

## FROM SPECIES BEING TO SPECIES BECOMING: ONTOLOGICAL THINKING IN *THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO*

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### Abstract

In his 1969 text *On Marx*, Louis Althusser argued that the 1840s represented an 'epistemological break' in Karl Marx's political philosophy. Situating *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) within this tradition, this article contends that the period in question might best be seen as representing an *ontological* break. By reading the text through the lens of gender, the manifesto is shown to exemplify this transition, with Marx foregoing the earlier notion of a 'species being' and instead emphasising the socially constituted nature of self: not so much a species being as a species *becoming*. Recent scholarship on Marx's ecological thought is then examined, offering an account of *The Communist Manifesto* that situates the text within the material conditions of the 1840s. Through the concept of a 'metabolic rift,' the intersection between ontology, ecology and capital accumulation is developed, offering a set of novel resources for conceptualising political subjectivity within the Marxist tradition today.

THE PUBLICATION OF *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) came at a time of international unrest, shortly before the 1848 revolutions which spread through mainland Europe. Taken within this historical context, the manifesto is, first and foremost, a revolutionary pamphlet, a means of inciting change. But it is also more than this. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the co-authors of the text, this pamphlet was a way of laying down the values of the Communist League.<sup>1</sup> For 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, the tumultuous decade of the 1840s represented a juncture in the development of Marx's ideas. It is here that Althusser [1965] (2005) locates an 'epistemological break' in the work of Marx: a movement from humanism to historical materialism. The article will explore a number of key insights in the text, focusing first on Marx's inverting of Hegelian Idealism and its relation to class and structure, and then on the concepts of gender and ecology. In doing so, the essay

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, which focuses on the development of Marx's thinking, sometimes only Marx will be referred in relation to *The Communist Manifesto*, despite this being a jointly authored text.

will argue that the 1840s might best be understood as representing an *ontological* break in Marx's thought, as opposed to an epistemological break alone.

Chapter One of *The Communist Manifesto* opens with what will become a defining principle in Marx's conceptualisation of history. Noting the core component of historical change, the manifesto states: 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle' ([1848] 2015, 14). To appreciate the significance of this line, we need to recall G.W.F. Hegel's contribution to the metaphysics of Idealism. For Hegel, history can be read as an indomitable march of progress towards what he terms Absolute Spirit (1807). Within any epoch, a number of contradictions arise. Progress is achieved when these contradictions are, in one way or another, synthesised. For Hegel, as for all Idealists, this progress is fundamentally immaterial; that is, the material conditions in society are a reflection of the dominant ideas of that epoch. History is imbued with the ideas, the *Geist*, of the time: it is going somewhere, and it does so by overcoming contradiction (Hegel 1807). This is the dialectical method, and it is this method that Marx would famously 'turn on its head,' inverting the idealism of Hegel into a materialist conception of history, and of historical change.

In his *Theses on Feuerbach* (part of *The German Ideology*, c1845-46), Marx builds on and utilises Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of Hegel (in *The Essence of Christianity*, 1841) (Feuerbach [1841] 2018, 270-281). For Feuerbach himself, Hegel's idealism is critiqued within the context of religion, emphasising the way in which religion, and God more specifically, was a reflection of man himself. Reversing the long-held Christian notion that 'man is created in the image and likeness of God,' Feuerbach's central argument was that God is created in the image and likeness of man. However, far from recognising the

constructed nature of religion, society has externalised the figure of God, locating it outside of itself and in the process 'alienating' man from his true essence, or his 'anthropology.' Thus, 'Man is the God of Christianity, Anthropology the mystery of Christian Theology' (Feuerbach [1841] 2018, 336). Subversively, for the later Marx and Engels at least, Feuerbach situates the metaphysics of Christianity firmly in the material world: the material *produces* the immaterial. Indeed, it is at this moment, with the publication of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, that Engels remarks 'we all became Feuerbachians' (Engels [1886] 2017, 224). However, while Marx and Engels build on this critique of Hegel, developing their notion of alienated labour, they also move beyond Feuerbach's contentions, grounding the entire metaphysical world – and not just the metaphysics of religion - in the *material* existence of man himself. It is in his reworking of both Hegel's and Feuerbach's works that Marx's contribution to philosophy is fully imagined.

By developing Hegel's notion of contradiction and employing his dialectical method, Marx and Engels are able to account for historical change. And it is in applying this method that Louis Althusser, in his 1965 text *For Marx*, argues that the 1840s represented a radical shift in Marx's thinking, what he terms an 'epistemological break' ([1965] 2005). Althusser recognises that 'Young Marx' was indebted to the work of Feuerbach; something Engels himself acknowledges in his reflections on this period. For Althusser, Marx was basing much of his work upon the notion of a 'human nature'. Indeed, it was in the process of labouring itself that the subject was constituted: what he called 'species being' (Marx [1844/1932] 2000). Clearly, for early Marx, alienation from the laboured product - as happens under capitalism - led to an alienation from human nature. Althusser locates this early period as one of humanism, and not the historical materialism that would come to represent Marx's

