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The Labor Process: How the Underdog is Kept Under

ABSTRACT

“Marxism and the Underdog” is an impressive paper. It usefully outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the Marxist (what I would prefer to term “historical materialist”) perspective on animals. As the paper rightly suggests, much of Marx’s own work was predicated on the opposition between humans and animals other than humans. Yet, as the paper also points out, many of his concepts and critiques are useful for addressing contemporary concerns. Among the most important recent examples is Benton’s critique of liberal and individualist “animal rights.” It is a perspective on Marx and his assertion that much human rights discourse offers little or no fundamental challenge to the patterns of economic, social, and political power that pervade capitalist society. There is little point in allocating rights to humans (and to animals) if the kind of society in which they live systematically denies the realization of these rights. I mention Benton here because his important perspective on animal rights is not fully explained in the paper under review here.

Yet we should not be over-confident about what might seem like the on-going and inevitable recognition of the animals question by historical materialism. For example, two recent well-received books
on historical materialism and the environment (Burkett, 1999; Foster, 2000) make no reference at all to animals as such. “The environment” remains here almost tacitly and wholly equated with the inanimate environment, with the wrecking of this environment and the challenges of such wrecking to both capitalism and socialism. These are excellent texts, but they still are, therefore, somewhat stuck in strongly anthropocentric ways of thinking. They do not consider the still relevant question of the real continuities between humans and animals, the need of the latter for proper recognition as independent entities, or the vexed question as to whether human sympathy is extended to all species alike.

The adequate incorporation of animals into historical materialism, therefore, still needs fighting for. And this can be done using some of the central concepts of historical materialism. Yet this perspective can be of more use than this paper perhaps suggests. Commodification, capitalism’s restless search for value and the incorporation of nature of all kinds into capitalist labor-processes, is at the heart of the capitalist enterprise. Animals as well as human beings seen from this perspective are not only, or simply, a “working class” on whose labor the whole of human society is predicated. Their biologically inherited powers of growth and reproduction are now increasingly subsumed within, and indeed modified by, capitalist social relations. They are being increasingly modified in capital’s own image. Their bodies and powers of development are being made an increasingly integral part of the production-process? in the food-production process.

**Historical Materialism**

Nonhuman animals, therefore, no longer are just slaves or beasts of burden, but they increasingly are being made central as means of production, ways in which surplus value is being realized by applying human labor (in, say, the laboratory) to the animals’ powers of reproduction and development. It is often said that new forms of In Vitro Fertilization and genetic modification are ethically suspect, whether extended to humans or animals. Moreover, increasing levels of private ownership and commodification using these technologies also have legitimately become causes of concern to critics. Yet an historical materialist position makes clear what is happening at a deeper level.
These developments are just part of an attempt to make new labor-processes out of reproduction. They are no less than new ways of interacting with nature to generate surplus value, again using human and non-human labor as a free input to realize value and profits. The making of future generations is now a labor-process. This is being achieved with all the social relations, forms of commodification, and managerial control that might be expected of a capitalist labor-process.

A second element of Marx’s historical materialism has hardly been recognized by “green Marxism” and finds only passing attention in the paper under review here. Yet it potentially is important. This concerns human subjectivity, a matter that has been taken up by a number of environmentalists, especially deep greens. But an historical materialist perspective throws new light on this topic. Marx’s vision of humanity’s interaction with nature, as set out in Capital, was dialectical.

Labour is first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.

As humanity changes animate and inanimate nature and attempts to reconstruct it in its own image, it simultaneously changes its own human nature. In this process, not only are social relations, formed in new kinds of labor-process, converting the powers of nature to produce commodities but also, critically, new kinds of subjectivity are made. Typically, as Marx argued, human beings are individualized and made to adopt a wholly instrumental view toward one another and toward external nature. Yet with the benefit of Freudian psychology and its fusion with historical materialism in the work of writers such as Dean (2002), we can envisage contemporary forms of human subjectivity and identity as increasingly narcissistic. The growing individualism of the workplace (including high levels of self-employment and part-time work) backed by high levels of consumerism, is now generating a new form of pre-occupied, self-regarding, self.
Extension into Adulthood

A modern identity of this kind is an extension into adulthood of more understandable childlike disregard for the needs of other living beings. This kind of subjectivity envisages the physical environment, animals, and other human beings as mere means of serving our own, human, well-being and identity. Such a modern narcissistic self leaves animals, and their need for a separately recognized kind of identity, with little chance of an independent existence. At best, they are limited to zoos and wildlife parks, tethered and displayed for humanity’s paid-for yet detached enjoyment. At worst, they are exploited in ways so well recognized by many of the authors discussed in “Marxism and the Underdog.” Something resembling Freud’s “anaclitic” form of subjectivity (one which recognizes the independence of beings on whom we still very much depend) urgently needs developing; one which extends sympathy to animals as well as humans. And yet it is difficult to see the making of such subjectivity without major transformations to the labor-processes in which so many animals are caught up. It will not be easily realized, as “deep greens” in particular seem to suggest, by people’s simply thinking differently.

Arguably, as this “underdog” paper suggests, a sympathy toward animals is developing, at least among certain classes. But an historical materialist perspective helps demonstrate why the underdogs of all kinds (including the working class) are still finding recognition and proper treatment so hard to achieve.

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References

