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Author/s:

Nelson, A

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Marx, work, agency and postcapitalist prefiguration

Anitra Nelson¹

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Abstract

Marx's interpretation of 'praxis' as a primary expression of what we are, of self-realisation and what we might achieve as social beings, frames his revolutionary thought. This article connects Marx's unique approach to certain forms of contemporary grassroots resistance and community-based postcapitalist responses to global heating and the totalitarianism of capital. In particular, his appreciation of humans as at one with nature supports a postcapitalist imaginary abolishing the contradiction between humans and more-than-human nature intrinsic to capitalist practices. By reference to critical theorists such as Jasper Bernes and autonomist Marxist authors Harry Cleaver and P.M. (Hans Widmer), the article identifies key principles of a nonmarket socialist form of postcapitalism, i.e. beyond both state and money. Work as waged labour under the rule of capitalists gives way to ecologically and socially constructive activities fulfilling collective sufficiency cogoverned and coproduced by all. Work is freed up as semi-voluntary activity, negotiated within a community mode of production where the product is both predetermined (co-planned) and, later, shared on the basis of satisfying basic needs. In contrast to strictly defined capitalist waged work, now standard across various geographies and cultures, the postcapitalist community mode of production proposed establishes convivial and ecologically appropriate work within local geographies of community sufficiency. Even as universal (global) principles typify the community mode of production, symbiotically respectful relations between humans and nature give rise to unique localised geographies of ecological diversity and pluralism.

Keywords

Karl Marx, work, postcapitalism, prefiguration, nonmarket socialism, praxis

Marx, trabajo, agencia y prefiguración poscapitalista

Resumen

La interpretación que hace Marx de la "praxis" como expresión primaria de lo que somos, de la autorrealización y de lo que podemos lograr como seres sociales, enmarca su pensamiento revolucionario. Este artículo conecta el enfoque único de Marx con ciertas formas de resistencia popular contemporánea y respuestas poscapitalistas de base comunitaria al calentamiento global y el totalitarismo del capital. En particular, su apreciación de los humanos como uno con la naturaleza apoya un imaginario poscapitalista que abolió la contradicción entre los humanos y la naturaleza más que humana intrínseca a las prácticas capitalistas. En referencia a teóricos críticos como Jasper Bernes y los autores marxistas autónomos Harry Cleaver y P.M. (Hans Widmer), el artículo identifica los principios clave de una forma de poscapitalismo socialista sin mercado, es decir, más allá tanto del Estado como del dinero. El trabajo como trabajo asalariado bajo el dominio de los capitalistas da paso a actividades ecológica y socialmente constructivas que satisfacen la suficiencia colectiva cogobernadas y coproducidas por todos. El trabajo se libera como actividad semivoluntaria, negociada dentro de un modo de producción comunitario

¹Informal Urbanism Research Hub (InfUr-), University of Melbourne, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Anitra Nelson, Informal Urbanism Research Hub (InfUr-), University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

Email: anitra.nelson@unimelb.edu.au

Correction (April 2024): Article updated to correct the in-text citation of the reference from '(Nelson and Liegey, 2022)' to '(Liegey and Nelson, 2020)' in the 'Green Materialism' section.

donde el producto está predeterminado (coplanificado) y, posteriormente, compartido sobre la base de la satisfacción de las necesidades básicas. En contraste con el trabajo asalariado capitalista estrictamente definido, ahora estándar en varias geografías y culturas, el modo de producción comunitario poscapitalista propuesto establece un trabajo amigable y ecológicamente apropiado dentro de geografías locales de suficiencia comunitaria. Incluso cuando los principios universales (globales) tipifican el modo de producción comunitario, las relaciones simbióticamente respetuosas entre los humanos y la naturaleza dan lugar a geografías localizadas únicas de diversidad ecológica y pluralismo.

Palabras clave

Karl Marx, trabajo, poscapitalismo, prefiguración, socialismo de no mercado, praxis

The revolutionary socialist Karl Marx contended that we have the capacity and the will to think, act, reflect and re-create our world and ourselves. With respect to work:

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 confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature ... he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature ... At the end of every labour process, a result emerges *which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning*, hence already existed ideally. (Marx, 1976: 283, emphasis added)

This article explores the liberationist drive through Marx's interpretation of human work with non-human nature as a primary expression of what we are, of self-realisation, and what we might achieve as social beings. It applies Marx's appreciation both of humans' capacity to pre-plan their activities and of their need to exist at one with non-human nature to the development of a shared imagining and realisation of postcapitalism to overcome the destructive and artificial dualism between humans and non-human nature intrinsic to capitalist values and relations.

This leading quote illustrates Marx's approach, described by the Serbian Praxis School philosopher Mihailo Marković (1983: 215) as a veritable 'unity of naturalism and humanism'. While *naturalism* positions humans as 'part of nature', Marx's *humanism* is evident in identifying us as a distinctive '*being of praxis*', referring to our 'autonomous, self-reflective, creative way of acting' (Marković, 1983: 215). I interpret Marx's praxis in an ontological sense as evident in *all* human activity, within which paid work (alienated labour), like slaving, is but one, inferior, type (Petrović, 1983: 389). While I have scruples with Marx's contention that humans are distinctive because they alone 'of all living organisms, communicate in symbols and think conceptually', I agree that within our 'various conflicting dispositions' humans have a self-reflective capacity for 'self-creation' (Marković, 1983: 217).

