of social processes. Even more importantly, Acaroglu sees history as a process of transitions. In doing so, he dismisses any teleological approaches and aims to grasp the historical contingency that results from the absence of any singular organising mechanism. His focus on Laclau's regional-experience-informed theory demonstrates the importance of introducing an element of contextual particularity into Marxist thinking on socialist transition. This allows him to further elaborate on other kinds of key particularities that can inspire experience-informed philosophical concepts.

No Emancipatory Horizons? Melancholy and Utopia

Acaroglu poses thinking of the future transitions within, or rather through the dynamics between melancholia and utopia, both as tackled by various leftist narrations. In doing so, he attempts to rethink positive projects which, in today's post-financial-crisis

² On the other hand, Žižek does dare people not to be afraid of being populist. Consider his comments in a debate with Jordan Peterson, accessed November 7, 2022, https://youtube.com/watch?v=lsWndfzuOc4&ab_channel=JordanBPeterson.

period, happen to gain track. Of course, given the unchanged economic and political situation of global capitalism, why would anyone suggest positive projects are gaining track. However, considering various nascent “disturbances”, such as the ever-growing popularity of undemocratic regimes, the intensifying rivalry between United States and China, the gradual recognition of the global climate crisis, or even the current COVID-19 crisis, we can easily assume that nothing is actually changing for the better. Acaroglu, nonetheless, positions the chapters on melancholy and utopia as some kind of precursor to the current debates on future projects among radical thinkers of the present.

Within Acaroglu's endeavours, Benjamin's reassessment of melancholy appears as crucial. Instead of understanding melancholy as an obstacle in the transition towards a more egalitarian society, Walter Benjamin grasped it as a positive resource of future struggles. In other words, the present is riddled with the incompleteness of the past (99). What Acaroglu implies is a certain openness to commemoration. He illustrates it through the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe situated in Berlin, which is “conducive to a positive construction of the future” (p. 100). Although such a reading provides rather a plausible interpretation of the installation, Acaroglu does not sufficiently acknowledge the fact that the very realm within which it is conveyed to the broad public appears to neglect aspects crucial precisely to the leftist tradition, and to the Marxist tradition in particular. Enzo Traverso suggests that traditions of anti-fascism and that of the GDR have been replaced by the “duty to remember” in order to pursue a newly established German national identity.³ One striking attribute that Acaroglu (following Traverso) overlooks, however, is that Benjamin was never faced with the shock of public excavation of all the wrongdoings of the Communist regimes in USSR, China, and elsewhere. After 1956, 1968, and eventually, after 1989, this can no longer be ignored. I maintain we should encourage more research into understanding how the respective events, which Benjamin never experienced due to his tragic death, might have influenced this idea of melancholy. Even if Traverso does not adequately address the traumatic memories of Communist regimes, his contribution is a solid step in this direction.

Nonetheless, Acaroglu establishes melancholy in order to pave the way for utopia. This approach allows him to present the current leftist discourses in a contextualized and fairly historicized fashion. The absence of utopia within leftist thinking is what demonstrates its subordination to the so-called “liberal consensus”, as Ivan Krastev would put it. Here, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek propose a tricky axiom, that is, that perhaps paradoxically we lose nothing if we acknowledge there is a huge portion of truth in the assertion that history has, in a way, ended. This, however, is no obstacle in theorizing utopian thinking anew. Especially, when one concedes that the “end of history” is itself a historical development. Badiou, for instance, as Acaroglu points out, recognizes precisely this pattern, the historicized understanding of a historically

³ Enzo Traverso, *Marxism, History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 14–16.

contingent impossibility of history, leading to new possibilities of action that react to this temporary end of history, such as those emerging after or during the financial crisis unfolded in 2008.

When it comes to tackling utopia, Acaroglu's most striking assertion is that neoliberalism is a kind of utopian thinking which, however, left-wing political actors frequently fail to perceive as such. This recognition of the utopian character of neoliberalism, which Acaroglu takes from Pierre Bourdieu, allows leftist transitional thought to break out of the ever-recurring focus on the past glory of the welfare state threatened by neoliberalism as its grave-digger. If neoliberalism is recognized as utopian, then it can be combated by an alternative utopianism rather than a return to what has already existed.

Practicing Transition

In the final parts of the book, Acaroglu develops a kind of cognitive mapping of the current substantial theories of transition as proposed by the left-wing intellectuals with an extra emphasis on theories of work. Acaroglu poses an underlying question of our times: What is the role of labour and work ethics in a vision of transition towards more equal and freer individuals and societies? Should we try to eliminate the apparently useless forms of labour that David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs"? Does the automation of such meaningless work liberate us from having to perform it ourselves, as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams would perhaps claim? Or shall the left opt for a different approach?

Acaroglu positions Paul Mason's arguments in opposition to the so-called acceleration theories of authors like Srnicek and Williams, which he finds teleological and rather determinist. He is more lenient towards Mason's understanding of the digital developments as ultimately dangerous to society. Moreover, he maintains that a blind faith in modernization eventually obliterates the right-left division which, as a matter of fact, panders to capitalist post-ideological interpretations that approach transitions as something unnatural, inhuman even. However, Acaroglu sees flaws in Mason's notion that post-capitalist elements exist in the networked circulation of knowledge. Together with Jodi Dean, Acaroglu see no *a priori* egalitarianism or democratization of private property in the freer flow of information. Assumptions of the egalitarian and democratic quality of freely flowing information, argues Acaroglu, could easily play into neoliberal ideals about the self-sufficiency of unregulated interaction. One must agree here with Acaroglu in maintaining that there are no automatic or self-evident egalitarian outcomes. Mason nonetheless provides a corrective to his seemingly hasty optimism. Instead of proposing an immediate transition to socialism, Mason imagines an expansion of the egalitarian and democratic qualities of networked information in a "distinct phase of capitalism" which would prepare the way for a later socialist transition. Mason's proposal reminds one of Žižek's suggestion that we make small changes, so that one day those in power might wake up with a sudden realization that they are missing their symbolic "balls of power". Yet one still needs to be cautious when

assuming the incipient emancipatory nature of this transitional project, since various outcomes are always possible.

Furthermore, the same reasoning could be applied when dealing with universal basic income. There is nothing inherently leftist in this notion, but we can suppose it changes the perspective of labour, which could lead to the opening of new battlefields concerning our understanding of production. In addition, even liberal economists, such as Mariana Mazzucato in her seminal work *The Value of Everything*, attempt to reassess what we actually perceive as value. Such developments suggest the rather audacious notion that we might already be witnessing a multitude of smaller transitions.

Instead of understanding the post-work future as an inevitable outcome, more or less articulated by either accelerationist or post-capitalists like Mason, Acaroglu brings Benjamin's melancholy back into play. Acaroglu argues against the one-sided fixation on work that in his view has constantly haunted the left, as though the left could only relive past struggles and update them through the lens of current capitalist technological advances. He, by contrast, puts more emphasis on social reproduction than on economic transformation. Here, on the level of social reproduction, he remedies the lack of a Gramscian moment in the post-Marxist imaginations of post-capitalism. These visions of post-capitalism lack a consideration of subject definition, and thus do not sufficiently account for how any utopian economic programme can apparently be overtaken by nationalist, conservative, or right-wing regimes or movements, thus clearly obliterating the very *raison d'être* of utopian thinking. Acaroglu calls for establishing a wider hegemonic project within the realm of social reproduction, where any transition visions ought to be contextualized. Furthermore, he stresses the need for a clear definition of the beneficiaries that future-oriented projects have to bear in mind. For this, Acaroglu uses an umbrella term, "prefiguration", in transition.

