



Power, Profit, and Prometheanism, Part I¹ Method, Ideology, and the Violence of the Civilizing Project

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No civilization has been more Promethean than capitalism in its aspirations. Named after the Greek Titan who gave fire to humankind, Prometheanism is understood as a kind of environmental—but not (necessarily) *environmentalist*—strategy for the domination and management of something usually called Nature. Unfortunately, the discussion often stops there. But if Prometheanism is domination, How does it turn a profit? This is an elementary, yet frequently, unasked question of a civilization that dispenses with everything ill-suited to the law of value. The uncontroversial statement that capitalism is a system of profit-maximizing class power hasn't translated to a dialectical synthesis of power and profit in the web of life. There are surely many reasons for this. One of them is the systematic acceptance on the left of Nature as a value-free concept. And yet, historically, bourgeois naturalism has been the ideological lynchpin of successive Civilizing Projects and Malthusian moments. To ignore this is to disarm struggles for climate justice and planetary socialism.

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The “domination of nature” has never been about domination as such. Nor has it been about the web of life in any straightforward sense. Such views forget that there’s nothing natural about the idea of Nature (Williams 1972; Werlhof 1985). From Prometheanism has issued not only the abstract view of Man against Nature, but all manner of Naturalized domination—above all, modern racism and sexism (Fields and Fields 2012; Patel and Moore 2017). Prometheanism is a form of class domination premised on “human sacrifice”—from genocides to disposable workers—specifically designed to advance the rate of profit and to render present social arrangements eternal. Let’s remember that neoliberalism’s clarion call—Maggie Thatcher’s “There is no alternative”—found its bedrock principle not in economics but natural law. “The laws of economics,” Larry Summers told a World Bank seminar in 1991, “are like the laws of engineering; one set of laws works everywhere” (quoted in Klein 2007: 218).

The struggle against Prometheanism and its intellectual, ideological, and imperial expressions is essential to the struggle for climate justice. There’s nothing natural about capitalogenic climate crisis. The Naturalism that runs through modern racism and sexism—invoking *natural* racial differences or *natural* proclivities inscribed in biological sex—found, as its logical and historical precondition, Prometheanism and the invention of Nature. No indeed, *modern* racism and sexism were not there “from the beginning” (e.g., Saldanha 2020).² But Prometheanism *was*. It did not take long for these pillars of superexploitation to crystallize. All three—Prometheanism, racism, and sexism—were subsequently bound together by Civilizing Projects and the world-historical drive to advance profitability.

In this and a companion essay, I explore the following ideas. First, accounts of capitalism’s geocultural dominations that fail to reckon with its Naturalism will invariably default to fragmented and fetishized categories that confuse units of observation with units of analysis. Such intellectual fragmentation mirrors bourgeois strategies of “divide and rule” and “define and rule” (Mamdani 2012). These undermine “the unity of the [working] class” (Federici 2012: 19, 39). As Federici (2004) shows, Nature is fundamental to disuniting late medieval re/producing classes through the power of its fetishization, and transforming difference into tightly-policed dualisms.

This leads us to engage the modern history of ideology in a fresh way. The “ruling idea” of Nature—I’ll explain the uppercase in a moment—is not a narrow epistemological claim (Marx and Engels 2010: 59). It is, rather, the lever of fetishization in the procedures of (bourgeois) philosophical reductionism. This reductionism articulates the intellectual and ideological domains. Naturalism, simply put, is a factory of fetishization that not only *justifies* inequality in the name of “natural law” and “Good Science”—as in the classic Malthusian explanation of inequality (Moore 2021a). It is also an accumulation strategy that establishes the conditions of power, profit, and life

² Some version of this formulation is widespread. It is typically accompanied by a considerable margin of historical-geographical *and* conceptual slack, given the equally widespread reluctance to engage the *emergence* of the world color line in its social, juridical, and cultural specificity. Typical is Saldhana’s (2020) paraphrase of Robinson (1983): “capitalism is from the beginning... *a runaway process intrinsically geared to expand itself by exploiting populations deemed less worthy of life*” (Saldhana 2020: 16, emphasis added). This tendency, however, is not racism but Prometheanism. It is an imperial-bourgeois naturalism that provides the ideological raw material necessary to construct *not only* the world color line but the world gender line in their modern, and thoroughly Naturalized forms.

necessary to ensure rising flows of unpaid work to the vortex of accumulation. *Prometheanism*, in turn, is the managerial ethos of control and social rationality that evacuates class politics from civilizational decision-making over the relations between humans and the rest of life.