In a naturalist vein, references in this article are made to 'non-human nature' or simply 'nature' not to distinguish humans as *apart* from other nature but rather as representing the non-human environmental conditions within which humans exist, even though most of these conditions are

artificial to some extent or another in as much as they have already been altered by humans, especially in the capitalist era. Artificiality does not make these conditions any the less natural but, rather, impacted similarly along with 'human potentiality', which is 'crippled and wasted' by capitalist relations, private property and the capitalist state (Marković, 1983: 216).

Often referred to as a theory of metabolic rift associated with the ways capitalist relations and forces of production inevitably alienate, mangle and destroy human and non-human nature, Saito (2022, 28) outlines three 'interrelated and mutually reinforcing' dimensions to Marx's concept of metabolism centring on interruptions to, disruptions of, and highly damaging disjunctions between and within, natural cyclical processes. The first *material* rift assaults natural cyclical processes generating and regenerating life as capitalist relations and forces of production develop to produce and reproduce capitalist *value* on an expanding scale by exploiting and wasting both labour (paid work) and the environment. Again supporting the valorisation of capital, the second *spatial* rift evolves from reconfigured forms of, and relations between, urban and rural activities, while the third *temporal* rift is associated with the results of a growing disjuncture between 'nature's time and capital's time' (Saito, 2022: 27).

In response to the growing ecological crises resulting from such metabolic disorders, ecosocialism, degrowth and certain other twenty-first century movements are engaged in experiential prefigurative experiments to inform the urgent transformation necessary to heal relationships between and within humanity and non-human nature. The climate emergency with respect to rising carbon emissions and the impacts of global heating already being seen and felt are only the most visible examples signalling the need for transformation. As Saito (2022: 31) concludes, 'metabolic rift cannot be fully repaired unless the universal metabolism of nature is mediated in a qualitatively different manner by freely associated producers'. In this sense prefigurative experiments aim to transform human work into a completely different activity from paid work, labour done under capitalist supervision.

Ecological crises, such as global heating which threatens to destroy the very conditions our human species relies on to live, must be addressed. As scientists warn action on such may already be too late, ecosocialist and degrowth postcapitalist prefiguration symbolise transformational signposts informing the determination and creation of processes, structures and institutions to human liberation *with* nature rather than liberation from

it. As such, I marginalise the arguments and work of productivist and ecomodernist imaginaries of a capitalist and Marxist character. Instead, the arguments orient around how Marx's perspectives speak to our contemporary dilemma using select quotes to support particular interpretations of Marx's original text.¹

I identify key principles of a nonmarket socialist postcapitalist model – beyond the state, markets and money (Nelson and Timmerman, 2011) – by reference to works, especially by autonomist Marxists. Within this model, work exists as praxis in a much freer, more fulsome and sophisticated form than it does in paid work within capitalism. Work is a collectively planned and delegated activity negotiated within politico-economic processes within the community mode of production, where the product itself is both predetermined and, later, shared on the basis of satisfying basic needs. Instead of waged labour – being paid in a universal equivalent (money) for various specific, predefined and supervised efforts – human activity is substantially locally organised in co-governing communities.

In contrast to strictly defined terms and conditions of capitalist waged work, extended in ecologically incompatible and standardised ways across various geographies and cultures, the postcapitalist model proposed establishes culturally and ecologically appropriate work within local geographies of community sufficiency. Consequently, even if universal principles typify the community mode of production, they are glocally applied, as respectful relations between people and nature living symbiotically in unique localised geographies of ecological diversity and pluralism. As such, glocal interacting cells across Earth focus on healing the destructive results of metabolic rifts on both human and non-human nature as well as establishing humanly liberating and sustainable relations between Earth and humanity.

Nature, human being and work

Marx, following Ludwig Feuerbach, referred to our 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*) in terms of our capacity and will to think and act, reflect, and re-create ourselves and our world. These characteristics are essential to the meaning of being human; species-being is 'conscious life activity' (Marx, 1977: 73). Nuances in this quote from his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* need to be appreciated lest one leaps to the conclusion that Marx is expressing a crude form of dualism between human beings and nature, as if opposites and with humans dominant (as capitalism dictates). In fact, Marx's method of dialectical contradiction leads in the opposite direction, acknowledging the unity of humans and nature.

On the one hand, Marx posits that the worker's 'object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of man's species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created' (Marx, 1977: 74). This line of reasoning is highly significant for Marx's

theory of alienation and labour theory of value or, to use the insightful terminology of Elson (1979: 165), his 'value theory of labour' where the form of the universal equivalent (money) 'reflects only abstract labour' as production for trade, workers and work are wholly managed by and for capitalists. Simultaneously, this alienation logic reflects Marx's position on human agency, liberation and progress to postcapitalism. The capitalist takes the product from its genuine producers so it is incumbent on the workers to desist and resist this unfair, indeed unnatural, process and recover not just their product and means of production but their very human being to visualise, plan and realise their own collective futures.