*magnum opus*. As the manifesto brings this early period to an end, it is possible to detect the transition. In opposition to his earlier works, in which the notion of alienation and species being are pervasive, there is little to no mention of these concepts. In fact, where alienation is mentioned, in Chapter Three, it is as a critique of existing socialist thought (Marx and Engels [1848] 2015, 40). By detecting this 'epistemological break' in *The Communist Manifesto*, it is possible to develop a number of other themes in the text; themes which appear to be at odds with Marx the humanist, but are entirely consistent with Marx as historical materialist. While recognising the importance of this period in reformulating Marx's ideas toward political subjectivity and the historical process in which the subject is conceived, this article will locate *The Communist Manifesto* as a key text in what is best described as an 'ontological break' in Marx's thought. With a particular emphasis on gender and ecology, the manifesto will be situated within the material conditions of the 1840s, a period in which notions of 'human nature' and 'species being' begin to take on a more socially constructed form.

Distancing himself from earlier notions of species being and alienation, Marx begins to emphasise the socially constituted nature of being. In this sense, the transition from 'Young Marx' to 'Mature Marx' is not just epistemological but *ontological*. Although Marx never repudiates the idea that man is by nature a labouring species, talk of 'natural relations' cease in the manifesto. While Marx the humanist locates an already formed subject and argues that the current structure is at odds with its essentialised being, the Marx of *The Communist Manifesto* begins to do something quite radical. Instead, Marx argues, it is the socio-economic structures of a society that actively *produce* subjects. Simply put, the subject is always already situated within a material structure. From this vantage point, the conditions

of society have a material basis, and can only be explained in relation to the mode of production. By structuring the subject in this way, individual agency is by no means precluded, only situated. As Marx would famously note in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please ... but under circumstances already existing' ([1852] 1937, 5). That is, the conditions of the present, inherited from the past, constrain the very futures of possibility. Or, as Marx so evocatively declares: 'The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' (Marx [1852] 1937).

Building on from this materialist conception of history, it is possible to unearth a number of other themes in the work of *The Communist Manifesto*, some of which lay buried during the period in which Marx was writing. Of course, what becomes immediately noticeable throughout the manifesto is Marx's emphasis on 'man.' As Joan Tronto (2015) has argued, in the discussion of capitalism and wage relations Marx takes a gendered approach to his study, with appeals to the notion of manhood throughout. However, considering the historical period in which the text was written, it is necessary to situate such a critique within its larger material and theoretical context. Thus, the use of gendered language in *The Communist Manifesto* does not grow out of the patriarchal values of 19<sup>th</sup> century alone, but feeds into a larger current in Marxist theory in which the labour performed outside of the factory floor is deemed valueless, or is relegated to the private sphere and thus rendered 'immaterial.' As feminist scholar Silvia Federici (2004) has argued, the labour performed by women is *necessarily* without value, for recognising the role of women in (quite literally) reproducing capitalism would render the entire mode of production *unproductive*. Indeed, for Maria Mies (1999), while patriarchy exists outside of capitalism, capitalism does not exist

outside of patriarchy. The labour performed by women and expropriated by capitalism constitutes a form of primitive accumulation in its own right, and thus Mies speaks of the private sphere as an 'internal colony' (Mies and Shiva 1993, 55), highlighting the intersection of gender, colonialism and capital accumulation. Clearly the emphasis on 'man' as *homo laborans* has deeply gendered implications.

The imagery of the victimised woman and the appeal to the heroic manhood of the worker - all of which are replete in Marx and Engels' early work - accentuate the ways in which the 'species being' of man was a fundamentally gendered concept, bound up in notions of productivity and value. However, we might read within the text a deeper and more subversive trend. In his 1884 work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels explicitly locates the nuclear family as a patriarchal institution necessary in the reproduction of capitalist relations ([1884] 2009). Developing this idea, Engels claims that family relations under capitalism do not represent natural relations as such, but are social relations produced in the very process of capitalist development. Paralleling the earlier argument that the subject under capitalism is by no means an already existing (albeit alienated) subject, but a subject who is actively produced, Engels makes the claim that the same is true of gender relations. This is a radical departure from his earlier works, such as *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), in which he argues that the employment of women "unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness" ([1845] 2009, 438). Evidently there is a turn away from the idea of 'natural relations' and towards the notion of the subject as socially constructed. Thus, it is possible to see why the materialist conception of history under way in *The Communist Manifesto* is potentially so radical for (re)conceptualising gender. From this perspective, the notion of womanhood, of

what it is 'to be' a woman, is not an internal condition of the woman herself, but an external condition imposed from without. What gives these gender differences their legitimacy, and thus patriarchy its power, is the way in which gender relations are deemed a fundamentally *natural* condition: in Marx's terminology, they become reified. While you cannot change what is innate, if gender relations are reconceptualised as social, the entire edifice on which gender is built destabilises. Certainly, there is a thread connecting Marx's structuralism to Simone de Beauvoir's pronouncement, almost exactly one hundred years on from the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' ([1949] 2009, 330). In this respect at least, Marx's contribution to philosophy is, and remains, invaluable.

