



## How to Read *Capitalism in the Web of Life*<sup>12</sup> Towards a World-Historical Materialism in the Web of Life

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Rufus: Mankind got it all wrong by takin' a good idea and building a belief structure out of it.

Bethany: So you're saying that having beliefs is a bad thing?

Rufus: I just think it's better to have an idea. You can change an idea; changing a belief is trickier. People die for it, people kill for it.

—*Dogma* (Kevin Smith, dir., 1999)

How many proletarians can dance on the head of a pin?

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It's an absurd question. But in its flight from history, the question embodies the anti-historical bias of too much of today's environmentalist and Marxist thought. Disconnected from world history, many Marxists, and not only Marxists, have succumbed to the bourgeois illusion that theoretical problems may be adequately confronted on theoretical terrain. A critique of this illusion was central to *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Moore 2015, hereafter *Web of Life*). The problem of capitalism, understood as a world-ecology of power, profit, and life, could only be addressed through world history. To be clear, this was not an abstract world history but one that drew inspiration from *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels' classic statement of world-historical materialism ([1846] 2010). The opening lines of this classic statement are so habitually ignored—even by Marxists!—that I wish to underline them here. A revolutionary and dialectical materialism *begins with (and returns to)*

the physical organisation of [“living human”] individuals *and their consequent relation to the rest of nature*. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, oro-hydrographical, climatic and so on. *All historical writing must set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men* (Marx and Engels 2010: 31, emphases added).

“We cannot here go either into” questions of the web of life and its “modification in the course of history through the action of men.” But, as groundbreaking scholars like John Bellamy Foster (2000) and Paul Burkett (1999) have demonstrated, this was precisely historical materialism's line of march. Indeed, just a few pages after the above-quoted lines, Marx and Engels extend the insight in ways that animated *Web of Life's* interpretive trajectory. Through the entangled histories of the family and class society, they emphasize, “the production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a *twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation*” (2010: 41, emphasis added). This twofold relation—*Web of Life's* dialectical heart—insists that class society, and capitalism specifically, is a metabolism of “reciprocal codetermination” through which human social relations, from the body to the biosphere, are interpenetrated with the totality of the web of life (Lewontin and Levins 1997: 96). To say that “Man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (Marx and Engels [1844] 1975: 275-276).

*Man? Nature?* The words are themselves dialectically reformulated—against bourgeois conceptions of these as things-in-themselves—in Marx's dialectical naturalism. Let me stress that Marx's dialectical naturalism is also a dialectical humanism. (How much virtual ink we might save with this elementary dialectical recognition.) Here is, from the outset, a *critique* of Man and Nature thinking, explicitly rejected in *The German Ideology*. The problem with the idealists, the Young Hegelians, was their “the polar opposition of man and nature” (Marx and Engels 2010: 482). Transcending such polar oppositions, Marx and Engels point to the historical emergence of the “*universality of man*” which “appears in practice precisely in the *universality* which makes all nature his inorganic body.” *Universality*, in their hands, has nothing to do with “Western Universalism” (Moore forthcoming). Rather, it is a philosophical abbreviation for capitalism's

world-historical tendencies. On the one hand, we find a capitalist “universality” as a “world-historical... empirically verifiable” movement—a tendency that “makes all nature... [the] inorganic body” of capital (Marx and Engels 2010: 51; Marx and Engels 1975: 275). On the other, its dialectical counter-tendency and potential negation: *communism*. This is not a “*state of affairs*” but the “*real* movement... [of] the proletariat, [which] can only exist *world-historically*... directly linked up with world history” (Marx and Engels 2010: 49). Communism becomes “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things,” allowing the “associated producers” (and reproducers!) to “govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way” (Marx and Engels 2010: 49; Marx 1981: 959).