On the other hand, this narrative of human objectification in which nature superficially appears as a subject does not deny humans encapsulation within nature, for:

The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which his labour is realised, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces. (Marx, 1977: 69)

Climate activists, climate justice advocates, and First Nations people who advocate the interdependence of humans and nature within localised co-governing (Kothari, 2021), and chant slogans such as 'We are nature defending itself' and 'System change not climate change' are consistent with Marx's thought, as follows.

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 part of nature. (Marx, 1977: 72–73)

Indeed, socialism 'proceeds from the *theoretically and practically sensuous consciousness* of man and of nature as the *essence*' (Marx, 1977: 108). Early manuscripts show the wellsprings of Marx's analysis from a standpoint *beyond* capitalist production for trade, as he seeks to identify the essential aspects of our being and natural, environmental, conditions of our existence in order to entertain alternatives. He is a liberationist analysing a system in order to go beyond it. He has judged it, and *Capital I* becomes an elaboration, a defence, of that judgement. Here labour, the worker for a wage, strides onto the scene as the subject who is a victim of their circumstances and, therefore, the most potent agent of their self-same liberation.

Capital I

The first volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, originally published in German in 1867, is about work and working in an unjust social system that since Marx's time has progressed to dominate humanity and, metabolically,

more-than-human nature. Carbon emissions and other forms of air pollution impact the conditions of life globally. *Capital* is a rigorous work engaging with a plethora of economic, philosophic, and political thinkers and works, from philosophical tracts of ancient Greeks to contemporary governmental reports. Marx argues that neither capital nor money should be considered an object or tool but essentially as a social relation. He points out that within capitalism it is neither a personal injustice nor a socially criminal act for capitalists to take the product from its authentic producers. Rather, this is a systemic crime, a formal expectation and defining term in the capitalist's contract with their workers. He examines a host of economic rationalisations associated with productive efficiency that are developed to narrate and recast this state of affairs whereby the means of production (natural and built environments) become privately owned by capitalists (primitive and continuous accumulation), and workers' conditions and lives are in large part determined by capitalists, including their futures, driven in the interests of valorising capital.

To reveal the workers real position vis-à-vis capitalists, Marx is forced to nimbly unpick every act within the capitalist contract, the capitalist process, not only the mode of production in its broadest sense including circulation, but also its mode of reproduction. He scrutinises every aspect of the supply chain and reproduction processes – the way that money develops and flows, how a firm's accounts are constituted, why workers are contracted and how they are paid. Are they piece-workers, casuals, freelancers, waged workers, or salaried managers with a share in the firm's profits via bonuses? How do each of these arrangements impact on the respective parties? What is the 'price' of labour and how is profit created? In his detailed analysis, Marx shows that a composite working class is created via the capitalist mode of reproduction, given that workers are literally robbed in an iterative way, day-after-day. Consequently, it is not simply a matter of recovering stolen goods and services rendered, or of renegotiating contracts as workers' unions do, but of understanding that this system is rotten to the core, creating, defining, and mobilising two main classes forever in conflict.

The capitalist mode of production gives the capitalist power to determine the place of work, the conditions and terms of work, the ways that workers perform their functions, and the expected pace of their work. The capitalist is not only an individual managing their own firm but also competes with other capitalists in a particular sector and form of organisation (say medium-sized businesses) in a particular region. Beyond associated markets rotating on dynamics of supply and demand is 'capital in general' – all the contextual financial conditions, governmental taxes, and regulations of the operation of each and every firm. In this sense, from the individual case through to general relations of reproduction, capitalism is a highly competitive system in which even capitalists act as mere functionaries, with a tightly circumscribed range of options determining decisions related to management.

Marx also analyses how and why commercial and financial cycles and crises are endemic to capitalism. The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and its vicious repercussions, and the economic ramifications of the global COVID-19 pandemic are recent examples. As such workers are not just subservient to particular capitalist managers but live in a self-ordaining world of capitalist management and consumerism, individualism, and so-called-democratic state politics. Workers are possessed to the core of their being, not only delivering an end product to the capitalist but also enduring the omnipotence of capital as a totalising social institution. From this nightmarish perspective, holistic human liberation is the demand.

Agency, liberation and nature today

In fast-forwarding to the twenty-first century it is important to point out that Marx's works have not only been attacked by defenders of capital but also used, abused, and misrepresented in defence of working class political activities, indeed revolutions, namely the Soviet and Chinese communist regimes of the twentieth century. As Chattopadhyay (2016: 8) writes, 'the conception of society after capital as we find it in the theory (and practice) of Marx's disciples is, by and large, totally anti-emancipatory, based on their complete misreading if not utter deformation of Marx's (and Engel's) own texts ... based on the self-emancipation of the immense majority, the working class'. Entire parties and movements have maligned his intent and treated as a hero or demagogue the man for whom equality meant that other humans were neither more nor less than himself. Consequently, Rubel and Manale (1975: viii) felt compelled to set the record straight with a biography 'to defend the non-legendary Marx'. Similarly, among others, Tom Kemp (1982: 43ff) shuddered at the overwhelmingly economic turn in interpreting his work.