Following Bourdieu's argument for a *reflexive* approach, I highlight the imperative of a radical interrogation of the connective tissues between scholarly frames and the shifting sands of bourgeois ideology. Foregrounding the Civilizing Project in methodological and historical registers, I sketch the possibilities for rethinking the relations of power, domination, and exploitation in modern world history. This suggests an interpretive vista—let's call it “interscience” from a proletarian standpoint (Braudel 1984; Hartsock 1988; Wallerstein 2001). This way of seeing allows an unthinking and rethinking of dominant tropes on the scholarly left, above all those of settler colonialism and decolonial thought.

In Part II, I trace how these tropes have, in failing to address Prometheanism as the Archimedean lever of bourgeois ideology, defaulted to a subaltern “clash of civilizations” thesis. Since critique without reconstruction is a hollow exercise, I chart the possibilities for joining a recuperation of anti-imperialist thought to a world-historical reconstruction of the Civilizing Project. This line of march unpacks a superexploitation thesis—grasped as differentiated unity of exploitation and appropriation, of paid and unpaid work performed by humans and the rest of life (Moore 2015, 2018). This alternative illuminates the fault lines within, and conditions of unity for, the Planetary Proletariat and its trinity of proletariat, femitariat, and biotariat (Moore 2022a). This is fundamental to building the internationalist politics of solidarity necessary to confront the climate crisis and transform the Capitalocene into a Proletarocene (Salvage Collective 2021).

Prometheanism: Ruling Ideas, Ruling Abstractions, and the Class Dynamics Of Naturalism

In its dominant academic expression, Prometheanism is a thought abstraction (Meyer 2016). Environmentalists have long used the term pejoratively. That's an important discussion. My interest is, however, elsewhere. The very polarity of the Environmentalist discussion speaks to an agreement over its underlying cosmology: Prometheans and Environmentalists alike agree on the cosmology of Man and Nature. This agreement admits social, technical, and technological relations while removing historical questions of class and the ideologies of Civilizing Projects. If such reductionism is often justified as an innocent practicality, just as frequently it is frequently an ideological claim masquerading as Good Science (Lewontin, Rose, and Kamin 1984). It conveys the impression that mechanical abstractions are innocent of ongoing ideological struggle—notwithstanding the widespread gestural acceptance of Bourdieu's insistence on reflexivity (Moore 2017a, 2021a; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

It's at the nexus of method and ideology that Prometheanism—grasped not as a thought abstraction but as a ruling abstraction—become significant. Capitalism's *ruling abstractions* shape what we see and do not see, what we foreground and what we abstract. Ruling abstractions are more than the premises of the bourgeoisie's “ruling ideas”—obsessed with Man, Nature and Civilizing Projects from the beginning (Moore 2021b). Breaking sharply with premodern holisms,

the Civilizing Project forged ontogenetically separated, hierarchically-structured, ideological zones: Man and Nature. Enlightened Civilizers bore the moral responsibility of rational oversight and active management. The result was to de-politicize and therefore legitimate capitalism by banishing its antagonisms onto the ground of “natural law” (Moore 2021a). Man, Nature, and Civilization became guiding threads for the practical violence of imperialism and its drive to establish the necessary conditions of world accumulation (Moore 2022a). The problem of ontological dualism—institutionalized in the Two Cultures of the human and physical “sciences” (Snow 1959)—is soaked in the blood and dirt of imperialist conquest and the worldwide patterns of racialized and gendered class formation it created (Wallerstein 1983).

This takes us to another uncontroversial statement: Upon the “discovery” of new lands, among the first acts of every great imperial power was to declare the inhabitants as savage. Un-Christian, un-Civilized, un-Development, un-Sustainable, they were part of Nature; not Human, or not quite Human. Or not yet Human. Savage meant unruly, and *lazy* (Alatas 1977)—an ideological move that naturally justified *work* as the road to Salvation. Sometimes, there were debates. The Valladolid Controversy was only the most salient (Patel and Moore 2017). But a dominant tendency won out: imperialism and world class formation would unfold through a cultural logic of “human sacrifice” that entwined the ideological and the biological (King 1989).

Our uncontroversial observation lends itself to something unthinkable within the imperial frame of Man and Nature. Namely, this ruling binary’s essential *intellectual* architecture had very little to do with the human species and the rest of life. Humanity, Civilization, Savagery – all reflected, and tried to alter in capital’s favor, the gradient of effective resistance to imperialism. Thus China, for instance, might be celebrated or disparaged according to early modernity’s global balance of forces (Hung 2003). In the final analysis, it was all about managerial control. From the planetary to the plantation, Civilizers were those who thought, while the Savages were those of worked. This imperial-bourgeois managerialism forms a throughline from Descartes and Locke to Frederick Winslow Taylor to the World Economic Forum’s Great Reset (Moore 2021a, 2022d). Its Prometheanism enabled the rapid appropriations of Cheap Nature, whose profitable leveraging depended on all manner of coercive semi-proletarianizations (Wallerstein 1983; Rediker and Linebaugh 2000; Federici 2004; Moore 2017b).

