

CRACK CAPITALISM

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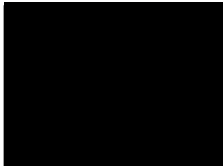
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The abstraction of doing into labour is the constitution of nature as object.

The driving of people from the land laid the basis for the creation of a proletariat cut off from the means of production and survival, and with it for the generalisation of abstract labour and the rise of capitalism. At the core of Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation is the 'forcible driving of the peasantry from the land' and 'the usurpation of the common lands', starting in the last third of the fifteenth century (1867/1965: 718; 1867/1990: 878).¹ This was (and is) a violent process. Marx cites the infamous Highland clearances in Scotland:

As an example of the method obtaining in the nineteenth century, the 'clearing' made by the Duchess of Sutherland will suffice here. This person, well instructed in economy, resolved, on entering upon her government, to effect a radical cure, and to turn the whole country, whose population had already been, by earlier processes of the like kind, reduced to 15,000, into a sheep-walk. From 1814 to 1820 these 15,000 inhabitants, about 3,000 families, were systematically hunted and rooted out. All their villages were destroyed and burnt, all their fields turned into pasturage. (1867/1965: 731; 1867/1990: 891)

We now, possibly city dwellers for generations, read this and we are shocked. 'Poor people, how they suffered', we think, and we do not understand. We do not understand that the 'poor people' are we.

The tearing of people from the land is perhaps the original and irredeemable sin of capitalism. It is a tearing asunder, a violent separation of humans from the natural conditions of their existence: 'Man *lives* on nature – means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. 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.² The constant interchange, or metabolic relation, between humans and nature is central to human existence. When Marx speaks of useful labour (the labour process as opposed to the valorisation process), he says that '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' (Marx 1867/1990: 283).³ The interaction with nature is a central aspect of human doing.

In pre-capitalist societies, the relation to the living and non-living world around us was generally based on the idea that it was important to maintain some sort of equilibrium. Before cutting down a tree, the woodcutter might ask it for forgiveness: absurd though it may seem to us, this was a recognition of the interdependence of the different forms of life on this planet. Often this relation was understood in magical or religious terms: 'At the basis of magic was an animate conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit and this imagined the cosmos as a living organism, populated by occult forces, where every element was in "sympathetic" relation with the rest' (Federici 2004: 142). These were certainly enchanted, fetishised forms of thought which interposed gods, goddesses and other spirits as mediators in the relation between humans and the non-human world (and an integral part of the patterns of domination in those societies). Nevertheless, these magical or religious forms gave anchorage to a certain equilibrium between humans and the surrounding world. Human doing, before the rise of capitalist labour, was generally based in a respect for this equilibrium.

The driving of people from the land is the forceful separation of humans from their natural surroundings, the breaking of the equilibrium necessary for human survival. This is the creation of what Marx referred to as the 'metabolic rift'⁴ between humans and the nature of which we are part, the metabolic rift that now so obviously threatens the very existence of humanity.⁵ This rift is inseparable from the abstraction of doing into labour: the former peasants, driven from their land, have no alternative but to sell their labour power to the owners of the means of production. The

very meaning of human activity is transformed: from the daily dialogue with nature it is transformed into the empty carrying-out of instructions – doing becomes labour. The alienation of labour is at once alienation from nature (Foster 2000: 72).

The rift is a dis-enchantment of nature.⁶ Nature becomes an object for humans, an object of scientific study, an object of labour, separated from magic and religion. This was not just a shift in thinking, but in fact a long and violent process closely bound up with the suppression and redefinition of women. The witch hunts that were such an important part of primitive accumulation were an attack on the magical vision of the world and the practices associated with it. (Federici 2004: 200ff.) This was accompanied by the rise of a new scientific rationalism that had at its base the constitution of nature as an object quite separate from humans, an object governed by laws that could be discovered by reason.⁷ Our relation to the world around us came to be seen as a relation of separation, of distance, of knowledge-about and use or exploitation.

This has profound consequences. Marx and Engels spoke of the resulting ‘idiocy of rural life’ (1848/1976: 188) and the cutting-off of the rural population from ‘all world intercourse, and consequently from all culture’ (1845/1976: 401), but the more serious problem is perhaps not so much what the separation did to the rural population as what it did to the urban population, those deprived of the contact with the land. The separation ‘makes one man into a restricted town-animal, another into a restricted country-animal’ (1845/1976: 64), and it is perhaps the restricted town-animal that does the greater damage, and suffers the greater loss.⁸ Ehrenreich (2007: 129ff.) speaks of an ‘epidemic of melancholy’ in Europe in the seventeenth century, which she sees as an aspect of the repression of collective joy, but it does not seem fanciful to connect both the widespread melancholy and the repression of collective joy to the separation of people from the land, the loss of the therapeutic effect of contact with other forms of life and the loss of vitality of the village communities. The enclosure of the land does not just provide an abundant supply of available labour power for the nascent capitalism: it creates a world of city dwellers depressed, impoverished and desensitised by their loss of contact with nature.

The enclosure of land is far from being just a past episode: in world terms, the elimination of peasants from the land has never been so torrential as it is today:

The global forces 'pushing' people from the countryside – mechanisation of agriculture in Java and India, food imports in Mexico, Haiti and Kenya, civil war and drought throughout Africa, and everywhere the consolidation of small holdings into large ones and the competition of industrial-scale agribusiness – seem to sustain urbanisation even when the 'pull' of the city is drastically weakened by debt and economic depression. (Davis 2006: 17)

All of this means not only misery for the people involved but that the metabolic rift between humans and nature is constantly growing.

By producing and reproducing the separation between humans and the rest of nature, we produce and reproduce the destruction of our own conditions of existence; in other words, we produce and reproduce the conditions of our own destruction. In this, humans bear a peculiar responsibility that separates us from other forms of life. The metabolic rift that threatens not only our own existence but also the existence of very many (possibly all) other forms of life is the consequence of human action and can be overcome only by a transformation of the ways in which humans live.

It has become very clear that our metabolic interaction with other forms of life and our natural environment is a precondition of human existence and that the future of humanity depends on our ability to overcome the rift we have created. This does not mean, however, that we are the same as other animals. It has become popular to assert that there is no essential difference between humans and other forms of life. This seems to me to be both wrong and dangerous. It is we humans (not the pigs, not the ants) who are destroying the prospects of life on earth and this reflects our peculiarly creative and destructive power. The doing which is central to this book is distinctively human doing, not animal doing. It is necessary to recognise our difference from animals in order to assume fully our peculiar responsibility in overcoming the metabolic rift: we cannot rely on the pigs or ants to do it.⁹

It is little wonder then that many of the movements of recent years have placed at the centre of their struggles the overcoming of the separation between humans and other forms of life. This is the substance of many of the cracks: the development (through organic gardening, permaculture, the creation of botanic gardens, dry toilets, whatever) of a form of living, a form of doing, based on a different relation with nature.¹⁰ The revolt of doing against abstract labour echoes the cry of the sixteenth-century revolutionary, Thomas Müntzer: 'all living things must also become free.'¹¹