Concluding Remarks

Rethinking Marxist approaches to transition as an audacious endeavour requires a variety of strains of intellectual traditions and interdisciplinary tools to be employed. It is thus extremely difficult to find the balance that would prevent the author from overwhelming the reader. Onur Acaroglu masters the drawing of that fine line between obfuscation and an enlightened reading of the issues analysed. On the other hand, although precise historization of the intellectual concepts presented in the book is aspired after, as it is perceived through the eyes of this historian I feel compelled to express encouragement for a more historically anchored analysis. Although, throughout the book, we encounter representatives of various schools and lines of thought, and the author offers a welcome bit of historical context, this reviewer would nonetheless have liked to see the author delve into other relevant writing from the periods in question, whether it be sociological, historical, or political. Such an approach would introduce a refreshing look at the respective intellectual endeavours of the authors being scru-

Matej Ivančík

tinized. Justifiably enough, this is, however, not the author's declared intention. One must conclude with the assessment that the book is not just about rethinking Marxist approaches to transition, but also, more broadly, about providing a vital new look at Marxist thinking in general while at the same time reaffirming Marxism afresh within current debates.

Matej Ivančík

ECOSOCIALISM, OR FASCISM?

Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), 558 p. ISBN 9781839761744

“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism”, Marx and Engels state at the outset of their 1848 *Manifesto*. Today a very different spectre appears to be haunting liberal democracies: right-wing, fascist governments that often have little tolerance for democratic practices, and seek to rally their followers to a “defence of the homeland” through repressive anti-immigration policies.

What has received relatively little attention in media coverage of these fascist movements until now, however, is how deeply their views of ecology and the environment have been imbricated into their worldview. This is the gap that *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (abbreviated WSBF hereafter) seeks to fill. It is a collaborative effort by Andreas Malm, winner of the 2016 Deutscher Prize for his book *Fossil Capital*, and the Zetkin Collective, a group of scholars, activists, and students researching the political ecology of the far right. They have produced a highly readable, at times dramatic, narrative accessible both to those with a background in Marxist theory and a general audience interested in the politics of our time.

The book offers “the first systematic inquiry into the political ecology of the far right in the climate crisis” (x), a study that tries to address an existential conundrum: Why does a portion of the developed world’s population militantly reject overwhelming scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate disruption, and instead build a counter-ideology based on denial, repression, and retreat into mythical nationalism?

The book’s opening chapter, “Fortunes of Denial”, supplies a useful historical background of the denialist movement’s activities since the mid-twentieth century. Key to its analysis is the contention that the fossil fuel industry (or “primitive fossil capital”, as the book calls it) and its allies have constructed an effective Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), the term given by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser to “a system of defined institutions, organizations, and the corresponding practices, which, through their day-to-day activities, uphold some elements of the dominant ideology” (14). Central to the denialist ISA – which solidified its power in the 1980’s with groups such as the Heartland Institute and the Global Climate Coalition – is the assumption that fossil

fuels are good for us: CO₂ is not really a pollutant, and we are actually rendering a service to the biosphere whenever we burn fossil fuels.

In the 1990's, however, the hard-line denialist ISA began to crack under the increasing weight of evidence of anthropogenic global heating; prominent members of primitive fossil capital including BP, Shell, and Texaco withdrew their memberships from denialist groups. This gave rise in 1997 to the Kyoto Protocol, the first international attempt to impose mandatory limits on carbon emissions. In the wake of Kyoto, however, fossil capital seized upon a new paradigm that the authors call "capitalist climate governance", which accepts the fact of global warming but positions capital as its savior. Now, fossil capitalists claimed, the problem could be fixed through a combination of market-friendly mechanisms such as carbon capture and storage, emissions trading, and the purchase of carbon offsets. All of these mechanisms were intended to postpone a showdown with fossil capital indefinitely, and none imposed any serious limits on accumulation.

Chapter 2, "Fear of a Muslim Planet", hones in on the primary issue driving far-right politics and parties today: immigration, especially the widespread anxiety among its followers that elites are engineering a "Great Replacement" of the white population by non-whites, particularly Muslims. The authors draw deftly upon the work of Michelle Hale Williams in seeing immigration as the "funnel issue" through which all other issues on their agendas – including climate – must pass; different far-right parties adopt a variety of positions on climate issues, but they are always related to promoting their anti-immigrant bias.

The following two chapters adumbrate how deeply embedded climate denial has become in the policy agendas of several far-right European parties. One prominent example is Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party, which won the first parliamentary majority in twenty-six years in 2015 on a platform touting national pride in its coal industry as "the past, present and boundless future of the nation" (106). When the UN held its COP24 meeting in 2018 at Katowice, the heart of the Polish coal region, the PiS government decorated the conference's halls with artwork made of coal, and organized a "Clean Fuels Day" hailing coal as "an intrinsic part of Polish biology" (111).

One observation in this section that might have been developed more fully is the apparent irony that some European countries – Hungary, Spain and Sweden especially – possess nearly no domestic reserves of fossil fuels and are heavily dependent on imports; yet, their far-right parties stubbornly toe the line of "no climate regulations, no renewables". While one might expect an eagerness from them to seek alternatives in the interest of self-reliance, their attitude can be summarized in a statement by Martin Kinnunen, leader of the Swedish Democrats, who said in 2018: "There are no good alternatives to fossil fuels." (94) Apparently the logic of climate governance is the same as the logic of immigration: other ethnicities and religions are acceptable in their

own countries, but *not here*; and it might be in our long-term interests to seek climate mitigation, but *not now*.

Chapter 5, “Ecology is the Border”, highlights far-right parties’ long-standing preoccupation with “green nationalism”, an ideology that identifies nature with nation, and promulgates the view that the nation can be kept clean only if foreign sources are kept outside its borders. As Marine Le Pen, leader of France’s far-right Rassemblement National party, said in 2019: “He who is rooted is an ecologist. He does not want the land where he raises his children to go to waste. But the nomad does not care, because he has no land!” (136) WSBF’s authors identify two major strains of green nationalist thinking: those who take a hard-line Malthusian view of the effects of uncontrolled population growth on the biosphere, exemplified by Garrett Hardin (*The Tragedy of the Commons*) and Paul Ehrlich (*The Population Bomb*); and those who are more generally critical the effects of “globalism” on the land within one’s borders, such as Paul Kingsnorth and the Dark Mountain Project.

The authors emphasize that despite its patriotic rhetoric and semi-romantic longing for a virginal, unspoiled land, green nationalism can lead to tragic consequences when taken to extremes, as in the case of Brenton Tarrant, a twenty-eight-year-old Australian who slaughtered fifty-one Muslims with a high-powered rifle in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019. Tarrant left behind a seventy-three-page manifesto titled “The Great Replacement”, which reads in part: “For too long we have allowed the left to co-opt the environmental movement to serve their own needs. The left has controlled all discussion regarding environmental preservation while simultaneously presiding over the continued destruction of the natural environment itself through mass immigration and uncontrolled urbanization [...] The Europe of the future is not one of concrete and steel, smog and wires but a place of forests, lakes, mountains, and meadows.” (151–152) Tarrant was heavily influenced by another far-right green nationalist, Norway’s Anders Breivik, who wrote before his own murder spree: “It’s the birthrates. It’s the birthrates. It’s the birthrates. Muslims are drowning the world with their children, which is why those children need to be killed.” (150)

WSBF’s authors conclude Part I of their book with a consideration of two recent petro-nationalist regimes, “White Presidents of the Americas”, that looks at the US’s Donald Trump and Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro. Trump articulated an ideology of “energy dominance”, where national sovereignty is based not only on becoming independent of other fossil-fuel producing nations, but on literally dominating them. Upon taking office in 2017, he immediately greenlighted pipeline projects placed on hold by his predecessor, set about systematically dismantling hundreds of Environmental Protection Agency regulations, and installed climate deniers in many key posts. Moreover, he emulated his border-protecting European green nationalist counterparts by slapping a ban on travel from several predominantly Muslim countries and planning a highly fortified border wall stretching over hundreds of miles of the Mexican border.