Meanwhile, many Marxian propositions have become commonplace social facts today, from accepting that alienation characterises capitalist societies to forsaking authoritarian religion, from understanding ourselves as products of our circumstances to believing that we, collectively, have the right to struggle for social change, liberation, and transformation. Numerous thinkers of the last half-century have creatively grasped this essence of Marx's work and applied interpretations of it to emancipatory discourse and practice, questioning mainstream Marxists strategies for achieving human liberation through vanguardist and working-class based organisation and, instead, offering strategies more consistent with ecosocialist and degrowth imaginaries of post-capitalist futures. These thinkers respect Marx's work but also challenge it, assessing it among a range of other works to apply in their everyday lives and self-creation as humanistic political beings.

As such, analyses of certain creative Marxists accords with praxis as they dedicate their work and activism to

breaking away from the cataclysmic mode of production for trade in which we still live. This Marxist thinking acknowledges theories and practical strategies of radical organised workers (Ness, 2014) and incorporates into the concepts of work, workers, and work refusal many activities conventionally classified as not real (paid) work which, nonetheless, prop up capital:

Work is a manifold extending throughout human activities with much of it unwaged, invisible, and unrecognized... Housewives, slaves, drug runners, sharecrop peasants, and prisoners are all part of the working class. Their work creates value on par with the work of waged workers throughout the history of capitalism. (Caffentzis, 2013: 3)

From this Autonomist Marxist perspective the ‘working class’ is a much more diverse set of agents than unions encompass. Capitalist history is a self-enlarging room of mirrors to the extent that capital’s characteristics are iterative, standard, and reproduced in a multiplicity of very different places and among various peoples. As capitalist practices have globalised, intensifying as well as expanding, state parties and national politics, cannot contain or independently confront the variety of capitalist forms that continue to develop, fragmenting nature as well as humanity. At this point of breakdown, of collapse, such agents are not only highly alienated and challenged but also have the potential to break through.

Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system analysis, elaborated in his four-volume work *The Modern World System* (1974–2011), details a multiplicity of dynamic connections between economies of nations and regions that are increasingly porous, where ‘non-capitalist’ relations of production can be prolonged, even as others fragment and are transformed into standard capitalist–worker relations to advance global capital. As capitalism dominates, marginalises and excludes, spatially and temporarily paid work has become central to more and more people’s lives. Consequently, discussion must focus on a broad appreciation of what Holloway et al. (2020 : 65) refer to as the ‘dynamic of capital against humanity, the dynamic of value expansion against the conscious collective determination of our needs and desires’ to which autonomist responses variously and numerous spring.

Moreover, Wallerstein (2002: 33) identifies 1968 as a ‘world revolution’ within which certain movements against capital become redefined in decisive ways. Production for trade triumphs as the state withers in terms of any latent potential for postcapitalist transformation. The left is rejuvenated in a diversity of movements that are singularly critical of the failure of communist regimes and socialist reforms to go beyond ‘alienating wage labour’ and to create a real democracy of direct and powerful decision-making (Wallerstein, 2002: 33).

This is where works of certain other critical social theorists intervene. Political economist Gareth Dale (Fleckenstein and Dale, 2023) recovers Marx’s thought from Promethean readings as ‘ultimately, a belief in the ability of the human species to collectively define and keep redefining its own “species being”, including its relationship to the environment’. Critical theorist Jasper Bernes criticises planning-oriented cybernetic socialism, Soviet-style planning, and socialist democratic imaginaries of planning as alienating and inefficient. In many such models a fetishised plan ‘chosen by no one, stands over and against everyone, a fateful force determining their life-chances’ (Bernes, 2020: 66). In contrast ‘true collectivity’ where people ‘banding together, collectively transform the world and themselves in order to meet common objectives’ is closer to the spirit of socialism (Bernes, 2020: 66).

Bernes points out that Marx and Engels envisaged decentralisation as ruralisation, a union of the urban and rural, with ‘the breaking up of big cities, the localisation and dispersal of food production, so that it was close to where people actually lived, and the dispersal of industry throughout the countryside, so that its polluting effects were mitigated ... something that Marx and Engels referred to continuously from 1848 on, taken up by many of the socialists they influenced’ (Bernes, 2018: 340). Here direct control and local access enhance autonomy and, thus, liberation (Bernes, 2018: 362). Of course, broader scales of organisation are required for production and distribution of, say, water (Bernes, 2018: 362) with appropriate technology such as tractors and trucks operating alongside more traditional and permaculture techniques (Bernes, 2018: 363). Such an approach accords with the convivial technology, food self-provisioning and collective sufficiency approaches of degrowth activists (Nelson and Liegey, 2022) and anarchist permaculture hybrids pointing towards postcapitalist gift economies (Leahy, 2011, 2021: 128–169).

Indeed, movements such as occupy, degrowth, climate justice and extinction rebellion have made material gains in the first decades of the twenty-first century, developing semi-autonomously and responding variously and collectively to multiple crises. Well networked activists are involved in multiple campaigns and movements, developing skills of horizontal governance, customising many universal claims and struggles in place-based ways. None avoid addressing climate change, but many recognise the surplus of carbon emissions as the tip of the iceberg of environmental crises.