All of which animates the *method* of world-historical investigation fundamental to *Web of Life* and the wider world-ecology conversation.<sup>3</sup> To recapitulate: the specificity of human social relations is foregrounded through its metabolic relations with and within webs of life, one in which human work is itself a “natural force.” The dialectical implication of this method is straightforward. Just as human work involves a dialectical transformation—in acting “upon *external* nature... [she] changes it, and so simultaneously changes [her] *own nature*” (Marx 1977: 283, emphases added)—so class society emerges by acting upon external natures, and in so doing changes its own nature. Modes of re/production, in other words, emerge through webs of life, and acquire their distinctive properties through such environment-making—a process in which class society is a product as well as a producer of webs of life. *Web of Life*’s charge was not to assert this point theoretically—which had after all been done—but rather to take the methodological implications of the dialectical imagination as a guiding thread for world-historical reconstruction (see esp. Moore 2017a).

Surprisingly, these arguments elicited a ferocious—and sectarian—response. Bellamy Foster turned the full force of *Monthly Review*, once a beacon of creative and heterodox Marxism, against *Web of Life*. He valorized whispering campaigns that aimed to intimidate—largely unsuccessfully—younger scholars. Andreas Malm, from a starkly different Marxist tendency (and one historically at odds with *Monthly Review*’s anti-imperialist Marxism), quickly joined the onslaught. Others would reproduce their claims, apparently untroubled by reading the text itself. Foster’s tendentious reading, completely devoid of any comradely appreciation, violated every rule of reading Marx that he taught me: above all, attentiveness to levels of abstraction, recognizing the rich totality of dialectical tendencies and counter-tendencies, taking special care that one not mistake Marx’s immanent critique of capitalist value relations as an endorsement, avoiding the conflation of methodological statements for theory, identifying the movement from general to determinate abstractions, and much beyond. Suffice it to say that Bellamy Foster’s list was careful and detailed when it came to reading Marx. No matter. Enemies must be destroyed, their arguments

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<sup>3</sup> For some recent outstanding contributions to the world-ecology conversation, see Antonacci 2021; Boscov-Ellen 2021; Brenner 2020; Campbell, Niblett and Oloff 2021; Dixon 2021; Eichen 2020; Ferrando et al. 2021; Gibson 2021; Jakes 2020; Mateos 2021; Molinero Gerbeau, et al, eds., 2021a, 2021; Ortiz 2020; Otter 2020; Scown 2020. Several hundred texts in the world-ecology conversation can be found here: <https://www.academia.edu/Documents/in/World-Ecology>.

completely obliterated – even if the enemies did not actually make the arguments in question. On offer from Foster has been a long and frankly dishonest set of claims about my arguments. In most instances—especially on questions of the specificity and centrality of class relations, of the law of value, of metabolism—these non-critiques have attributed to me views that are the very positions I’ve criticized. Among the most strident and fanciful claims, we find such fantastic assertions as the following: I don’t believe the web of life exists, and therefore I am an idealist and a “social constructionist”; I don’t believe that human organization is distinctive within the web of life, and therefore I am a monist; I don’t believe in dialectics and instead insist on a “flat ontology” that adopts Bruno Latour’s hybrid method; I believe that value is “everything” and therefore adhere to an economic reductionism that adopts the standpoint of neoclassical economics (e.g. Foster 2016; Malm 2018). In so doing, I have abandoned Marx, supported the climate deniers and become an enemy of socialism.

And how shall I respond? That I do not in fact beat my wife? That I am not a neoliberal? I will underscore that this is a mode of sectarian critique long favored by *Monthly Review* under Foster’s leadership. (It is, I would note, a clear departure from the non-sectarian legacy of Paul M. Sweezy and Harry Magdoff.) Such is the spirit of comradely debate that dominates the once-great *Monthly Review*, now converted into a de facto propaganda sheet for the Party of Metabolic Rift.