Much of Trump's presidential tenure is paralleled by that of Bolsonaro, who demonized the Amazon's indigenous population and Landless Workers' Movement while supporting corporate agribusiness development that greatly accelerated the Amazon's deforestation. Bolsonaro's foreign minister, Ernesto Araujo, wrote before the election: "The left has appropriated the environmental cause and perverted it to the point of paroxysm [...] Climatism is a globalist tactic to scare people and gain more power." (214) Bolsonaro also emulated Trump's "energy dominance" paradigm by initiating the world's largest expansion of offshore oil and gas production by Petrobras, Brazil's state-owned fossil fuel corporation.

Chapter 7, "Towards Fossil Fascism", begins a pivot to the book's Part II, where WSBF's authors attempt to "make sense of all" (xii) the material presented in Part I. Is it possible for an anti-climate politics to become dominant on the far right in the twenty-first century, and if so under what scenarios might that happen? Chapter 7 suggests a heuristic grounded in two steps. First, the methods of two prominent contemporary theorists of fascism are counterposed: Roger Griffin, who believes that fascism should be studied as a set of ideas; and Robert O. Paxton, who believes fascism should be studied as an active historical force. WSBF's authors appear to suggest that we can learn from both approaches. Second, they propose several possible "Scenarios of Fossil Fascism" (239–247), wherein primitive fossil capital is compelled to respond to crises of both mitigation and adaptation. While the scenarios they propose might be considered overly hypothetical and arbitrary by some, I found all of them to be plausible visions of what may lie ahead in this century.

Out of all this, the authors propose a provisional definition of fascism in Chapter 7: "[A] politics of palingenetic [Griffin's term combining the Greek words for birth, "genesis", and again, "palin"] ultranationalism that comes to the fore in a conjuncture of deep crisis, and if leading sections of the dominant class throw their weight behind it and hand it power, there ensues an exceptional regime of systematic violence against those identified as enemies of the nation." (235) WSBF's authors assess that in the third decade of the millennium we are rapidly sliding down a slope into "fascisation" (251), where a conjuncture of ascendant nationalist politics, deep crises, and realignment of class interests poses an increasing challenge to the West's liberal democratic paradigm.

Chapter 8, "Mythical Energies of the Far Right", highlights the constitutive power of myth and conspiracy in the formation of eco-fascist ideology. Key to far-right thinking is the myth of "palindefence", a variation on "palingenesis" introduced in the previous chapter; the palindefence myth posits that "we defended ourselves and our inestimable estate in the past; we were under siege but eventually rebuffed the enemy; we fought hard and gallantly for what will always be ours and *now we have to do it again*" (257). WSBF's authors offer numerous examples of how palindefensive tropes have inflected far-right activism: Italian Lega activists bringing heraldry copied from the Battle of Lepanto to a demonstration; Spanish Vox activists assembling at Covadonga, where the

expulsion of Moors and Jews from Spain supposedly began in the eighth century; and most tragically, Serbian nationalists invoking their defeat in 1389 at the hands of the Ottomans to justify the wholesale slaughter of Muslim civilians at Srebrenica. Moreover, ethnonationalists have often used the palindefence myth effectively to support their climate views: if we are entering an epoch of multiple mitigation and adaptation crises, then a defensive posture is necessarily best; if there is climate-induced migration to Europe, then those migrants will likely be Muslim, and should be repulsed from the “homeland” even more vigorously than other groups.

Conspiracy theories of the far-right complement this mythical thinking by offering deniers a warm cocoon of reassurance. If the overwhelming consensus on anthropogenic climate change by tens of thousands of scientists cannot be accepted, then how can it be accounted for? Only by postulating a conspiracy, where these scientists – and, by implication, the millions who accept their conclusions – have ulterior motives to collude in fabricating data. Chapter 8 probes some of the most widespread of these conspiracies, beginning with the so-called “left climate conspiracy”, which proposes that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989 the left tried to recoup its losses by fixating on climate change as the new crisis of capitalism. In the 2010s this merged with traditional theories of “Cultural Marxism”, with the result that “[t]he take of the green nationalists would be that Cultural Marxism has arrogated ecology to itself and must be kicked out of it” (206–207).

What does it mean to be recognized as “white”? Why does one’s recognition of their (and/or their associated group’s) whiteness frequently include an inherent bias in favor of fossil capital? These are the subjects of Chapter 9, “Skin and Fuel”, which draws upon Althusser’s theory of interpellation to explain how racial self-recognition often leads seamlessly into trusting the “stock” of fossil fuels over the transitory “flow” of renewables. “Whiteness”, WSBF’s authors quote sociologist Ruth Frankenberg, “is a location of structural advantage in societies structured in racial dominance. It is not a shortage of eumelanin in the basal layer of the epidermis, but a ‘standpoint’ and ‘site of privilege’” (332). It is an attitude that unconsciously dictates the view that those perceived as non-white are “trash”, less than fully human, and as fully fit for exploitation as non-human nature.

Much of Chapter 9 is devoted to a historical review of the ways that white people’s mastery of fossil-powered technology, beginning with the coal-fired steamships that propelled the British Empire’s nineteenth century expansion, led to an ideology WSBF’s authors label “techno-racism”. Whites were entitled to land formerly occupied by non-whites, it was assumed, because their mastery of technology – concomitant with their mastery of nature – proved their superiority over those who did not use the land “productively”, that is, imbricated with the circuits of capital accumulation.

Chapter 10, “For the Love of the Machine”, documents how the ideology of fossil-powered technology became a central trope in the rise of twentieth century European fas-

cism, articulated in the writings of Filippo Marinetti (Italy) and Ernst Jünger (Germany). Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto of 1909 was a foundational text for the rise of post-World War One Italian fascism. In a typical passage from it he writes: "Combustion engines and rubber tires are divine [...] Gasoline is divine. So is religious ecstasy inspired by one hundred horsepower." Destruction of nature was a key part of Marinetti's technophilia; he dreamed of leveling Italy's hills and valleys and filling them with rail lines and superhighways to facilitate fossil-powered transportation. Jünger played a similar propagandistic role for the nascent Nazi regime; in works like *Storms of Steel* (1920) and *War as an Inner Experience* (1922), he glorified war as an opportunity to exercise the power of burning fossil fuels. For Jünger, the rise of the German "Volk" that was so central to Nazi ideology was predicated on the subjugation of nature; while the "masses" (a term equivalent to Jews and communists for Nazis) were led willy-nilly by unruly nature, the Volk would find their dominant role by submitting to the dictates of the (fossil-powered) machine.

Nazi "ecology" was a curious thing, as WSBF's authors point out: while some prominent leaders were vegetarians, and the regime instituted a short-lived nature preservation law in its early years, Hitler's Reich ruthlessly conquered and exploited both land and the fossil "stock" beneath it to shore up its industrial base for war. I. G. Farben grew into Europe's largest private corporation in the 1920's by developing a "hydrogenation" process that transformed lignite coal into both gasoline and petrochemical products that powered the German Wehrmacht. (Auschwitz, the authors point out, was a site for extracting and processing coal before it became a concentration camp.) In the end, the Reich prefigured Europe's current green nationalists by privileging borders over ecology; theirs was a "hyperfossil" (443) regime that, in Walter Benjamin's telling, created an aesthetic of power with fossil capital central to its material processes.