Many activists are realists, from the latter decades of the twentieth century building and trialling various experiments of alternative living and practices to form prefigurative and hybrid post-industrial, ecologically sound, self-provisioning, and caring settlements (Nelson, 2018: 214–37). Their concepts of work are fluid, aligned with Marx’s liberating aspects of praxis. Many steeped in postcapitalist imaginaries and strategies argue for separating sources of monetary income from work, as in guaranteed minimum services and

incomes, and viewing unpaid forms of work such as housework and creative activities as legitimate work.

Rupturing the dialectic

Autonomist Marxist Harry Cleaver, author of the classic *Reading Capital Politically* (1979) and member of the *Zerowork* (UK and Europe) editorial collective of the 1970s, refers to capitalism as ‘a global work machine’, so absorbing and demanding that it constrains ‘our chances at any kind of autonomous self-realization, either individual or collective’ (Cleaver, 2017: 4). The back cover of the 1977 *Zerowork #2 (Political Materials 2)* features a quote from Marx, that ends: ‘The abolition of private property becomes a reality only when it is understood as the abolition of “work”’.² Indeed, Marx iterates the abolition of paid work and private property as two sides of the same coin throughout his work (Zilbersheid, 2011).

Cleaver (2017: 5) places workers and other equally significant resisters of capital at the centre of history to show that even as ‘capitalists try to confine us within their dialectic – limiting and constraining our struggles to activities compatible with the growth of their system – we have repeatedly subverted and ruptured those dynamics’. His *Rupturing the Dialectic* offers a persuasive rationale for self-confident action. Essentially paid work is social control; resisting it ‘strikes at the heart of capitalist command’ (Cleaver, 2017: 21).

On the one hand, workers experience the imposition of capitalist work disciplines, perspectives, and practices both outside and inside the office, factory, or farm. They might internalise work efficiencies and ape such habits at home, say purchasing low quality and harmful consumer goods or services that purport to save money and time, as such reproducing capitalist dominance via monetary calculations and perspectives. Indeed, many now see their home less in terms of use value terms and more as a potential asset.

On the other hand, there is not only unionisation but also autonomous organisation in women’s liberation, climate action and anti-war movements, developing and expressing values of solidarity and community to advance collectively defined interests. Forced into paid work, we are also capable of ‘free work’, activity that we determine and manage using our own values and preferences. Free work rises in significance as capitalism threatens us not simply as individuals and when in paid work but also as a determining influence on many characteristics of our social, cultural, political, and environmental lives. As capitalism, the main source of global heating, continues to erode our future means of existence as a species, we develop postcapitalist imaginaries and build refigurative experiments forming alternative, autonomous, ways of living.

Both resistance to paid work (production for trade and money) and the co-development of autonomy as individuals and place-based communities offer transformative experiences,

stages, and relationships beyond the black box of capitalism. The alternative, in the current system, is to either forbear or internalise the social pattern of capital whereby all use-values are interlaced with and ultimately dominated by their exchange value. This world of prices and financial dealings perpetually results in simultaneously economic, social, political and environmental crises. In this world, all values ultimately reduce to monetary values (prices) or to their potential realisation as money.

Cleaver (2017: 228) concludes that strategies for moving beyond capitalism must focus on ‘rupturing the dialectics of money’. His ultimate message is that:

The reduction in the roles of, and eventual elimination of, work, money, and markets are not just utopian dreams, nor need they be limited to ‘nowtopian’ experiments. They are all possible. It is only a matter of finding the best paths to doing so. (Cleaver, 2017: 289)

John Holloway takes the same route in *Hope in Hopeless Times* (2022: 253) where he identifies the abolition of money as the essence of hope: ‘Abolish money before it abolishes us’. Holloway identifies key social and ecological challenges as heads of a hydra, whose body is money; ways to abolish money focus on ‘breaking its logic, breaking its grammar ... moving in-against-and-beyond’ (Holloway, 2022: 250).

Reducing work: Reducing production

It is not simply a matter of refusing paid work because work within capitalism pits us against other human beings, develops in us an armour of inhumane characteristics pitted against our humane self, and constantly pressures us to identify artificially as an alienated individual. As Marx notes, capitalism estranges us from ‘nature’, human nature, and the living environs of which we are a part. This is the alpha and omega of capitalism. The system estranges us from our means of existence, our rightful material and spiritual context, from ongoing primitive accumulation to piling waste, and the production of carbon emissions.

This is not simply a qualitative fact of an exploitative and self-defeating relationship. Global Footprint Network (2023a) estimates – widely referred to in sustainability literature and organisations but certainly not without limitations (Global Footprint Network, 2023b) – suggest that around fifty years ago (by the early 1970s) the planet became incapable of regenerating itself. Since then exploitation from forests, oceans, and savannahs to lands rich with minerals and oil has sharply increased. Tipping points in Earth and human systems are being reached and safe boundary conditions for human life are being breached (Lenton, 2023). As a total planet of human beings, conservative estimates have us exploiting resources at a rate equivalent to the regenerative capacity of 1.75 Earths (Global Footprint Network, 2023a). This average hides a massive inequity in levels of

exploitation of Earth among peoples and regions, levels directly linked to hunger and other forms of poverty counterposed to deplorable overconsumption, both tendencies contradictorily generated by capitalism.

