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Summary: As awareness grows relative to the pernicious nature of capital in regards to both ecological destruction and gender oppression, there is a need to work out a truly inclusive, non-hierarchical and ecologically sustainable alternative to capitalism. Presented at the Chicago Convention of the International Marxist-Humanist Organization in July - Editors

Ecology, Feminism and the Renewal of Marxism

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Ecology and Capitalism

We currently find ourselves in a period of intense conservative backlash internationally on a variety of fronts. Two of the issues where this reaction is particularly dangerous is in the areas of climate change and in terms of gender relations. As I write these lines, the Midwest and the East coast of the US are in the midst of an extreme heat wave. Further, on June 26, 2018 in Quriyat, Oman, the highest temperature low in a 24-hour period was recorded at 108.7 °F.^[1] While this provides only anecdotal evidence, it is becoming more and more clear that human made climate change is real and will continue to affect humanity and the environment more generally. In fact, sixteen of the seventeen warmest years on record have happened since 2001 and 2016 was the warmest year on record.^[2]

Temperature change is certainly not the only problem. There is clear evidence that the Antarctic ice sheet is melting, leading to a possible massive sea level rise—up to 5 meters by one estimate—that will engulf much coastal territory.^[3] In fact, just a rise of 4 inches could place many South Seas islands and large parts of Southeast Asia under water. Moreover, water and food shortages caused by drought are likely to contribute to social and political unrest.

While the Paris Agreement seemed to point to the possibility of a new international climate regime that could mitigate

some of the worst excesses of capitalism, it became very clear early on that this would not be likely. First, there were few enforcement mechanisms within the agreement, giving states and corporations the ability to cheat on the agreement. Second, less than a year after the COP 21 agreement was signed, Donald Trump announced that the US, the leading producer by far of CO₂ per capita,^[4] would be pulling out of this agreement and would, in fact, engage in policies that would increase production of greenhouse gases. While a number of US states quickly stated that they would still abide by the agreement and internationally there was a strong effort to keep the agreement in place for the remaining signatories, the loss of the US to this agreement will have a profound effect, especially as Trump and his administration seem bent on a return to the dirtiest forms of energy available.

The third reason for the seeming failure of the Paris Agreement is that the science that it was based on turned out to be flawed. In July 2016, *Nature* published a paper that seemed to illustrate that the targets of limiting temperature increase to less than 2 degrees Celsius are likely unreachable. Some of the heat from CO₂ emissions has not only been stored in the atmosphere, but also in the oceans. These emissions can stay trapped in the ocean for decades before being released into the atmosphere. This is something that previous scientific studies had not fully accounted for.^[5]

Thus, more damage has already been done than previously thought.

There are many theories for why humans are responsible for climate change. These range from liberal contentions that point to a simple failure of humanity to understand what it is doing to nature to those that would say that humanity is by nature rapacious and that we have entered the period of the Anthropocene where human industriousness has created conditions that are fundamentally altering the climate at a planetary level. Others point to us entering a period of the Capitalocene— a period where capitalist social arrangements have fundamentally altered the climate at a planetary scale.

While it is not possible in this short essay to provide a detailed discussion of these debates, they are important to understanding where climate change comes from and how to fix the problem. On the far end is the liberal position that indicates that the solution is simply about having a better scientific understanding of the world. This is clearly false. Knowledge of climate change has been available for a long time and it has had little effect on actual policy or in some cases even public opinion.

This seems to make the Anthropocene argument seem more valid. While human produced climate change is new, environmental destruction is not. Human societies have had

devastating effects on many ecosystems throughout our history in diverse circumstances. What makes the current situation so much different is that we now have the ability to have global effects on the planet because of technological advancement. While the above is certainly correct, this argument has at least two flaws. First, if human beings in general have negative effects on the environment regardless of other factors, what is the incentive to seek to change things? Second, and more relevant for the present discussion, technology as such is not the issue, but instead, a specific use of technology can account for human made climate change. Social relations and not technology as such are the problem.