In their final chapter, "Death Holds the Steering Wheel" (a quote from Marinetti, interestingly!), WSBF's authors undertake a wide-ranging examination of why climate denial has been so successfully interpellated on the far right, why it has formed the substratum for the rise of fascist movements, and how it may be part of a civilizational "death drive" discussed by Freud and others. The work of Stanley Cohen (*States of Denial*) is cited to suggest that there are three categories of denial: literal, interpretive, and implicatory; the last of these, where the facts and gravity of a situation are accepted but not acted upon, is the dominant form of denial in advanced capitalist countries. Why, the authors ask, has this form of denial taken root so strongly? Importantly, denial is at least as much a product of the collective imaginary as the individual's. Leaders of capitalist economies assume that capitalist production and accumulation are for the general good (ignoring negative externalities like damage to the biosphere, of course). When a problem comes along that potentially challenges capitalist class interests, leaders react reflexively with some combination of misperception and reluctance to intervene. Meanwhile, workers participate daily in their own, unconscious forms of denialism:

driving to work, cooking on a gas stove, flying on a plane to their vacation, and so on, all of which appear rational to them but are arguably “irrational” from a climate point of view. An apropos quote by Adorno is offered: “People are inevitably as irrational as the world in which they live.” (485)

Ultimately, the authors suggest, far-right denial involves a regression into narcissism (again, both individually and collectively), a refusal to accept any responsibility for the degraded environment, a retreat into victimhood, and a reflexive blaming of “others” for climate change. It is at the point where the populace feels most confused and insecure about their future that the fascist leader rises, offering panaceas like palingenesis and expulsion of racial minorities. Fascists understand that the masses suffer feelings of insecurity, isolation, and powerlessness, and manipulate them with fantasies of omnipotence over – that is, the ability to destroy – both humans and nature.

WSBF concludes with a Postscript that reviews events in both Europe and the Americas significant to the climate movement in 2020, the year Covid struck. (The authors mention in the Introduction that the book’s manuscript was completed in January 2020, so this section is their attempt to bring the discussion closer to the publication date.) Many events are assessed for their effects upon far-right climate politics, including anti-lockdown protests, Black Lives Matter marches, demonization of Asians as the putative source of the “China Virus”, wind farms in the UK, Danish shutdown of oil and gas exploration, and others. The authors find cause for both optimism and pessimism in these events: the electoral strength of several far-right parties waned in 2020, though it is probably too early to tell whether this constitutes a turning point. More ominously, they speculate that “[p]erhaps the anti-lockdown movements prefigured another form of fascism: a revolt against adaptation, in defense of white petty-bourgeois layers constricted or even declassed by it” (520).

Where, in the end, do ecosocialists turn for hope and solidarity in the face of fossil fascist forces that appear to be gaining strength in the past decade? The authors attempt an answer in a brief essay titled “Coda: Rebel for Life” that precedes the Postscript. The far-right, they conclude, cannot be humored; it must be beaten. And there is fertile ground for doing so: “In their perpetual blurring and overlapping – denialism, capitalist climate governance, green nationalism, fossil fascism – the dominant classes and the far-right merely demonstrate that they have no real way of dealing with this crisis. Counter-apparatuses have plenty of material to work with here.” (508) The dominant ideology is plainly destructive; rebelling against it becomes a rebellion for life itself.

White Skin, Black Fuel deserves a wide readership among everyone interested in ecology and the current state of global politics. The book has two major limitations: its discussion is confined geographically to Europe, the US and Brazil (a limitation that a follow-up volume will hopefully address by expanding its purview), and it could have offered a more specific agenda for what an ecosocialist response might look like. But

Steve Knight

the authors do offer an astonishing breadth of material covering the history, ideology, and recent activism of eco-fascists. Those who cling to the assumption that liberal democracy will “save” our planet would be wise to heed its warnings.

Steve Knight

A WINDOW INTO SOCIALISM'S LABORATORIES

Matěj Spurný, *Making the Most of Tomorrow: A Laboratory of Socialist Modernity in Czechoslovakia* (Praha: Charles University Karolinum Press, 2019), 330 p., ISBN 978-80-246-4018-1

Matěj Spurný's book *Making the Most of Tomorrow* is an eruditely written story of the demolition of Most, a medieval royal borough located in the North Bohemian Basin, and the construction of the new Most right across the river. Bridging social and environmental history, the author provides an account of one of the most grandiose infrastructure projects in East-Central Europe. From the 19th century onwards, the town was an important source of coal extraction. With the growing need for energy to feed a developing industry and with natural resources dwindling, it became essential to expand the country's mining sites. And so the long-standing fear of the inhabitants of a town built literally on top of a rich and accessible coal deposit was finally realized in the 1960s. Old Most was to be destroyed and rebuilt next to its original location, leading to the largest socio-technological experiment in the history of the Czech lands. *Making the Most of Tomorrow* presents a fascinating account of the events leading to this act of creative destruction, offering simultaneously valuable insight into the political system, the intellectual traditions of modern urbanism, ecological thinking, and techno-utopianism in socialist Czechoslovakia.

The experimental nature of the whole enterprise resonates in the book's title, although some of its charms are lost in translation from the Czech original. The name of the town translates literally into "bridge", so the English audience cannot fully enjoy the wordplay: *Most do budoucnosti: Laboratoř socialistické modernity na severu Čech* (literally: Most/bridge to the future: A laboratory of socialist modernity in North Bohemia). These minor differences notwithstanding, the title of the book imaginatively evokes the atmosphere of an isolated research room full of notes and blueprints. This is indeed a convincing metaphor for the prevailing mindset of the scientific age of social engineering and techno-optimism. It depicts, in a nutshell, the striving after comprehensive planning and management of social change common across the globe in the second half of the 20th century.

However, as Spurný demonstrates, the process of planning and implementation of the project eventually went far beyond work of the laboratory type. The degree of control that the main proponents of the demolition of Most were seeking turned out to be far beyond their grasp. This argument is well stated by Spurný when he describes the multitude of different actors partaking in the discussions about the project. Not only was there a great diversity of interests and opinions among the representatives of the party-state on every level (ranging from central to local authorities), but also numerous social groups in the 1960s were entering the increasingly open public sphere, including experts of various specializations and positions within the political structure. Spurný convincingly demonstrates the exceptional status of the state-owned SHD mining company (*Severočeské hnědohorné doly* – North Bohemian Lignite Mines) which, according to his analysis, was responsible for the initial idea of the demolition and *spiritus movens* of the whole enterprise. He provides a captivating description of the political change in the post-Stalinist period, pointing to the emergence of new ways of policy-making marked by a gradual move towards technocratic ideals.

The book is well-structured. It is comprised of five parts, each devoted to a distinct perspective from which Spurný looks at the conceptualization and realization of the described project. This main body of the work is preceded by a comprehensive introduction that sketches both the historical story of Most with a more detailed depiction of the demolition of the old town. The first part addresses the deepening estrangement of the land in which the inhabitants of Most lived their lives. After the expulsion of the Germans, a new collective identity had to be founded on the basis of a resistance to the heritage of the former inhabitants, including the cultural landscape of the borderlands. Spurný thus tells the story of a population deprived of any sense of common identity and belonging. This “uprootedness” was then amplified by the influx of people from all over Czechoslovakia and beyond. The subsequent part concentrates on the material and economic aspects of the grandiose project, stressing the reductionist logic of productivist rationality that reifies nature and the social world. The next two parts provide insight into the intellectual sphere by presenting the demolition of Most in the broader context of utopian thinking and subsequently analyzing the sources of the increasing tempo of criticism of the devastation of nature in Czechoslovakia. The last part discusses the attempts to reconcile the contradictions between the strivings after economic efficiency and the increasing need for the legitimization of the socialist regime.