Curiously, the core of *Monthly Review*’s critique holds that I am an idealist and a constructivist. How this gibes with literally hundreds of fine-grained empirical references to geobiological landscape and climate change is never really explained. Presumably the alternative is a historical materialism in which the web of life matters. But... there seems to be little interest in engaging *Web of Life* on the terrain of capitalism’s world history and its metabolisms of power, profit and re/production—which is, after all, the book’s focus. One reason for this might well be, in Foster’s case, that my world-historical assessment of capitalist origins and development essentially flows from the anti-imperialist historical thesis associated with *Monthly Review*. Of course there are differences between the figures, but *Web of Life* fits squarely within the broad anti-imperialist world histories of Magdoff (1978), Wallerstein (1974), Arrighi (1994), Frank (1967), and yes, Foster (1994)—all frequent contributors to the once-mighty socialist journal.

The result is a failure to engage the world-historical questions that might shed light on the struggle for a Biotarian socialism in the era of the planetary inferno (Moore 2021a). Instead the world has been treated to a kind of clickbait Marxism in which hot takes and surficial reading takes precedence over a real intellectual debate. The problem of course is not who disagrees with whom, but the absence of a comradely mode of debate and synthesis that might help us move towards a more radically honest, and historically-grounded, assessment of planetary crisis—the very issue that dominates *Web of Life*, which begins and ends, let me emphasize, with the climate crisis and planetary justice.

It’s worth noting that the non-critiques recapitulate, intellectually, the world left’s most destructive sectarian tendencies over the past century. This is not only uncharitable and uncomradely; it is specifically destructive of the intellectual resources necessary to wage and win the worldwide class struggle in the climate crisis. Sadly, for the past century or so, a significant

tendency within Marxist thought converted *ideas* into *beliefs*, and then assigned political positions on the basis of interpretive differences. Marxism is not alone in this respect; but here the tendency towards sectarianism—the linear translation of interpretive differences into divergences of political principle—has been especially pronounced.

For Malm and others, I am a “monist” who denies human distinctiveness in the web of life. Here is an expressive instance of breathtaking sloppiness, justified by a belief structure that prioritizes radical posturing over generative intellectual debate. It bears noting that I use the word *monist* precisely once in the book. Even then, I make clear that the word monism is deployed in a relational and dialectical fashion. Indeed, the whole discussion is an extension Foster-ally Burkett’s thinking on relational holism (1999). I use Marx’s distinctions on the matter as a guiding thread, privileging “the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature” within the long-run development of class society (Marx 1977: 173). This is such a basic premise of Marx and Engels’s historical materialism that I had to rub my eyes in disbelief as these Marxists ignored Marxism’s crucial philosophical insights – preferring instead the real abstractions of Man and Nature in excommunicating me from the True Faith. (Indeed, as Michael Kleinod [2020] has shown, behind the flurry of Malm’s revolutionary posturing on this matter is a reluctance to deploy historical materialism’s basic methodological principles!)

My philosophical and theoretical position is impossible to miss and stated explicitly in the first pages of the Introduction. I begin *Web of Life* by warning of the dangers of an undifferentiated, “Green holism,” including poststructuralist theory as well as Latourian actor-network thinking. In its place, I argue for a “perspective [that] allows for the multiplication of questions that turn on the *oikeios*: the creative, generative, and multi-layered relation of species and environment” (Moore 2015: 4). The argument here specifically joins three luminaries of Foster’s eco-socialism: Paul Burkett’s groundbreaking work on the relational holism of Marx’s value theory (1999), and the dialectical biology of Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin (1985). Nor do I stop there. I insist on the specific and ongoing historical-geographical distinctiveness of human social relations with and within webs of life. “To say that humans are a part of nature is to highlight the *specificity* of humanity within the web of life—its *specific* forms of sociality, its capacities for collective memory and symbolic production, and much more” (Moore 2015: 6). So much for undialectical (post)humanisms and naturalisms!