In other words, working for capital now means partaking in destroying our personal being, our collective being, our natural and material being, our future being. We now face a conjuncture in which the regeneration of the planet in all its environmental diversity is as urgent as, and must be integrated with, transforming our socio-political and economic relationships so that we can determine what we do, and how we do it, in the future.

Activist-writer Hans Widmer (pseudonym 'P.M.') a Midnight Notes Collective associate of Caffentzis (2013: 2) wrote the classic 1983 work *bolo'bolo*, which elaborates on the built, productive, and social units of a multi-scalar planetary eco-commons. A summary appears in a degrowth collection where Widmer with Schneider (2018) present the smallest unit as an autonomous urban community of around 500 residents directly linked to their rural surrounds for collective self-provisioning. This residential size is deemed relatively ideal for communal economic and political structures. Such neighbourhoods are 'logistic terminals, modules of household economy, re-localised clusters of formally scattered living functions' where care work and housework are communal all-gender duties (Widmer with Schneider, 2018: 158). This is not just a theoretical degrowth imaginary but has informed practical prefigurative hybrid projects, including Kraftwerk 1, where Widmer lives.

Kraftwerk 1 is one of Zurich's innovative 'New Cooperatives' that emerged in the last few decades within a cooperative housing model established in Zurich a century ago delivering, by the mid-2010s, more than 120 housing cooperatives managing 40,000 apartments and set by referendum to represent one-third of Zurich's apartments by 2050 (Boudet, 2017: 9, 245, 247). Referred to by Hofer (2017) as 'typologies for a post-industrial society', they are model examples of resident-led eco-collaborative living expanding in many other European capitals, such as Berlin (Nelson, 2018). In the Zurich case, residents self-govern their housing cooperatives as share-holding tenants with rents pegged at affordable levels. Residents drive the building and living of the housing cooperatives – typically vertical, environmentally-sound, building blocks with hundreds of residents, approaching the size of Widmer's autonomous neighbourhood.

Some New Cooperative members have produced a tract with draft principles for a radical future *to work towards* in their urban communities based on a 'rational household economy' with the Marxian descriptor: 'Everybody contributes what they can, everybody gets what they need' (New Alliance, 2019: 3). This household economy is self-governed, its product is neither subject to trade nor marketed but, instead, shared on the basis of need. Cooperation rules, not competition. The majority of necessary and unpaid work is food-provisioning and caring, within households or

neighbourhoods. There are public services, industries, and small collective, cooperative, and individual initiatives that comprise 'non-vital' activities.

Swiss sustainability data informs the New Alliance proposal based on statistics and calculations provided by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. The proposed aliquot shares aim to use Earth in ways such that every person in the world might have a similar one-planet standard of living yet diversity and choice in the ways that they produce and consume. The tract offers a 'typical lifestyle menu' that assumes eco-collaborative living with 1000-watt of energy and 20–30 m² per person for private residential space along with free access to various communal spaces and facilities; bike riding unlimited but no car rides, 6 km train/tram travel per day and 1000 km each of boat and train travel in lieu of any plane flights; a strongly plant-based diet still allowing 15 kg of meat and 20 litres of milk per annum; just 70 litres of water daily; 180 min Internet use weekly and printed newspapers shared on the basis of one daily per 50 residents (New Alliance, 2019: 2; o500 (undated)).

New Cooperatives approximate prefigurative hybrids. They are precarious, betwixt this world and an imagined postcapitalist other, meaning that:

Cooperatives had and still have a double obligation, firstly towards the well-being of their residents and secondly towards their own survival as legal and commercial entities. As businesses, they have to mediate between utopian principles of equality and common property on the one hand and, on the other, the persistence of the market culture. This dual principle makes the cooperative model possible but is also the source of its inner contradictions. (Davidovici, 2017: 203)

Addressing such contradictions requires multiple and broad spread changes. Chattopadhyay (2016: 6) contends that for Marx, in an epoch-long transformation, both classes evaporate 'and the Association is inaugurated with no private ownership in the means of production and communication, no wage/ salary system, no commodity-money relation and no state'. This logic follows that in Bernes, aforementioned, and highlights Cleaver's point of the necessity of 'rupturing the dynamics of money', which explodes any relationship of waged labour, freeing unpaid work in a liberating form of praxis. 'But', you ask. 'How?'

Green materialism

The extension and intensification of capitalism has incorporated more and more natural and human living matter and energy 'resources' under its management, including visible paid work or invisible unpaid work, such as domestic housework.³ As a system with an abstract and practical logic, in which money is the central measure and value, a multitude of social and environmental use values are exploited,

contorted, neglected, or obliterated. Yet the conscious agency of workers and radical critics has also accompanied capitalism, in multiple forms of resistance. Similarly the planetary environs, which had succumbed in various ways to our appropriation is now showing a capacity to re-appropriate us. In global heating and the COVID-19 pandemic, mechanisms for a global re-appropriation appear clearer and imminent. Humanistic, anti-capitalist and pro-environmental movements have arisen.