The book provides an important contribution to several research fields within contemporary history and could also be of high value to historically oriented representatives of other disciplines. First of all, it provides insight into social and environmental history. By setting the case of Most in a wider timeframe, Spurný managed to relate the demolition of the town to the evolution of the social structure of Czechoslovak society from the interwar period onwards. The range of issues addressed is indeed impressive, from housing problems to public health to ethnic minorities. He also touches on some aspects of the cultural and intellectual life of the time. A more general but still

valuable discussion of the interrelation of the power elites and the expert circles offers an intriguing contribution to the history of socialist expertise. Last but not least, the depiction of the struggle between the imperatives of market efficiency and technocratic rationality on the one hand, and the emergent social movements on the other, brings us closer to understanding the making of post-industrial value systems.

The latter is best evidenced by the rise of ecological consciousness in Czechoslovakia, whose description is a valuable part of the book. Spurný manages to link the modernist thinking of the local elites with the worldwide trends in architecture, urban planning, social management, and economics. He writes a story of the triumphs of modernity followed by the emergence of a critique of its alienating and destructive powers. The book provides a well-designed study of how the interrelated preservationist discourses of the natural environment and cultural heritage found their place in the public space of an authoritarian state. The author links this with the broadening spectrum of social groups entering the public space. Covering, in more or less detail, the entire Czechoslovak period, Spurný offers an intriguing insight into the evolution of the legitimization and power mechanisms of state-socialist rule.

As such, the book could open up several discussions that might interest sociologists, environmental and urban studies scholars, as well as political scientists. The case of Most is indeed a radical and thus fascinating example of the challenges of scientific-technological civilization. From this perspective, Spurný successfully argues against the one-sided thesis of state-socialist ideological excesses, demonstrating the complexity of the circumstances which led to the demolition of the old town. The experiment described is rather a telling example of European modernism, "a mirror of the character of modern society, of various forms of alienation and the self-propulsion of the technology and economic development of human beings and their environment as they change" (404).

Bartosz Matyja

FACTORY FARM ANIMALS: OUT OF TOUCH, OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

Eva Kořátková and Hana Janečková (eds.), *Animal Touch* (Prague: ArtMap, 2021), 244 p. ISBN 978-80-907873-7-7

Factory farming is not a sexy subject. Despite seemingly improving regulations and technologies, animal farms remain isolated and hidden not only from our sight, but also, ideally, from all of our senses. And yet it is hardly possible not to think about them globally in the context of the climate crisis and their devastating environmental effect, or stumble upon them more locally, entangled in the political power relations and economic interests involving the previous prime minister of the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš. And, of course, there is more to factory farming than these considerations; there is, for example, a surplus of suffering, death, and exploitation, to name just a few of the most obvious aspects of this form of (not) being with the animals.

Given this, it is a great thing that the Institute of Anxiety (Institut úzkosti) and the publisher ArtMap commissioned *Animal Touch* (available also in Czech as *Dotek Zvířete*). This collection of 14 articles, edited by Eva Kořátková and Hana Janečková, became available in 2022 in both Czech and English. It brings together a number of artists, researchers, and writers to examine large-scale livestock farming and explore the need to get back in touch with animals. As the editors explain in the book's introduction, "the key motivation was to study more systematically the relationship between humans and more-than-humans, focusing on the concept of factory farming as a contemporary tool of power and control which reduces this relationship to binary categories: privileged and oppressed, useful and useless, edible and non-edible, actors and passive subjects, humans and the others" (14).

Looking back at theoretical attempts at thinking the nonhuman, and animals specifically, it might seem that the subject of animal farming is not just unappealing, but also outdated. After all, it was philosophically and systematically considered, and then consequently condemned, nearly half a century ago in such classic books as Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and *Practical Ethics*. However, despite a certain conclusive-

ness surrounding the utilitarian approach to factory farms, the reality of this form of interaction with animals prevails and keeps provoking human conscience, resulting in new textual attempts at grappling with it.

For example, in the late nineties, animal farming became an important element of J. M. Coetzee's unusual Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, in which he created a fictional story of a woman named Elizabeth Costello, whose uncompromising commitment to animal welfare gets her in all sorts of trouble in the academic, theory-fuelled world. This curious literary and theoretical experiment was then published under the title *The Lives of Animals* and featured commentaries from several scientists and thinkers, the above-mentioned Singer included. It then became an important point of reference in the thinking of Cora Diamond in *Philosophy and Animal Life*.

More recently, Sunaura Taylor published *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, which confronts the discrimination towards animals with the reality of discrimination experienced by people with disabilities. Drawing on disability studies, Taylor argues that the predominant discrimination in favour of abled-bodied people "helps construct the systems that render the lives and experiences of both nonhuman animals and disabled humans as less valuable and as discardable, which leads to a variety of oppressions that manifest differently".¹ Reflecting on parallels and relations between animality and disability, she remarks that "disability is ubiquitous among animals used in food production"² and "it seems impossible to consider the disability that farmed animals experience as separate from their environments",³ that is, physical spaces operating within a particular logic, as a part of efficient systems.

Argentinian author Agustina Bazterrica's 2017 novel, *Cadáver exquisito*, translated into English in 2020 as *Tender is the Flesh*, engages with the reality of factory farms and meat consumption through provocative means, and has been said to have had a practical impact on discouraging people from reliance on intense large-scale animal farming. The author wants us to imagine a world in which a virus wiped out all animals, and humans were faced with the "necessity" to consume human flesh instead. Significantly, and predictably, those meat providing humans have to be significantly "othered" in the process.

By a sometimes similarly provocative means, *Animal Touch* makes space for attempts at new imaginaries. And yet, it does not offer one normative set of conclusions. Instead, it provides heterogeneous insights into different aspects of animal farming and being with animals. For example, in "How Am I Not Myself: On Taking Metaphors Seriously", Lucia Pietroiusti does what she proposes in the title, that is, takes the metaphors we

¹ Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017), p. 66.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

use seriously to reflect on links between meat eating, birthing, and grieving. One of her leading metaphors is that of a mother, which denotes, for example, a yeast starter, but is also linked to giving birth and thus commonly understood as operating within particular sets of species boundaries, which Pietroiusti calls into question. The chapter, and its first sections in particular, brings to mind the Polish philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina's philosophical depiction of women's everyday hustle and bustle in her excellent 1992 book *The Rifts of Existence* (*Szczeliny istnienia* – not translated into English, but translated into Czech as *Škvíry existence*). It thus provides an intimate account of human-animal interaction from the perspective of a woman situated within common life experiences and everyday practices, that remain lacking in larger literary and philosophical traditions. In “Memories of a Factory Farm”, Lenka Vítková develops this line of thought by drawing clear parallels between factory farming and the system developed around giving birth, nursing, and schooling. Her reflections are illustrated with evocative paintings by Věra Kotlářová-Chovancová from the Museum of Roma Arts and Culture in Brno.

More experimental in its form, the chapter written and illustrated by the artist Marie Lukáčová provokes bewilderment and, possibly, a sense of discomfort, as she merges the animal and human in a desire-driven dance of eroticism and consumption. While a straightforward moralistic interpretation is possible, stemming from engagement with traditionally understood gender roles and exploitation of women and animals, the character of this contribution seems to be in line with the editors' commitment to evoke these contradictory emotional states so that they contribute to changing the dominant ideas and narratives: “By working with affects of revulsion and desire, different emotional pathways can be forged. These made, synthetic, alienated affects can lead to the kind of thinking and feeling that is necessary for building more equitable relations with others whom we do not perceive as our own, or are excluded from our community and are not seen as part of our own affective register.” (24)

This state of epistemic and normative confusion is further enhanced by the sets of photos with which this small book is interwoven, literally from cover to cover. The images feature pieces of animals sculpted in vegetables. While the editors refer to these creations using the category of monstrosity, I find them to be aesthetically refreshing hybrids with resolutely ambiguous and audacious (sometimes literally) muddled epistemic and normative content. For it is not clear what kind of message these chimaeras deliver, except for the aforementioned methodologically encouraged confusion and micro-disorientation, which can be epistemically worthwhile. The philosophical basis and moral value of this state has been recently recognized by Ami Harbin as a means of tenderising, which could open us to “live unprepared, sense vulnerabilities, experience in-this-togetherness, and live partly against the grain of norms”.⁴ In *Disorientation and*

⁴ Ami Harbin, *Disorientation and Moral Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 121.