This ideological transition established some humans as Man and most humans as Savage and part of Nature. Modern racism and sexism are starkly binarized. This turns on a procedure of “radical exclusion” (Plumwood 1993). Combined with Prometheanism and philosophical reductionism, we have a toxic ideological brew. In contrast to medieval Europe, during the rise of capitalism Man and Nature were conceptualized as “ontologically prior to the whole that the units comprise” (Lewontin et al. 1984: 6). This is common to ideological as well as intellectual dualism, a procedure through which the properties of Man and the properties of Nature are not only ontogenetically-generated but mutually exclusive (Moore 2015, 2017a). Plumwood (1993) calls it the “logic of colonialism.” In so doing, she allows us to unify dialectically the relations between capitalism’s “means of mental production” (Marx and Engels 2010: 59) and its *class* strategies of power, profit and life.

Why should bourgeois reductionism be such a pressing issue? The short answer is that it speaks to how the climate crisis is a class struggle enabled by—because obscured by—Prometheanism and its Man and Nature cosmology. Today’s climate crisis is a capitalogenic triple helix: of the climate class divide, climate patriarchy, and climate apartheid (Moore 2019, 2021a, 2022a, 2022b). This is not a mechanically-joined trinity, positing an abstract causal pluralism in the fashion of intersectionality. Rather, the trinity of Slaveship Earth emerged at a turning point in capitalist history—the “long cold seventeenth century” (Ladurie and Daux 2008; Moore 2021c, 2022c). Between 1550 and 1700, the Civilizing Project, commodity frontiers, and militarized accumulation contributed to the first capitalogenic climate crisis. This was the “Orbis Spike,” a dramatic if temporary decarbonization (and therefore cooling) issuing from slaving-induced genocides after 1492 (Maslin and Lewis 2015; Cameron et al. 2015; Koch et al. 2019).

That long, cold seventeenth century—the most protracted and unfavorable stretch of the Little Ice Age—was an unprecedented moment of capitalist crisis, marked by social unrest, political crisis, and economic volatility (Parker 2013). Imperial bourgeoisies moved rapidly towards a “climate fix” strategy premised on new rounds of coercive proletarianization and commodity frontiers, forging new racialized and gendered regimes of accumulation (Moore 2021b, 2021c). This initial formation of climate apartheid and climate patriarchy was propelled by the class dynamics of the climate fix—even if recent vogues like the “plantationocene” (Wolford 2021) and the “racial capitalocene” seek to deny this (Vergès 2017).³

To lean on Barbara J. Fields well-turned phrase (1990), ideologies do not have “lives of their own”: they are *class projects*. More precisely, these class projects are shaped by the “dull *compulsion of economic relations*” in the web of life (Marx 1977: 899; Moore 2015). *Class politics* are crucial because most of what constitutes a good business environment is beyond the capacity of capitalists as economic actors. They require state-machineries, and state-machineries require ideologies to cohere effective unity between ruling strata and cadres (intellect workers), as well as some token of consent from the vast majority (Gramsci 1971). As Wallerstein illuminates, the long cold seventeenth century was a moment when *statism*—“a [legitimizing] claim for increased power in the hands of the state machinery”—cohered as the ideology of Absolutism (Wallerstein 1974: 144ff, quotation: 147). This clearly was insufficient, however, to realize the climate fix embarked upon after 1570. Some measure of universalism—initially, an increasingly instrumentalized Christian “natural” theology—was necessary for colonial hegemony (Wallerstein 1974; Betancor 2017). Hence the Civilizing Project’s “universal” Prometheanism as the ideology of endless accumulation. It

dominates the thinking and action of rulers and ruled, oppressors and oppressed. It is the cosmology of “more,” more of everything, more for everybody, but more particularly (or if necessary) for “me” or “us.” There are seeming rebellions against this cosmology: “limits of growths” rebellions which often turn out to be hidden

³ In both instances, the arguments proceed through an avoidance of the Capitalocene argument about how class, race, gender, and webs of life are constructed in their historical-geographical specificity (compare with Moore 2017b, 2018).

ways of defending the “more” of what is of interest to one group against the “more” of another group; “egalitarian” rebellions which often turn out to operate on the assumption that the route to equality is through more of the same, but this time for someone else, “us.” (Wallerstein 1978: 7)