### **I am not a Marxist? Non-Critiques and the Flight from World History**

Having lived through a barrage of intellectual smears since the publication of *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, I now appreciate some of Marx’s exasperation with the French Workers Party. By the late 1870s, Marx denounced the latter’s “revolutionary phrase-mongering.” If this is Marxism, he wrote, “what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist” (Marx and Guesde 1880). Another certainty: Marx’s priority was not to reproduce a high priesthood of the True Marxism, but to advance a revolutionary praxis informed by the most radical and ruthlessly honest assessment of capitalism and class society in world history. A historical materialism that relegates the history of

capitalism to a secondary concern necessarily resorts to “revolutionary phrase-mongering.” This is precisely what we have seen in the fictitious critiques of Foster, Malm, and other eco-socialists. It substitutes well-turned polemical phrases for historical interpretation: the assessment of key turning points within, and patterns of, class society over the *longue durée*.

This world-historical emphasis was well-known to the critics. This makes its erasure all the more curious. This argument about world-historical turning points and patterns is introduced at the beginning of *Capitalism in the Web of Life*—and had been developed in preliminary form through a long series of (occasionally influential) essays stretching back nearly two decades (e.g. Moore 2000a; 2000b; 2003a; 2003b; 2010a; 2010b; 2011a; 2011b). Surveying poststructuralist and Marxist theory, I observe that, for all their insights, these tendencies have not “directly challenged the dualist framing of world history. For those concerned about the earth, its people, and the web of life, the great patterns and processes of modern world history have remained firmly engaged within the prison house of the Cartesian binary. *No theoretical critique will open the cage*” (Moore 2015: 5).

Although *Web of Life* is often regarded as work of theory, it does not perform that work on the terrain of theory, but rather directly engages with capitalism’s turning points and developmental patterns in the web of life. In contrast to most work in social and political theory, every major conceptual and theoretical statement is specified through world-historical facts, understood as the “developing tendencies of history” (Lukács 1971: 181). Pivotal moments in the text include 1492 and the “long” sixteenth century; British-led industrialization between 1780 and 1830; the emergence and consolidation of neoliberal capitalism after 1971. All are in service to making sense of—to quote Sweezy (1953)—the “present as history.” That world-historical present is, of course, the climate crisis, understood as the outcome of class struggle and also the new socio-ecological terrain of the planetary class struggle (Moore 2021b; 2021c). Drawing on Arrighi (1994) and Wallerstein (1974), I elaborate a concretely periodized history of *phases of capitalist development in the web of life*, integrating the historical geographies of imperialism, environmental change, science, class formations, and capital accumulation.

The non-critics have applied their belief structures in the ways that dogmatic formulations must: they are self-referencing and refuse to engage alternative ideas on their own terms. Specifically, Foster and Malm decline to engage two of *Web of Life*’s premises: the question of world history and the problem of real abstraction. This is not an accidental oversight. It is an instance of their belief structures overriding a critically honest assessment of the text. *Real abstraction* appears two dozen times in the text. (I have elaborated my approach further in successive essays since 2015: see Moore 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2017d; 2018; 2021d.) World history, as we have seen, is everywhere in *Web of Life* (and in everything that I’ve ever written), its centrality emphasized from the outset: “Without a world-historical reconstruction, the critique of Nature/Society dualism will remain theoretical when it needs to be methodological and historical” (Moore 2015: 14).

No matter. The eco-socialists are completely unconcerned with world history when it deviates from their thought-abstractions. (Forgetting, somehow, that dialectics flows *through* variation, not

in spite it.) No matter, even though the eco-socialists drape themselves in the vestments of the One True Faith, disregarding—as fundamentalists always do—heterodox insights within *their own* sacred texts. (Such is the corrosive power of belief structures upon dialectical thinking.) In the eco-socialist flight from world history, “they forget,” as Marx and Engels warned in *The German Ideology*, “that they... are opposing nothing but phrases to [other] phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are combating solely the phrases of this world” (Marx and Engels 2010: 30). Such an approach, Marx and Engels warned, risks sharing “the illusions of [their] epoch” (Marx and Engels 2010: 55).