Moral Life, Harbin reflects on the mechanisms of moral action and agency, suggesting that disorientation can have “moral benefit” through “disrupting habitual ways of being in the world”.⁵ In the context of *Animal Touch* and its authors’ commitment to challenge the dominant ways of thinking and being with farm animals specifically, it is crucial that “disorientations seem to challenge what we know and leave us feeling like we know less than we once did. Yet at the same time, in some cases of disorientation, individuals express gaining new kinds of awareness about the complexity of their social locations, and about the norms that structure their lives.”⁶

Despite the strongly speculative and questioning nature of many contributions in the book and the authors’ need to restrain from prescriptiveness and easy answers, there is an underlying tool to be used and guide us throughout different chapters and it is the eponymous animal touch. Understood very broadly, it evokes the event of (non)encounter and brings to the front the realisation that our current access to animals is deeply mediated. Particularly strikingly in the context of intense factory farming, animals are kept out of human touch and sight. Our contact with animals is interfered with by cages and often transmitted by camera surveillance. These means are not innocent as they distort the image of animals.

Animal Touch does not shy away from engaging with the political aspects of the animal and human exploitation of intensive livestock farming. This is evident, for example, in the essay by the researcher Tomáš Uhnák, who looks into the social and environmental aspects of the fishing industry. Its brutal practices affect the animals involved, vulnerable humans – Rohingya refugees caught in a vicious net of slavery and exploitation – as well as the environment. Bob Kuřík’s essay draws on critical engagement with the concept of the Anthropocene, suggesting that, in fact, the term Plantationocene might better describe our condition. Enabled by slavery and consisting of the (often brutal) imposition of monocultures, this form of life control seems to be the culprit behind the most harmful ways of interaction with the nonhuman.

In her contribution, British philosopher Esther Leslie takes on a challenge posed by Haraway in *When Species Meet*, in which she suggests that the question “Can animals suffer?”, while important, should not close the path to posing further questions, including “Can animals play?” or “Can animals work?”.⁷ It is this last question that Leslie tackles in her analysis, which involves Marx and the English Marxist utopian artist William Morris. Bringing work- and animal-related language expressions to the centre of attention, she draws parallels between the conditions of work performed by animals and those of humans. She depicts the way technology and control shape such work(s), suggesting new forms of nature-inspired human work through biomimetics.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 22.

These loose philosophical reflections constitute a useful frame for a more systematic and sociologically-informed study on animal work.⁸

Very compact both in its size and content, this collection constitutes a welcome and accessible invitation to ask further questions and give attention to this issue. A particularly good example of this is Filipa Ramos's interview with Astrida Neimanis, where a new kind of imaginary is proposed to combat the dominant conception of the subject. It is hoped that these new metaphors and new practices of considering one's place in the world could feed into more sustained and sustainable ways of thinking and being. Still, these ideas are mostly hinted at, as the themes are discussed very broadly without going into philosophical details.

On a more practical level, two accounts of animal activism are presented, one more uncompromising than other, but both stemming from a sense of caring for animals. Petr Dobrý explains the mechanism behind his commitment to rescue chickens from factory farms. He humbly depicts the motivation and intricacies of this initiative that has turned into a sustained practice by means of positive communication and hard work. The chapter also sheds light on the damage done by the predominant myths about chickens, but it is worth reading for many other reasons, including to learn about "stray bees" and how to help them. There is not a hint of pretentiousness or assumed heroism in Dobrý's account and yet his contribution radiates with the hope and importance of solid, organised grassroots work.

A completely different strategy emerges from the conversation between Eva Kořátková and Michal Kolesár. It is also in this dialogue that we come across probably the most evocative definition of intense livestock farming included in the book: "Factory farming is a euphemism for an intensive concentrated mechanism using life as an industrial commodity and focused on profit. To achieve this, it does business with life, cripples it and ruins it." (167) In response to this understanding of the issue, Kolesár takes part in direct actions, rescuing animals: "I go to buildings where animals are legally crippled and illegally take them away to better lives and safer homes. Hens, ducks, pigs, rabbits, lambs, foxes. I do it without hiding my identity because I reject the idea that I'm doing something wrong." (162) That is why he calls his form of involvement "open rescues" or "direct rescue action".

What is striking in his account, especially in comparison to Dobrý's, is his strong unwillingness to cooperate and communicate with those in power – be they political representatives or factory owners – to write petitions, make appeals, or mitigate the poor conditions in which farm animals are kept in any form that would represent a compromise. He is not convinced by any such attempts as they, in his view, operate

⁸ See, e.g., Jocelyne Porcher, "Animal Work", in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, ed. Linda Kalof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 302–318.

within the “free market, instructions and power”, and thus they effectively embody “an obedience where there should be resistance” (169).

Kolesár is not interested in systemic changes or even raising awareness of these issues. He criticises many forms of the animal rights movement, including the entire animal rights discourse, and considers veganism to be narcissistic and out of touch with the reality of animal’s lives in factory farming. Because despite his reluctance to preach (for example, in one place he mentions that “nobody has an obligation to help others” [166]), it is this spontaneous and undeniable recognition of atrocities when one is confronted with them and natural instinct to help that motivates his actions, even though it means living with a criminal record for ecoterrorism. Additionally, it is in Kolesár’s account that the importance of animal touch comes to the forefront, as it is through the direct, physical handling of an animal that the rescues happen and preparation for this close encounter forms part of the training of those participating in actions.

There is something existentially rebellious and anarchistic in this anti-systemic commitment. It is not exactly hopeful and it gives no redemption or reconciliation, as Kolesár admits that despite years of involvement in this form of being with animals, he has “not come to terms with anything” (168). It is captivating and potentially inspirational to gain an insight into these two very different approaches sketched by Dobrý and Kolesár, as they shed light into different personal, social, and political complexities and consequences.

Animal Touch is not a comprehensive, systematic, and academically cohesive study into factory farming. Chapters vary deeply and links between them are sometimes tenuous, although the overriding framework just about succeeds in holding them together. Ironically, I would like to question what seems to be one of the few unifying methodological decisions, namely the insistence on using the term “more-than-human world” when referring to animals, plants, or other elements of nonhuman nature. In addition to a potentially trivial quantitative element (there being more of what is not like us, representatives of *homo sapiens*, than us), this way of referring to the nonhuman seems to evoke qualitative evaluation of the sort performed in the traditional ideological framework, only with a different vector. This semantic implication seems to be even clearer in the case of “more-than-humans”: it places value, as if being non-human and thus “not-human”, just “different to” or “other than”, did not suffice and it was necessary to be “more than” to warrant attention. The humble term “nonhuman” is not completely innocent either, but it seems to be less loaded and it seems to leave the door open to acknowledging the nonhuman within the human, along the posthumanist line of thought. Acknowledging the lack of a systematic terminological framework surrounding these relatively new paths of investigation, I would like to suggest that “more-than-human” is not a fortunate choice, as to me, paradoxically and against the intention of the users, it seems to strengthen the “human”.

To sum up, this compact book in a subway-friendly format, combining short and multidisciplinary texts that are miscellaneous in their form and content and interwo-

ven with stimulating artworks, deserves wider attention. It is clearly a project prepared with care, and not only in regards to farm animals even though this particular way of relating to nonhuman others occurs throughout the book. All contributions are accessible to non-specialists and no deeper knowledge is presumed or required. If anything, those already specialised in particular fields might find some contributions lacking in depth, but given the format and length of both individual chapters and the book, the authors do the best they can to present selected ideas and reflections in a way that would encourage readers to further investigations. After all, this is not your usual, “boring” edited collection. It is a fun, thought-provoking and sense-awakening assortment of textual and visual resources.