Building upon this reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, it is important to situate the text within the material conditions of the 1840s. In this respect, there is one facet of the manifesto - and of Marx's oeuvre in general - that has gone largely unnoticed in political theory: the notion of ecology. Not only is this aspect of Marx's work under-theorised, but it represents a fundamental phase in Marx's ontological break. As John Bellamy Foster (1998) notes, the early Marx is rightly criticised for his 'Promethean' view of nature: that is, viewing capitalism (and thus post-capitalism) through an overly rationalistic and technocratic lens. A product of what Jacques Derrida (1977) would recognise as the binary system of Western philosophical thought, this Promethean gaze locates culture as outside of nature; indeed, nature becomes the *constitutive outside* against which culture defines itself. By perceiving nature as inert and mechanistic, as a plunderable resource to be extracted, Marx's reference in the manifesto to 'the idiocy of rural life' ([1848] 2015, 17) acquires a more material and anti-ecological realisation. Indeed, Marx's notion of 'species being' is one in which man is

*homo faber* – man as maker – whose being is bound up in the active manipulation of the natural world. As George Lichtheim has argued, the only ‘nature’ relevant to early Marx is ‘human nature’ (1982, 245). However, by the 1840s Marx begins to develop an approach fundamentally at odds with this conceptualisation of man: one in which essence – if there can be said to be an essence at all – grows *out of*, as opposed to *outside of*, nature. The fact that this sea change in Marx’s thought takes place within the context of the 1840s, the decade in which *The Communist Manifesto* was written, is by no means coincidental. This ecological perspective proves to be fundamental in the ontological reformulation of Marx’s later work.

In his study of the ecological merits of *The Communist Manifesto*, John Bellamy Foster (1998) locates the concept of ‘metabolism’ as central to Marx’s rejection of Prometheanism and his transition to a more ecologically sensitive worldview - a transition from what we might call species being to species *becoming*. Building on from the work of German chemist Justus von Leibig in the 1840s, Marx began to recognise that nature cannot be assumed to take the form of a ‘free gift,’ as it had by economists from Adam Smith and David Ricardo onwards (Foster 1998, 182). Far from conceptualising culture and nature as separate spheres, Marx began to conceive of capitalism - and by extension any mode of production - as one element in a much larger ecological framework. Borrowing from the work of the natural sciences, to which Marx continually professed his indebtedness, the notion of metabolism was formulated as a way of critiquing the tendency of capitalism to externalise the costs of natural resource extraction. Instead, such tendencies constituted a form of ‘metabolic rift,’ in which the reproductive capacity of the natural world was placed at odds with the productive needs of capitalist accumulation (Foster 1998). And while this idea wasn’t made



explicit until the publication of *Das Kapital* in the 1860s, Marx begins to factor in the role of environmental degradation in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* ([1844] 2000: 21). For Foster at least, *The Communist Manifesto* can be read as a juncture between Promethean Marx and the more 'mature' ecological thinker to which his work should ultimately come to be understood.

By situating the manifesto within this larger ecological context, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of Marx that revolutionises the way in which political subjectivity is conceived. Returning to the idea of a transition from species *being* to species *becoming*, it is through an engagement with the socio-historical realities of the 1840s that Marx's subject emerges as a socially constituted subject. Far from nature and culture existing as independent, if occasionally interdependent, entities, Marx begins to recognise what Donna Haraway calls *naturecultures* (2008): the inseparable, co-constituted reality of both. Acutely aware of how the so-called 'Second Agricultural Revolution' had produced widespread soil erosion in England, the ostensible 'solutions' sought to this environmental crisis led Marx to recognise the intersection of environmental devastation, colonialism and capital accumulation. From the transportation of bones from the battlefields of Europe, to the importing of manure from Ireland at a time of relentless famine, through to the harvesting of guano from Peru via the infamous 'coolie' system, Marx was resolutely aware of the way in which empire building, colonial conquest, and environmental degradation violently implied one another. Indeed, when Marx states in the manifesto that 'the cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls' ([1848] 2015, 8), he does not speak metaphorically, but with specific reference to the Opium Wars, equating capital accumulation with violence and not with an innocuous 'free market.' Thus,

while the first part of the essay goes some way in arguing that *The Communist Manifesto* represented an ontological break in how Marx conceived of subjectivity, it is in situating this break within the material history of the 1840s, and moreover in the metabolic framework of Marx's developing ecology, that such connections can be drawn out. His structuralist understanding of society, and his emphasis on how the relations of production consist not of *natural* relations between pre-existing people, but relations in which the political subject is socially constituted, remains powerfully resonant today. In fact, in our 'post-modern' era, in which 'all that is solid' truly has 'melted into air' ([1848] 2015: 6), Marx's ideas come home to roost. In re-conceptualising the text this way, not only can notions of gender and ecology be re-imagined, but *The Communist Manifesto* can be read anew, offering a novel way to conceptualise political subjectivity within the Marxist tradition.

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