Of modernity’s illusions, none is so powerful—and none more fundamental to the imperialist bourgeoisie’s belief structures—than Man and Nature (Moore 2021e). I have written these words in the uppercase because they are not merely words; they are instruments of bourgeois rule. I call them *ruling abstractions*, and they are the ideological building blocks of capitalism’s structures of domination: Prometheanism (Man over Nature), racism (White over Non-White), sexism (Man over Woman) (Moore 2019; 2020; 2021d). The history of capitalism and its long history of entwined genocide and ecocide, beginning in 1492, is more than a “material” history of devastated environments, mass graves, and profit-making opportunities created by empires and seized by capitalists. It is a history functionally enabled by ideological models specifically designed to allow empires and bourgeoisies to manage planetary life in the interests of endless accumulation.

The binary of Man and Nature is, in other words, the fundamental operating code for the imperial bourgeoisie’s strategy of planetary management—premised from the beginning, long before Descartes came along, on the separation of “thinking” and “working.” In Man and Nature, *Man* is an ideological claim. It signifies the bourgeoisie’s “over-representation” of itself, specifically embedded in successive Civilizing Projects, from the Spaniards’ *Requerimiento* (1513) to Truman’s Point Four declaration (1949) (Wynter 2003). In the most practical ways, these Projects designated the peoples of colonial and semi-colonial worlds as lazy, savage, barbaric, and otherwise un-Christian, Un-Civilized, Un-Developed. These Projects designated the planet’s “savage” peoples—along with forests, minerals and soils—as Nature (Patel and Moore 2017).

Pause for a moment to reflect on the geocultures of domination in the modern world: racism and sexism above all. Racism and sexism emerged, in their modern forms, out of the great crisis of the long seventeenth century. The language associated with modern domination—especially but not only in relation to racism and sexism—is the language of bourgeois naturalism. Although it matured during the era of Thomas Malthus (c. 1780-1820), its roots are found two centuries earlier, during an unprecedented crisis of capitalism. In this era—and all that followed—the geocultures of racism and sexism relied upon this thoroughly modern cosmology: of Civilized and Savage. Women, in Federici’s apt turn of phrase (2004: 100), became the “savages of Europe” (and not only Europe). Africans, indigenous peoples in the Americas, Slavs, Celts, and many others became, variously, “monstrous” and savage. Women could find salvation by fulfilling their “natural” roles as mothers and caregivers. In colonial worlds, especially in the Americas, African slaves and coerced indigenous proletarians could find salvation through work—largely or entirely

unpaid. In all instances, we see how the emergence of imperialist geoculture formed through new cosmologies of the Civilized and the Savage: the “illusions of the epoch.”

### **Real Abstractions: From Commodity to Civilizational Fetishism in the Making of Planetary Crisis**

In *Web of Life*, I conceptualize this geocultural dynamic through a reconsideration of Sohn-Rethel’s concept of real abstraction (1978). For Sohn-Rethel, the circulation of commodities in class society precipitates forms of abstraction in everyday life. These abstractions enable and obscure the class dimensions of the division between mental and manual labor. In this sense, real abstractions are not merely a mask to disguise the bloody realities of class society; they communicate and enable the prevailing “common sense” of Marx and Engels’s “ruling ideas.” To paraphrase Marx, the widening and deepening of the cash nexus sweats real abstractions from every pore. Such abstractions go beyond ideology as conventionally understood. They entangle directly and dialectically with modes of thought, the philosophical moments of modes of production *and* their “means of mental production” (Marx and Engels 2010: 59). Ruling abstractions enable specific forms of domination and surplus extraction in class societies. Implicit in this model is the suggestion that the greater the *quantitative* advance of monetary circulation (and therefore the greater development of class structures premised on the division between “thinking” and “doing”), the more likely is the possibility for a *qualitative* revolution in real abstraction, extending well beyond the domain of circulation. As the reader might guess, Sohn-Rethel’s critique of real abstraction unfolds in the grand Marxist tradition of the critique of fetishization and alienation. Crucially, it joins dialectically the material, economic, and ideological domains within a unified frame.