Here we find a decisive ideological moment of worldwide class formation and accumulation. From the origins of capitalism, Prometheanism unifies the structures of knowledge, ideology, and capital (Moore 2021b). It produces successive versions of the Civilizing Project, and these are necessary to consolidate successive accumulation regimes. From the genocidal cocktail of metaphysical instrumentalism and “just war” in the sixteenth century to Truman’s nuclear hegemony, linking the Truman Doctrine’s counter-insurgency with Point Four Developmentalism, the Civilizing Project has represented the imperial bourgeoisie’s self-interest as the bearer of Salvation, Civilization, Development, and today, Sustainability (Moore 2021a). No accumulation regime can forgo such legitimation.

Mechanically unifying bourgeois humanism and bourgeois naturalism, the Civilizing Project killed two birds with one stone. It “over-represented” the imperial bourgeoisie as the best of Mankind (Wynter 2003). Meanwhile, empires and their cadres invented Nature as a strategy to secure everything for which they didn’t want to pay (von Werlhof 1985). While scientific revolutions found ways to turn webs of life into profit-making opportunities, military revolutions made sure no one got in the way (Antonacci 2021).

Nature was the ideological glue that held the two moments together. It served as an ideological hammer of worldwide class formation, not merely externalizing costs but enabling epoch-defining modes of appropriating unpaid work (Moore 2018). When Federici reckons western Europe’s female semi-proletariat as the “savages of Europe,” she situates this transition as a decisive “lever” in the production of world surplus value (Federici 2004: 100, 103–104). It was pivotal to the “proletarian struggle” (Federici 2004: 80)—and constitutive of the era’s climate fix. Such bourgeois naturalism was, in other words, fundamental not just to the creation of the world semi-proletariat, but also of the femitariat and its provision of socially-necessary *unpaid* work. To this we may add the strategic unity of big science, big capital and big empire in mapping and securing profit-making opportunities in planetary life, forging a *biotariat* of extra-human unpaid workers yoked to the engine of endless accumulation (Moore 2018, 2022a).

Class, Civilizing Projects, and the Problem of Method

The line between the *Civilized* and the *Savage* was drawn early and often through a cascading series of early capitalist geographical and geocultural developments (Patel and Moore 2017). It would mature as the Cartesian revolution after 1648, but its threads were increasingly woven together in the fabric of a precocious if uneven bourgeois naturalism whose lineages reach back to the long sixteenth century (Crosby 1997; Abulafia 2008). By the seventeenth century, Nature and Savagery assumed their modern meaning.

Savagery in particular became the ideological raw material for two pillars of bourgeois domination—sexism and racism (Federici 2004; Bethencourt 2013). *Naturalism* enabled a new form of class exploitation. This was superexploitation, premised on the appropriation of unpaid work from humans and the rest of nature under the sign of one or another “natural law” (Moore 2021b, 2022d). Nature became not only a “ruling idea” but a *ruling abstraction* enabling this superexploitation (Moore 2015, 2022b). As we’ve seen, the emergence of modern sexism was a constitutive moment of primitive accumulation—a movement of class formation (Marx 1977)—through which women became the “savages of Europe.” Absent femitarianization in and through proletarianization, there was no Cheap Labor and no capitalism.

Modern racism formed in cognate but distinctive fashion. Robinson makes the point well. Identifying “savagery” as fundamental to Cheap Labor in the capitalist world-ecology:

English colonialism had [invented]... the savagery of the Irish... The notion... traveled well. *When the need was for labor*, the Irish, the poor of the metropole’s cities, the African and the native American were comfortably herded together under the notion of savagery. When the issue had been the expropriation of the lands of the natives, there was little cause to respect the claims of savages or to comprehend their resistance as anything more than *savagery*. Indeed, colonial thought expected quite the opposite. The colonists were the ‘advanced civilization.’ Such societies proved their historical significance by the destruction or domination of savage. (Robinson 1983: 186–187, emphases added)

From this vantage point, we can begin to make sense of a far-reaching intellectual turn among critical intellectuals, especially but not only in the Global North. This is the tendency to evade the the dynamics of capital and class through tropes of settler colonialism, extractivism, plantationocene, and sometimes, deceptively, “the West” or Europe (e.g., Wolfe 1999; Blaser 2013; Hixson 2013; Brand et al. 2016; Wolford 2021; for critiques, see Ajl 2020; Moore 2022b). If the approaches are diverse, the wider ideological impact of these tropes has been fairly uniform. In the main, these meta-categories and the academic cultures they sustain privilege the following: regional particularism, class and capital denialism, methodological nationalism and groupism, and a kind of “new institutionalism” (Lecours 2005) that privileges a specific productive or political form (states, mines, plantations, etc.) at the interpretive expense of their underlying relations. Is it impolite to observe that such empiricism finds its historical taproot in seventeenth century English empiricism? Or that such empiricism was closely linked to actually existing primitive accumulation, settler colonialism and the slave trade (Glausser 1990)? Probably. But I can see no way around the matter.