As we are celebrating the 60th anniversary of the publication of *Marxism & Freedom*, perhaps it is time to reflect on the contributions of both Marx and Dunayevskaya to a Marxist-Humanist theory of humanity's relationship to the natural world. Key to developing this type of theory is understanding how capitalism seeks to transform all real and seemingly natural boundaries into barriers that it must overcome. Human and natural power must be constantly transformed in order to seize as much surplus value as possible:

“Just as production founded on capital creates universal industriousness on one side... so does it create on the other side a system of general exploitation of the natural and

human qualities, a system of general utility, utilizing science itself just as much as all the physical and mental qualities, while there appears nothing *higher in itself*, nothing legitimate for itself, outside this circle of social production and exchange. Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as well as of the social bond itself by the members of society... For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond all natural barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship...It is destructive toward all of this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces. But from the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets *ideally* beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome it, and, since every such barrier contradicts its character, its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome but just as constantly posited...The universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers of its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development,

allow it to be recognized as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards its own suspension.”^[6]

Capital views everything in the natural and social world as a possible instrument for extracting value. Any barriers that it encounters must be overcome in order to extract the greatest amount of surplus value. Marx writes that often these barriers are only overcome ideally rather than in reality since its *raison d'être* is on the basis of a false universal. For example, China is currently building technology that it hopes will end the possibility of periodic droughts by launching rockets filled with silver oxide into the atmosphere to “create” rain. While the technology seems to work at least on a small scale, it should be noted that it is not creating rain, but instead simply taking water out of the atmosphere by an artificial process. Its most likely effect would not be to end droughts in the region but it would instead simply move some of them to another location outside of the borders of China. Chinese capitalists would get a significant advantage over other capitalists in the region.^[7] One of the effects of climate change appears to be overcome, but this is only appearance. Only a more rational organization of production that values both nature and humanity in a non-instrumental way can solve the problems of climate change.

At the level of production, this effort to overcome natural barriers necessarily leads capital to use despotic means to eke out surplus value— all the more so the more natural barriers that are in place. This is particularly true in the workplace where the worker is increasingly alienated from the natural world. Dunayevskaya’s discussion in *Marxism and Freedom* of “the despotic plan of capital” which she juxtaposes with “the cooperation of freely associated labor” is useful here. As capital seeks to wrest more labor power out of the worker, the factory becomes more and more controlled by managers and bureaucrats who seek to make every cost saving strategy a reality by new methods and machines in order to extract more surplus value. This is necessarily an antagonistic relationship between workers and management as the benefit of these new technologies is mostly realized by the capitalist at the expense of the health of the worker and her alienation from nearly all aspects of productive life and the natural world.

Dunayevskaya points out that cooperative labor under capitalism is a very stunted form of collectivity:

“Under capitalistic control, this cooperative labor is not allowed to develop freely. Its function is confined to the production of value. It cannot release its new, social, human energies so long as the old mode of production continues. Thus the *nature* of the cooperative form of labor power is in opposition to the capitalist integument, the *value-form*. At

the same time the monstrous creation of monotony, speed-up, uniformity, military regularity and more speed-up robs science also of its self-development, confining it to the single purpose of extracting ever greater amounts of surplus, unpaid labor from the workers.”^[8]

Thus, there is a need to overcome the alienation between humanity and nature as well as the alienation between human being and human being. Dunayevskaya rightly points to the need to reunite science and technology with its human object. For Marx, as for Dunayevskaya, there is no science as such, only science as it relates to real live human beings interacting with their environment:

“The *human* significance of nature only exists for *social* man, because only in this case is nature a *bond* with other *men*, the basis of his existence for others and of their existence for him. Only then is nature the *basis* of his own *human* experience and a vital element of human reality. The *natural* existence of man has here become his *human* existence and nature itself has become human for him. Thus *society* is the accomplished union of man with nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature.”^[9]

Therefore, any new society has to keep in mind the fight for a livable biosphere and the fight for an end to alienation are two sides of the same coin.