In *Web of Life* and subsequent texts, I extended real abstraction beyond the circulation of value. Sohn-Rethel’s critique of commodity fetishism suggests a way to understand capitalism’s *civilizational fetishism*. Civilization and Savagery emerged as ruling abstractions through financialized imperialist projects—the Iberians are a prime example—committed to planetary management and the expansion of commodity frontiers. (A major theme in *Web of Life*.) Civilizational fetishism, in other words, is the historical and logical precondition for the globalization of commodity fetishism.

My operative premise, following Arrighi and Schumpeter, is that bourgeoisies are relatively powerless to establish the political conditions of a “good business environment,” or what I call Cheap Nature. The bourgeoisie simply cannot accumulate surplus value without the legal and military force of empires, which establish the political framework for capitalist competition on the world market. The world bourgeoisie cannot, in turn, counter-act the tendency towards a falling rate of profit without geocultures of domination, which not only suppress wages and consumption but divide the world proletariat through sexist, racist, and nationalist abstractions. Finally, such geocultures of domination are not only strategic to the superexploitation of humans but also,

through Prometheanism, to the rapid exhaustion of webs of life necessary to sustain endless accumulation.

In *Web of Life* and since, I have aimed to connect the ideological, material-ecological, and politico-economic within capitalism's world histories. This is not a matter of abstract theorizing. Who and what the imperial bourgeoisie designates as Nature and Civilization is fundamental to understanding capitalism's drive towards climate crisis, and its capitalogenic trinity: the climate class divide, climate patriarchy, and climate apartheid (Moore 2019; 2021d). An eco-socialism that relegates geocultural domination to the status of a secondary contradiction—rather than woven into the fabric of endless accumulation and the endless conquest of the Earth—is one that accepts the economic reductionism of bourgeois thought (including vulgar Marxisms) and disarms movements for planetary justice.

In this light, I reconceptualized Sohn-Rethel's provocative thesis on real abstraction through world-historical investigation. Arguably the decisive narrative frame of *Web of Life* is the dialectic of *project* and *process* (Moore 2015: 13). The Civilizing Project looms large in the first moment. That Project goes by many names. For the Spanish, it was Christianization; for the French, *la mission civilisatrice*; for the British, the White Man's Burden; for the Americans, Manifest Destiny, and after 1949, Modernization. Each of these empires assumed that their particular Civilizing Project represented the best that Humanity had to offer. Social formations that stared down the gun barrel of these Civilizing Project were, with the stroke of the pen, redefined as savage, irrational, lazy, warmongering, animalistic—in short, everything that the Civilized were not.

What does this have to do with the web of life? *Everything*. Human lifeways outside “the West”—but including virtually all peasants and most workers within the West—were relocated into a new cosmological domain, Nature. Nature is not merely a mythical domain and an ideological claim; it is a concrete class-ideological project. Nature is everything that bourgeoisies don't want to pay for; only popular revolt and revolution forces adjustments (von Werlhof 1985). This is the strategy of Cheap Nature. It has a double register, each moment animating the other. One moment is to cheapen in price—not for everyone, but for imperial bourgeoisies. Another moment turns on the geocultural devaluations of Prometheanism, racism and sexism. (When Foster ignores this element of my argument, he contributes to a widely held perception that Marxism is unable to address geocultural domination in the history of capitalism and its drive towards planetary crisis.)

In linking capital's geo-economic logic with capitalism's geocultural logic of domination, we begin to see how extra-economic domination and force is central to the accumulation of capital—and the devastation of planetary life. Cheapness as world-historical strategy joined imperial power, racism, patriarchy, and accumulation to enable the greatest environment-making revolution since the dawn of settled agriculture some 8,000 years earlier. This environment-making revolution pivoted on the ways that the ruling abstractions of Civilization and Savagery, or what today we call Society and Nature, joined with financialized imperialism to create and expand the world proletariat, dramatically in the two centuries after 1550.