The alternative? We might fruitfully revisit an earlier wave of settler colonial studies. Intimately bound to the tensions of national liberation struggles and decolonization, radical scholars in the long 1970s sought to make sense of the global and national antagonisms of class formation, politics, and struggles within an imperialist system of accumulation (Arrighi 1965; Emmanuel 1972; Good 1976; Samed 1976; McMichael 1984). Across a spectrum of interpretations, these approaches by and large rejected Eurocentric class formalism in favor of

creative and dialectical reformulations of class and capital, gender and race in world-historical perspective.

This is a crucial lineage of the world-historical critique. Its insights have been largely eclipsed by manifold expressions of bourgeois reductionism—a meta-procedure of the capitalist mode of thought from the Scientific Revolution onwards (Lewontin et al. 1984). World-historical thinkers struggled against such reductionism from the beginning. Much of the recent wave of settler colonial and cognate research has favored varied forms of methodological nationalism and cognate procedures. Of these latter, of special relevance is groupism, a species of “basic unit” thinking that takes

bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basic constituents of the social world)... It has managed to withstand a quarter century of constructivist theorizing in the social sciences... that “cultures,” “communities,” “tribes,” “races,” “nations,” and “ethnic groups” are not bounded wholes. Despite these and other developments, ethnic and other groups continue to be conceived as entities and cast as actors... “Groupness” is a variable, not a constant; *it cannot be presupposed*. (Brubaker 2004: 2–4, emphasis added)

Methodological groupism, no less than methodological nationalism, sharply contrasts with the world-historical method and its preference for the dialectical emergence, consolidation, and movements of relational wholes (Hopkins 1982; Moore 2017a). A dialectical method objects to arguments premised on “structural invariance”: the notion that world-historical processes (including civilizational, national, racial, and other constructs) expand quantitatively without qualitative restructuring (Arrighi 2004). The reliance on non-relational units as building blocks relies on philosophical reductionism. Reductionism is *not* the same thing as the academic folk concept that usually says: “*You didn’t pay enough attention to topic x, y, or z,*” or alternatively: “*It’s way more complicated than that!*”—the battle cry of empiricism. Rather, it encompasses

a set of general methods and modes of explanation both of the world of physical objects and of human societies. Broadly, reductionists try to explain the properties of complex wholes—molecules, say, or societies—in terms of the units of which those molecules or societies are composed. They would argue, for example, that... the properties of a human society are similarly no more than the sums of the individual behaviors and tendencies of the individual humans of which that society is composed... [R]eductionism is the claim that the compositional units of a whole are ontologically prior to the whole that the units comprise. That is, the units and their properties exist before the whole, and there is a chain of causation that runs from the units to the whole. (Lewontin et al. 1984: 5–6)

By Way of Conclusion: From Method to Praxis

Basic unit approaches are hardly confined to scholarly inquiry. They are intimately bound to capitalism’s structures of knowledge, the “means of mental production,” and recurrent Malthusian iterations of biologist, populationist, genetic and other “natural” justifications for capitalist

inequality (McNally 1993; Moore 2021a). A dialectical alternative cuts through the Gordian Knot of difference not by mechanically separating (and then recombining or intersecting) observable units but rather by embracing difference as mutually—yet asymmetrically—constituting (e.g., Federici 2004). Dialectics, it bears repeating, flows *through* variation—not in spite of it.

Dialectics is, in other words, an *eductive* method (Moore 2015). Marx’s guiding thread allows one to explore the potential “for change, ...for the construction of new totalities (e.g., social ecosystems) and the like.” *Eduction* “rather than deduction or induction is... the central motif of dialectical praxis” (Harvey 1993: 37). Only then can dialectics as the “great loosener” allow us to engage specific observable units within wider historical movements of creation and dissolution (Bhaskar 2008; Moore 2017a). On that note, I can think of nothing better than to conclude by highlighting Marx’s trajectory in *Capital* (1977). A story that begins with the commodity does not conclude with a neat and tidy reprise of the commodity cell form. Marx concludes with the expropriation of the expropriators.

As Marx underlines, historical materialism is not merely method but praxis.

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