Marx's work is directly relevant to these current challenges, to the visions of ecosocialist, occupy, and degrowth activists, and to the strategies of other such anti-capitalist movements. The notion of 'green materialism' (Nelson, 2015) points to characteristic anti-capitalist practices and principles today, which correspond to the 'new materialism' that Marx spelled out in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx, 2002 [1845]). In contrast to the 'old materialism', Marx's 'new materialism' is sensuous, practical, real, critical and revolutionary. In horizontalism, the green materialist characteristics of anti-capitalists offer structures of direct democracy, the building blocks for replacing the organising principle of capitalism (money) through community-based negotiation of local self-governance for collective sufficiency. In this postcapitalist vision work is neither paid nor is there any production for trade, for money.

Today, money as such has a veritable agency as a specifically capitalist tool and weapon (Clever, 2002). Capitalists engage workers in their system by shutting them out of the processes of production and distribution except to work for money, income which is used to purchase from the market some of the goods and services that workers have made in order that they can live. The market is the primary and often only source of basic needs and wants. Capitalists idealise the market as offering 'freedom of choice'. Meanwhile efficiencies lauded by capitalists are purely monetary efficiencies. Capitalists produce specifically for trade and the entire logic of the productive apparatus is technologically and organisationally arranged through monetary calculations for monetary ends. Expanding ownership of natural, human, and artificial 'resources' is accounted for and transferred via money. Prices arise as a key feature of this anthropocentric game without anchors in – indeed acting as barriers to – meeting both the regenerative needs of ecosystems and the basic needs of all people.

In contrast, green materialist characteristics of anti-capitalist currents offer the bases for co-governance on the basis of ecological and social values, producing for direct use on demand, in short abolishing money, trade and markets. A community mode of production asserts these values through commoning. Arguably, this can only occur by obliterating processes that create monetary values and by socio-political restructuring for direct democracy via the eminence of a developed form of use values, 'real values'. Real values are social and ecological values of not only means of production and product, but also of our ecological and social being more generally (Nelson, 2022a).

Marx's vision was based on a philosophy of revolutionary being and practice, praxis, humans as active agents. Replacing individualistic, bourgeois society with a collective and creative sense of humanity, contemporary anti-capitalists fulfil Marx's thrust in Thesis 10 of *Theses on Feuerbach* (2002 [1845]): 'The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity'. They develop personal skills focussing on empowerment, relationships and self-organisation, creative expression and working at what they think and feel, is socially and environmentally responsible. In as much as they are politically conscious and embody social and environmental values, these currents have strong parallels with Marx's 'new materialism'. They do not aspire to egotistic bourgeois freedom but, rather, a genuinely *free society* based on co-governance.

Anti-capitalism is often characterised as a break with the traditional left rather than a flowering of Marxism. Yet Argentinian Ezequiel Adamovsky (2011: 89–124) distinguishes contemporary young anti-capitalists from the traditional left due to their focus on 10 distinctive operational principles and styles, as follow.

1. Anti- and counter-power: "disempowering" the state' rather than "taking over" it'
2. Acting autonomously, so that 'the expansion of *power-to* undermines *power-over*'
3. With presence and immediacy: 'Each time they create self-managed, non-commercial, and egalitarian spaces, the revolution is taking place.'
4. Using horizontalist structures, non-hierarchical assembly-based organisation and sharing knowledge and skills
5. Structurally de-centred, for instance constantly re-organising voluntary and flexible networks
6. Integrating a multitude of types of people and liberationist causes
7. Strategically responding to specifics and learning through listening rather than laying down a general program and propagating a line to be followed
8. In local–global – versus national state-focused – struggles against capitalism
9. Using direct action and civil disobedience – being the point, being the power
10. Developing a constructive creative culture *vs* an intransigent them–us culture.

Taking an overview of these 10 descriptors, three points stand out. First, their characteristic unity of purpose and organisation, centred on autonomy, power and agency. Second, the characteristics that they hold in common are ecological in manifestation and cohesion. Their socio-political being reflects an ecologist's holistic perception of the way the natural world functions as interlocking, antagonistic yet balancing aspects, relatively self-sufficient and dynamic. Third,

their synchrony with Marx's radical view of what it means to be human, where praxis is central, is remarkable.

Adamovsky's characterisation of young anti-capitalists has been drawn on by Nelson (2022a: 163) with a plea to:

imagine a global network of collectively sufficient, cell-like communities each responsible for the sustainability of the environments that sustain them. Imagine each diverse community empowered, relatively autonomous, present, organised horizontally internally, networked in seamless ways locally and globally, caring for the Earth. Imagine us collectively satisfying everyone's basic needs. In these ways, we would be fulfilling our real human potential as creative active beings.

The agenda is in front of us. This is what needs to be built on. This is what needs to be done.

As such the state is usurped by a grassroots based direct democracy (think Zapatistas and Rojava), by occupations, by directly questioning and resisting capitalist activities, relations and values. In a social and ecological world wrecked by capitalism's intensive and extensive controls, disciplines and exploitative activities, passive and active resistance are both essential as transformative methods that can prefigure different ways of being, in relationship with one another and more-than-human nature. Degrowth activists pursue such methods in as much as they replace full-time with part-time work, and eschew production for the market and traded goods and services.