When Marx observes that capitalism degrades the soil and the worker, he is pointing also to the *necessary* conditions of capitalist development in the web of life (Marx 1977: 636-638). Capitalist class formation unfolds through the *political* imposition of property relations that allow for the two essential conditions of endless accumulation. One is Cheap Labor, including centrally the unpaid work of humans defined as Natural (for example, women). The second is Cheap Nature, which includes human work, as we have seen, but encompasses all webs of life put to work for capital. From this standpoint, “Proletariat” (putting humans to work for capital) and “Biotariat” (putting extra-human life to work for capital) form a world-historical unity (Moore 2021c; 2021d; Collis 2014). Whilst Bellamy Foster and Malm have been busy congratulating themselves on their faithfulness to Marx and their fidelity to the class struggle (and therefore, in classically dualist fashion, denouncing potential comrades as class enemies), they have been equally busy ignoring the dialectical relations between humans and other webs of life in a multi-species class struggle that is at the heart of today’s climate crisis.

It’s this class struggle in the web of life—the interpenetrating unity of Proletariat and Biotariat—that is the dialectical countertendency to the Civilizing Project and its Promethean fantasies. Prometheanism was the original form of domination, simultaneously creating a dualist cosmology of Civilization and Savagery and cultivating the bourgeois conceit that webs of life may be infinitely controlled in the interests of Man’s improvement. More than anything, this dialectic of project and process animates *Web of Life*, and allows us to see the *fragility* of capitalism’s environment-making dynamics today. Capitalism creates its biotarian gravediggers alongside the global proletarian forces, who together produce limits that cannot be “fixed” through capitalist politics-as-usual. This is the crescendo of *Web of Life*. The book begins with the climate crisis and capitalism’s Promethean projects of domination and exploitation; it ends with the activation of *negative-value*, the counter-tendencies of the law of value that threaten its negation. This for Marx is the communist horizon (Dean 2012): the generative proletarian-biotarian negation of capitalism’s ecocidal and genocidal logic.

My argument emerged through a reading of Marx’s method so elementary that it never occurred to me that the eco-socialists would find it controversial. In *Web of Life*, I follow Marx’s procedure by moving from general abstractions to progressively more determinate abstractions. For instance, I begin with Marx’s conception of work as a relation that remakes both the worker and “external nature” (Marx 1977: 283). This conception provisionally abstracts the history of class society. It is the basis for my concept of work/energy, which the reader encounters in the Introduction. Across multiple chapters, I elaborate the work/energy concept in relation to Marx’s theory of value *and* the history of actually existing capitalism, its class structures and its class struggles. This approach allowed me to emphasize the centrality of unpaid work—including the unpaid work of extra-human life—in capital accumulation. To underline the point: this unpaid work is a class struggle over the working day. Marx emphasizes the point in *Capital*: “What interests [capital] is purely and simply the maximum of labour-power that can be set in motion in a working day. It attains this objective by shortening the life of labour-power, *in the same way* as a greedy farmer snatches more produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility” (Marx 1977:

376). This class struggle over unpaid work—mediated through the capitalist state, imperial formations, and the bourgeoisie’s ruling abstractions – includes not only the Biotariat, as we have just seen, but also the Femitariat, representing the gendered class struggle over human unpaid work and socio-biological reproduction (Moore 2015: chapter nine and *passim*; also Federici 2013).

The formation of the limits to capitalism in the twenty-first century stem from a socio-ecological nexus of revolt and resistance to capitalism’s business as usual. The climate crisis, in particular, represents a key expression of this class struggle reading of the “limits to growth” shorn of its bourgeois fetishisms. For the climate crisis is not narrowly geophysical but expansively implicated in the deepening stagnation of capitalism’s core Cheap Nature nexus, between Cheap Food and Cheap Labor, including the spiral of radical agro-food politics of food sovereignty and food justice. The book begins with climate crisis—the book’s first citation is to Rockström’s work on planetary thresholds (2009)—and ends with the climate crisis, as a world-ecological tapestry of power, profit and life. This framing encourages narratives of the climate conjuncture as a crisis that incorporates geophysical change but is unknowable purely on that geophysical basis. (Listen to *the Science* is a pernicious slogan for sure, see Moore 2021f). A historical materialist understanding of the climate crisis requires that we join, as a dialectical unity, greenhouse gas concentrations with the climate class divide, climate patriarchy, and climate apartheid.