The question remains, what can be done given the fact that some long-term climate change is inevitable? A number of climate change scientists point out that quick action can still forestall the worst predictions, but the time frame for action remains very short.^[10] This has led many in the climate change movement to prioritize government intervention and international agreements as they rightly point out that action needs to happen now in order to prevent catastrophe. Where such arguments as these fail, is in raising a necessary tactic of the present into a philosophic point and a model for the future. Given the present crisis, we must do everything possible to stave off further environmental destruction even if it means working with those that have mixed motives such as governmental entities, who at present, have more power to enact large scale change than private actors do. However, this does not mean that we should embrace a statist model and expect those in power to solve our problems for us. Instead, we should encourage and work with activists and movements that seek the sort of non-hierarchical, fully emancipated and stateless post-capitalist society that we seek as one of our first principles.

The state is clearly not an answer to our current problems, but as long as we are clear on what kind of society we want, state laws and regulations can be a potentially useful tool, albeit one that can also be dangerous. Perhaps it is best to go back to Marx here and his call for “Revolution in

Permanence” from his 1850 address to the Communist League:

“The relation of the revolutionary workers’ party to the petty-bourgeois democrats is this: it marches together with them against the faction which it aims at overthrowing, it opposes them in everything whereby they seek to consolidate their position in their own interests.”^[11]

In a similar fashion, we should be working with those environmental movements that seek to change the status quo and offer commonsense solutions for limiting human impacts on the environment today while at the same time working toward more permanent solutions to capital’s despotic and destructive nature. Theorizing environmentally sound alternatives to capitalism and emphasizing the fundamental incompatibility of capitalism and continued life on Earth represent longer term goals.

Gender, Struggle, and Revolution

We currently live in a world rife in contraction, especially as it relates to issues of gender. At the same time as conservatives of all stripes around the world are trying to set back the clock on women’s rights, the women’s liberation movement has begun to revitalize itself. This has been made particularly clear in the recent global demonstrations on International Women’s Day. Women from all over the world from the US, Spain, UK, Italy and South Korea to

Afghanistan, China, Argentina, India and the Philippines participated on a variety of issues including the gender pay gap, sexist stereotypes, anti-abortion laws, sexual assault and sexual harassment, authoritarian governance, the right to education, and violence against women. One of the most interesting examples comes from Spain, where many women engaged in a one-day strike. About 5.3 million women stayed home from work, committed to not spending any money, and not doing any domestic work to illustrate their economic and social value with the message “if we stop, the world stops.” The strikers were able to gain support from most trade unions and many of these held their own 24-hour strike or two-hour work stoppage.^[12]

Further, a recent vote in Ireland, a bastion of conservative Catholicism, legalized abortion by an overwhelming margin (66.4% in favor), amid high voter turnout.^[13] This comes after a 2015 popular referendum in which Irish voters approved same-sex marriage by a similar margin (62-38%).^[14] This is particularly striking in a country that only voted to legalize divorce in 1995. It seems as though the people remain ahead of the government on a number of policies related to gender and women’s rights.

While events like these are not revolutionary in and of themselves—the strike in Spain does not go much further than calling for equality of exploitation of both male and female workers, for example—the movement does not have

to stop here. Women throughout the world have latched on to the #metoo movement that started as a campaign to make more visible the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault in women's lives. As a result of this visibility, a number of prominent men have lost their jobs and some social prestige. This movement has made clearer for many the extent to which women have been devalued from a social perspective and illustrates a new kink in the armor of patriarchal domination.