In concert, certain degrowth and postcapitalist practitioners create more attractive and feasible ways of collectively producing, exchanging and working with nature – prefiguring commoning on the basis of locally determined use rights and collective planning. They aspire to fulfil local residents' basic needs through social agreements (compacts rather than monetary contracts). They either make arrangements to use, or to squat and occupy public and private property, sharing resources in ways decided through direct democratic co-governance. Collective activities are central to the grassroots vision of a degrowth transformation to post-growth postcapitalism, thus broadening and deepening spheres of radical change, resistance and revolution (Liegey and Nelson, 2020: 49–85, 158–69). Radical proposals argue for nonmonetary economies without markets or production for trade, for a community mode of production with production for communally determined demand based on collective sufficiency and collective responsibility for production (Nelson, 2022a). The result is local geographies of community sufficiency, ecological diversity and pluralism.

Postcapitalist imaginaries, models, and concrete activities have not emerged in a theoretical vacuum. Many are inspired, developed and proposed by seasoned activists based on their experience, and intimate knowledge of the limits, challenges and potential of such experimentation. By way of a sample

beyond those already referenced in this article – Andrea Vetter, a co-founder and member of the German degrowth formation *Haus des Wandels* (Nelson, 2024) has co-authored key degrowth works, such as Vetter (2018) and Schmelzer et al. (2022); United States social scientists Marina Sitrin (Sitrin and Sembrar, 2020) and Marisa Holmes (2023); University of Leeds geography Professor of Urban Futures Paul Chatterton (Chatterton and Ryan, 2008 ; Nelson and Chatterton, 2022); and Denmark-based Lara Monticelli (2022), who interrogates ecovillages and is co-editor of the Bristol University Press 'Alternatives to capitalism in the twenty-first century' book series. Activist scholar analyses contribute to the proliferation of prefigurative and postcapitalist studies, for example, the Catalan-based Sekulova et al. (2023) who monitored community-based initiatives for almost a decade with respect to their degrowth achievements.

Capitalist violence is not just repression of speech, political control and military might. Capitalist violence is the everyday submission of workers to a life embroiled in monetary values, monetary accountancy and monetary discipline. Withstanding state and private violence requires rationalisation along the lines of 'abolition revolution' (Day and McBean, 2022) and material progress in community-oriented solidarity and co-production. In other words, we require a credible critique of capitalist economic activities and ideologies, and the assertive proclamation and defence of non-monetary direct democracy, commoning and co-production to fulfil all the basic needs of people and planet. Powerful and entrenched resistance, actions and rhetoric speaking from the firm, even if partially imagined, ground of the world we need.

Acts of communal liberation free our activities from conventional paid work and recognise contributions of humans and more-than human nature altogether. People work directly and carefully *with* nature. In reappropriating the essence of genuinely human activity, released from the straightjacket of wage labour, we can deconstruct both money and capital. In his early writings, Marx (1977: 130–31, emphasis in the original) concluded that '[m]oney is the alienated *ability of mankind*', that in 'distorting and confounding ... all human and natural qualities, the fraternisation of impossibilities – the *divine* power of money – lies in its character as men's estranged, alienating and self-disposing *species-nature*'. Abolishing money prevents capital as a human activity, as a relationship, as a catastrophe. Abolishing money marks the end of private property, the basis of which is owning land, the other side of the human–nature duo:

To make land an object of huckstering – the land which is our one and all, the first condition of our existence – was the last step towards making oneself an object of huckstering. It was and is to this very day an immorality surpassed only by the immorality of self-alienation. (Marx, 1977: 131, emphasis in the original)

Commoning within a non-market community mode of production frees both work(ers) and more-than-human nature from their current fatal imprisonment within capitalism.

Conclusion

Marx's thorough approach and self-conscious analysis of capital, as a subject and object, is wholly relevant to contemporary revolutionary action within a world ridden with capitalist ideology and anti-nature practices. His writing on work, workers, nature and working is especially relevant at a point in human history where the implications and ramifications of unequal social relationships and environmentally unsustainable practices present as mounting and existential crises to the very being of humans on planet Earth.

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1. This article is very selective in its references to what Verso editor and Historical Materialism editor-in-chief Sebastian Budgen (2023) refers to as 'the murky world of eco-Marxism and ecosocialism full of its competing chapels and theorists', including the John Bellamy Foster and *Monthly Review* metabolic rift school; Jason Moore (2015) as in *Capitalism and the Web of Life*; a variety of ecosocialisms (Nelson, 2022b); and degrowth-influenced Marxists. The positions of degrowth-influenced Marxologist Kohei Saito (2022), specifically with respect to an ecological reading of Marx, and of the Autonomous Marxists mentioned, are key reference points in the framing in this article. The interpretation of Marx's work in this article is consistent with, and develops from, key previous work by its author, such as Nelson (1999) and Nelson and Timmerman (2011).
2. The source of the quote is Marx K (1972) *Ueber Friedrich Lists Buch Das Nationale System der Politischen Oekonomies*. Berlin: Archive-Drucke 1 S. 25.
3. Certain passages and arguments in this Green materialism section originally appeared in Nelson A (2015) 'New and green materialism', *Progress in Political Economy* site, posted 29 July — <http://ppesydney.net/new-and-green-materialism/>.

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Author Biography

Anitra Nelson is an activist scholar (Honorary Principal Fellow in the Informal Urbanism Research Hub at The University of Melbourne) whose expertise centres on money, nonmonetary futures, degrowth, postcapitalism and prefiguration (see <https://anitranelson.info/>).