### **The World-Ecology Conversation: Towards the Communist Horizon in the Web of Life**

*Capitalism in the Web of Life* emerged from, and contributed to, the world-ecology conversation. World-ecology builds squarely upon the dialectical, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary traditions of Marxism but refrains from the sectarian theorizing of “ecological Marxists.” It insists, with Lenin (quoted in Marcu 1943: 548), that we must be as “radical as reality itself.” And it asks us, with Raymond Williams (1980: 84), to approach the thorny questions of power, profit and life with a revolutionary humility, in pursuit of “radically honest” analyses. In other words, we must be ready to choose *ideas* over belief structures, dialectics over dogmas. Old verities that no longer serve the struggles against capitalogenic climate crisis—and for a revolutionary democratic rather than authoritarian-technocratic politics—must be confronted and dispensed with. Forgotten and obscured elements of radical thought, necessary to today’s climate class struggle, must be nurtured and recuperated. At every turn, the kinds of radically dishonest political smears (of commission and omission)—characteristic of the eco-socialist non-critiques—must be publicly identified and collectively repudiated.

The world-ecology conversation pursues a revolutionary synthesis long implicit in Marxism. It is a conversation that seeks to join, as differentiated unities, what Engels (1895) calls the “production and reproduction of real life,” the endless accumulation of capital, the militarization of economic life, and modernity’s ruling abstractions. I will repeat here—as virtually all my critics have missed the point—that historical materialism is *historical*, or it is nothing. At its best, historical materialism challenges intellectual business as usual—including Marxist belief structures. Among its enduring contributions has been the insistence that we grasp the diversity of

life (from which “the writing of history must always set out,” Marx and Engels remind us) as variously inside, outside, and in between the specific expressions of human relations. Humans are, like all life, an environment-making species; so too human organizations, from families to financial centers. Life is the connective tissue of inside, outside, in between; it makes human organization and human organization—unevenly and modestly, but today massively—makes webs of life. The work of empires and Civilizing Projects of every kind is not outside but integral to class formation and class conflicts, at every point appropriating webs of life necessary to advancing the world rate of profit and the class relations that underpin it.

With Marx and Engels, I am completely uninterested in throwing my “phrases” against others. Is my theory “better” than theirs? Like the hypothetical proletarians dancing on the head of a pin, the question is absurd. This is what the critics refuse to acknowledge. There is no *better*. There are only responses that more or less useful to the tasks of revolutionary struggle in the capitalogenic climate crisis. The point is not theory but revolutionary praxis. And here, *world history*, not abstract theorization and radical phrase-mongering, is fundamental. The crucible of what is, and what is not, useful is world history and the ideological struggle over the relevant frames of that history. And so we are back to the standpoint of the proletariat—but this time, the Planetary Proletariat in the web of life. It is from this standpoint of communism’s “real movement” that we may regain and reclaim the generative terrain of world-historical debate and contestation. For through *this* world-historical—and I would say, world-ecological—imaginary we may find the present as world history, and reclaim that history as a fundamental instrument of revolutionary theory. Radical concepts and theories must be battle-tested on the crucible of world history, refined and reinvented through revolutionary struggle in the planetary crisis. Radical ideas, to paraphrase the young Marx, can become material forces when mobilized by the proletarian forces in the web of life. (That is, the world-historical unity of Proletariat, Biotariat, and Femitariat). It is here that we may find a world-ecology of hope and praxis that will widen—rather than narrow through sectarian denunciations—the possibilities for the socialist emancipation of humans and the rest of nature. To borrow from Immanuel Wallerstein, ours is a moment of “worldwide class struggle” (Wallerstein 1983: 35) in the “socio-physical conjuncture” (Wallerstein 1974: 35). The communist horizon beckons as we unshackle ourselves from bourgeois naturalism and embrace planetary justice in the web of life.

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