Julita Skotarska

PROMETHEUS HUMBLLED

Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettesse, *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics* (London and New York: Verso, 2022), 240 p. ISBN 9781839760310

The Salvage Collective, *The Tragedy of the Worker: Towards the Proletarocene* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), 112 p. ISBN 9781839762949

Among the many original sins of which Marxism is accused, Prometheanism is one of the more plausible. Marx evidently admired the figure of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, and whose name is believed to mean forethought.¹ In his admiration, Marx is also accused of forgetting the other part of the story – that Prometheus’s forethought was also hubris, a claim to knowledge to which he was not entitled, with unintended consequences for which he was punished and bound. Thus, it is said, Marxist socialism inherited a one-sided belief in the capacity of human action to know and to transform the world according to our own plans and desires. Such a conviction underpins Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettesse’s in *Half-Earth Socialism*, which presents itself as a deliberate corrective to leftist Prometheanism in the form of a renewed utopian socialism. Its great villains are techno-utopians of both the socialist and neoliberal variety; its great heroes are the defenders of socialist planning, beginning with Otto Neurath and continuing through Soviet cybernetics and cutting edge climate modelling. The *Half-Earth* of the title draws from E. O. Wilson’s proposal of the same name that calls for the rewilding and abandonment of half of the earth. While they criticise some elements of Wilson’s vision, they hew closely to its core principle that any socialist society will be far more concerned with repairing and disentangling itself from nature than with transforming or exploiting it.

Half-Earth Socialism begins with a dystopian vision of failed capitalist geoengineering exacerbating the problems it was designed to solve. It ends with a narrative that consciously mirrors William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* – William Guest, a resident of our world (or rather, a particular part of that world, contemporary New England)

¹ See S. S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), Chapter 1.

awakes in a strange bed to find he now occupies a communal dormitory, albeit one which will soon be abandoned as part of the rewilding of Massachusetts. He learns about the central planning agency based in Havana and the various local proposals that feed into it, the world parliament in La Paz that debates the various plans it proposes, the global energy quotas, which are themselves open to debate, the models that track the plan's implementation, the organisation of labour in which "nobody is a full time anything" (138), and the great rewilding. He visits the solar power plant and does a shift at the farm, and, just like Morris's hero of the same name, awakes back in his own bed.

These visions sandwich three chapters that outline their theoretical underpinnings. Central to *Half-Earth Socialism's* argument is the need for simple principles with which to guide the construction of an alternative society. This, Pendergrass and Vettesse suggest, is something we should learn from the neoliberals: their "simple and powerful axioms" (10) allowed them to act decisively in moments of crisis, no matter how wrong-headed the axioms and noxious the results. The left, likewise, can benefit from such clear and simple axioms, which, appropriately combined with cutting edge scientific knowledge, can provide us with the vision we have long been lacking. The core axiom is provided by the opening philosophical chapter, promised as a light *hors d'oeuvre*, but doing rather a lot of heavy intellectual lifting. The chapter proceeds from three texts published in 1798 – Hegel's "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate", Thomas Malthus's infamous *Essay on the Principle of Population*, and Edward Jenner's *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolæ vaccinae*. These are taken to "represent discrete epistemologies based on what can be known and controlled: nature, demography, or the economy" (31). Hegel's text first introduces a concept of "humanisation of nature", insisting that nature is knowable through labour, and can ultimately be redirected to human ends. Malthus believed it was possible to grasp the laws of human population, and that doing so demanded population control and reduction. Jenner began to trace the origin of disease to animal farming and the "deviation of Man from the state in which he was originally placed by Nature" (30), and in doing so recognised (pace Malthus) the social origins of disease and (pace Hegel) the limits of human control of nature.

Readers may notice, though, that these three texts do not so clearly map on to the 'nature-demography-economy' schema, and this is because there is a fourth intellectual current that plays a vital role in this story: neoliberalism, or more precisely, the origins of neoliberalism as a response to socialist planning, especially to the work of Neurath. Hayek and Mises insisted on the economy as fundamentally unknowable, a complex natural organism about which we can only ever have partial knowledge. This, as is well known, ruled out not only socialism, but even modest social democratic or Keynesian reforms. Yet, Pendergrass and Vettesse argue, when push comes to shove, neoliberals believe that the market forces can be harnessed to control nature. In this respect, they are a peculiar kind of Prometheans, "the bastard heirs of Hegel", insofar as they "seek one unconscious realm (nature) to be subdued by another (capital)" (52). Thus presented, this schema allows them to assert the principles that guide their utopian vision:

Neurath persuasively argued that socialism must be the conscious control of production and distribution, a political act that transforms the economy into the “domain of the will”. Mises and especially Hayek undermined Neurathian socialism through powerful epistemic critique, which diverted the Left into pseudorational market socialism. In response, we try to out-Hayek Hayek by arguing that nature is more unknowable than the market, and therefore far more deserving of our awe as an unconscious, decentralized, and unimaginably complex system. (53)

Nature is unknowable, so we must respect its limits, and act to disentangle ourselves from it rather than master or transform it; the economy, on the other hand, can be subjected to conscious planning. This axiom thus established, the subsequent chapters develop the vision that derives from it: No to nuclear power, geoengineering, and carbon capture and storage; yes to veganism, degrowth, and rewilding. No to market solutions; yes to a system of planning that draws on historical examples and cutting edge science (a system you can play with yourself, at <http://half.earth>). Theirs, then, is a realistic, practical utopia, “constrained by quite conservative parameters” (12): the Morris-esque vision is merely a dessert course that follows the main work of defending its coherence.

This schema is elegant, and its broad political conclusions attractive and compelling, but it often stretches at its limits. As they acknowledge, the Hegelian vision has been subject to many interpretations, as has Marx’s inheritance of it. Thus they recognise that if the humanisation of nature depends on human action, then this introduces a degree of uncertainty (since nature cannot be known in advance of action), and that there are readings of Hegel that chime with their vision of recognising and harmonising with nature’s limits, all of which point to a somewhat more nuanced view of “Prometheanism”. At the same time, they insist that “Prometheanism is so ingrained in Marxist thought that it must be confronted, refuted, and extirpated so that socialism can be made fit for an age of environmental catastrophe” (34), and later sharply distinguish the Promethean tradition from the Utopian tradition they defend (the latter tradition itself seems rather over-extended, apparently incorporating elements of Frankfurt Critical Theory). Likewise, while nature may be “ultimately unknowable” (55), it is clearly not *absolutely* unknowable: the Neurathian plans that form part of their vision know *something* – indeed rather a lot – about nature, as they readily acknowledge. In that case, might these simple axioms risk re-hypostatizing the two realms of nature and the economy, as if what we really *need* to know is not precisely the points where they meet and interact?

Similar themes dominate The Salvage Collective’s *The Tragedy of the Worker*, which is both more and less ambitious than *Half-Earth Socialism*: rather than a utopian proposal, it offers something that veterans of the left might recognise as closer to a *perspective*, synoptically combining history, ecology, and strategy (this reflects in part its origins as an editorial for the *Salvage* journal). It delves into the early-Soviet experience (in their interpretation, the only time that fossil capitalism was seriously threatened in

its history, but tragically transfigured by its commitment to red plenty and drive to industrialisation into another fossil state), the dynamics of capital accumulation as the basis of climate denialism, green capitalism and its bad hope, the politics of the arctic, and much more. It is written in the characteristically literary style that has established *Salvage* as one of the most compelling voices on the contemporary left (to my mind, their literary flourishes work far better than Pendergrass and Vettesse's joky section titles). Framing the argument is the titular tragedy:

That, as avatar of a class in itself, she [the worker] was put to work for the accumulation of capital, from capitalism's youth, amid means of production not of her choosing, and with a telos of ecological catastrophe. That thus, even should the proletariat become a class for itself, and even if it does so at a point of history where the full horror of the methods of fossil capitalism is becoming clear, it would – will – inherit productive forces inextricable from mass, trans-species death. (11)

The proletarocene is thus the other side of the capitalocene – the name for the epoch that workers have made (against their will), and that they will inherit. In this sense, *The Tragedy of the Worker* shares *Half-Earth Socialism's* call for repair, or, for salvage: “The earth the wretched would – will – inherit, will be in need of an assiduous programme of restoration. While we may yearn for luxury, what will be necessary first is *Salvage Communism*.” (89) Indeed, their critical targets are similar, from Donna Haraway's recent flirtation with population control to the accelerationist luxury communists (“the Elon Muskrattery of the left” [79]).

But, for *Salvage*, the problem with the techno-optimists is not that they are too Promethean, but that they are “not Promethean enough” (4). Here, Prometheus represents less the direct mastery of nature and more the epic scale of transformation required:

The fundamental premise of historical materialism is that being determines consciousness. Who are we, the wounded victim-comrades of too-late-capitalism, to legislate for those who (we hope) will come after? So great is the change demanded to preserve a habitable biosphere that, if we make it, our inheritors on the other side will read such texts and wonder, as we do of Bronze Age epics; were these people even human? (4)

This, then, is *Salvage's* axiom. Less the unknowability of nature, and more the unknowability of the future, in particular the people of the future: “It is precisely due to the Promethean scale of the project to utterly reconfigure of the world and thus the humans who will remake it that we can know neither their capabilities nor their drives and desiderata in advance. This is not an evasion but rigour.” (80) Such rigour grounds both their rejection of Haraway's flirtation with Malthusianism and their critique of the defenders of socialist luxury: Haraway assumes the limits of the present are the limits

of the future; the ecomodernists assume the desires of the present are the desires of the future: "As with population limits, so with trinkets: we cannot ultimately know what the tchotchkes of a liberated people will be, nor how many they will have, nor if they will have any at all." (81) To frame the growth debate in terms of working-class luxury both assumes the workers who inherit the wasted earth will recognise the same things as luxury, and precludes any critique of it in the present. And so, "there must be, for any dream of the future, of emancipation, a place for truly epochal and transformative aspirations. But if this is Prometheanism, Prometheus here must be, not bound by, perhaps, but *sublated* with a rigorous humility." (82) Ironically, perhaps, *Half-Earth Socialism* reaches a remarkably similar formulation, concluding in a more conciliatory mode than they begin: "The point, however, is not simply to substitute socialist utopianism for Promethean Marxism, but rather to strive for a synthesis of the two to create a new, epistemically humble socialism." (172)

With Prometheus suitably humbled, it would no doubt be possible to trace several lines of agreement between these two books that could and should form the basis for any serious ecosocialist thinking. But it is also possible to trace a deeper disagreement, less about Prometheanism than utopianism. For, where Pendergrass and Vettesse see the necessity of utopian vision, *Salvage* are far more ambivalent: "Provocations and utopianism are play, relief, and can be goads to thought and action" but they are "vanishingly rarely worth much as blueprints" (79) and "we must be clear about the categoric nature of those ruminations, the veil between us and prediction" (80). Here, they are showing their roots in the tradition of "socialism from below", which has long associated the utopian tradition with an elitist streak that assumes knowledge and authority to which it is not entitled. The depth of these roots are made clear in the following formulation: "*Ecosocialists*, we take the existence of limits seriously; *ecosocialists*, we take seriously the fact that we cannot yet know them." (80) In contrast, *Half-Earth Socialism* falls into a long tradition of the left criticising itself for lacking a compelling vision of the future, insisting not only on the necessity of visionary speculation, but on a practical and realistic vision that answers "the hard questions" (12): "In the rare chance that they take power, socialists will falter and fall without a programme to guide the transition beyond capitalism." (21)

Of course, these approaches are not completely incompatible. *Salvage* recognise the value of utopian visions, even insisting they are necessary, while Pendergrass and Vettesse insist their vision is a simple proposal and an invitation to others: "we need many speculative contributions on the political horizon before it is suffused with a sulphurous mist and the future becomes as dim as the fixed grey skies of neoliberal hegemony" (21), and their own vision is open to further transformation ("What happens after that, who knows" (174)). If we are sufficiently clear about the "categoric nature" of these visions, then perhaps we can have our cake and eat it. But, this can only go so far before we hit a deeper problem: Vettesse and Pendergrass encourage those unconvinced by their proposal to develop their own, based on a different axiom but following the

same procedure. But if the axiom of the unknowability of nature is replaced with the axiom of the unknowability of our future needs, desires, and capacities, then how do we move to the next steps of the procedure? If we insist that there is a value in *refraining* from specifying the future, then why proceed to the final step at all? And if the main value of utopian vision is as play and inspiration, then why worry so intently about its realism and practicality? It is a peculiar irony that it is the non-utopians who hold open the possibility for deeper transformative visions, and the utopians who are beholden to what we can realistically imagine (thus *The Tragedy of the Worker* can freely call for “a mass outbreak of red geoengineering” [89]). As one member of the Salvage Collective writes elsewhere, “if we take utopia seriously, as a total reshaping, its scale means we can’t think it from this side. It’s the process of making it that will allow us to do so. It is utopian fidelity that might underpin our refusal to expound it, or any roadmap.”²

It is here where *Half-Earth Socialism*’s principles of knowability and unknowability are most double-edged. Their insistence that the economy can be grasped and modelled through existing technologies drives their rigorous defence of democratic planning and grounds their vision, but it also keeps that vision on “this side”, bound to what we can see from here. No doubt they would respond that this is a feature, not a bug, and, as it happens, they are still able to make a beautiful case for something radically different from our present. And yet, it invites another classic criticism of utopianism, that it severs means from ends. *Half-Earth Socialism* takes place after the revolution, almost brazenly and self-consciously. From the outset, we are told, “How such a Half-Earth socialist coalition might come to power we cannot say.” (17) And yet, there *is* a revolution in this story. So what did the inhabitants of Half-Earth learn in the making of it? What Soviets, Communes, Councils, and networks prefigured it? What transformations did they undergo, and what new needs and capacities did they discover? Such criticisms risk sounding like rehearsed point scoring learned in party meetings, but it is not only traditional Marxists who insist that you can’t talk about the future society in the abstract from the process that creates it. Or, rather, you *can*, but it raises the question of why you are doing it, and *who* you are doing it for. *Half-Earth Socialism* sits uneasily (though perhaps productively) between a blueprint for a movement already in being and an inspiration for one yet to be fully formed.

Which is to say that visions like that of *Half-Earth Socialism* are valuable, but that those who do not think they are the central task are not naive dogmatists. They are perhaps simply more haunted by that question of “*who?*” Towards the end of *The Tragedy of the Worker*, the authors remark that “Salvage-Marxism is a disaster communism conditioned by and pining for a party form that it knows did not deserve to survive, and did not: learning to walk again, pain in that phantom limb and all”. (85) Prometheus must indeed be humbled, but he must also learn to move. Stranded on this side, we

² China Miéville, “The Limits of Utopia”, *Salvage* (1 Aug 2015), <https://salvage.zone/the-limits-of-utopia/>.

cannot help speculate about what the other side looks like; but it is only as we move there that we will see it, and we should be ready to be surprised. This does not have to be mysticism or obscurantism. It can, as Salvage reminds us, be a form of rigour.

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