The past few years have shown an increasingly successful activism from the transgender movement. Starting with Argentina's move in 2012 to allow anyone over the age of 18 to choose their gender identity on government documents, a number of other countries have passed laws allowing for recognition of transgendered identity including Columbia, Denmark, Ireland and Malta.^[15] The US record is far more mixed, with the Obama administration sometimes supporting the transgender movement in the case of student access to bathrooms, for example, and the Trump administration ending Obama era policies on this issue. In India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, hijras— male to female gender identification has been at times traditionally recognized—have now formally been recognized by the state.^[16] This is certainly not to say that state recognition means an end to oppression,^[17] but it does illustrate a shift in

cultural values internationally as well as the potential for a new force of revolution if further radicalization takes place.

Much more remains to be done, however. As women and other LGBT people are again showing themselves as activists in their own causes, there is a need to return to philosophy as well. Today's gender and sexual rights movement can move toward the role of acting as "new passions and new forces" for revolution only when theory and practice are combined into a dialectical whole. There is much work for Marxist-Humanists to do in terms of theorizing a positive alternative to capitalism. Women and non-traditional gender conforming individuals throughout the world provide new avenues for inquiry as they say "no" to many of the most oppressive aspects of patriarchal capitalism. We need to stand with these individuals in their opposition to the status quo and help in making concrete how a new society would organize gender relations.

It is clear that even state regulation of civil rights is not nearly enough to secure full emancipation for women and non-traditional gender conforming individuals, as is indicated by a multinational debate over transgender rights. As Marx points out, simple political equality is not human emancipation. In fact, the abolition of a distinction must presuppose that the distinction actually exists.^[18] This distinction is then alienated from the individual's species being: the state ignores the difference of the individual in

order to bring them into the community. Thus, the individual is fractured into multiple parts where only the most abstract aspects of humanity are acknowledged by the state and by other human beings. One remains a citizen, but qualifiers must always be added which can ultimately lead to a sort of second-class citizenship. For example, women are politically equal to men in the US but face discrimination on the job market, in the political sphere and in terms of the right to control their own bodies in part because they contain an identity that is not part of the abstract citizen that is recognized by the state. They have the capacity to produce new human life—something that is difficult, labor intensive and can take away from the standard of what abstract civic duty or the employer-employee contract represents. In the liberal state, difference is acknowledged and alienated from the individual's species being, leading to a separated public and private individual that must constantly fight to retain the full rights seemingly granted with citizenship. Hence, the constant back and forth on civil rights for all the oppressed minority groups.

It is necessary at this point to return to the issue of identity, this time from the perspective of what a new society might look like. Perhaps there is something that we can learn from Marx in his discussion of gender, albeit his interest was likely far from supporting what would become the LGBT community or fundamental change in gender roles. In the

1844 Manuscripts, Marx takes up in an extremely brief and abstract way, the progression of gender relations and how it illustrates progress toward the fully developed human being:

“The immediate, natural and necessary relation of human being to human being is also the *relation* of *man* [Mann] to *woman* [Weib]. In this *natural* species relationship man’s [Mensch] relation to nature is directly his relation to man [Mensch], and his relation to man [Mensch] is directly his relation to nature, to his own *natural* function. Thus, in this relation is *sensuously revealed*, reduced to an observable *fact*, the extent to which human nature has become nature for him. From this relationship man’s [Mensch] whole level of development can be assessed. It follows from the character of this relationship how far *man* [Mensch] has become, and has understood himself as, a *species-being*, a *human being*. The relation of man [Mann] to woman [Weib] is the *most natural* relation of human being to human being. It indicates, therefore, how far man’s [Mensch] *natural* behavior has become *human*, and how far his *human* essence has become a *natural* essence for him, how far his *human nature* has become *nature for him*. It also shows how far man’s [Mensch] *needs* have become *human* needs, and consequently how far the other person [Mensch], as a person, has become one of his needs, and to what extent he is in his individual existence at the same time a social being.”^[19]

Of particular note here is how Marx moves from the abstract universal—the unmediated, “natural” human understanding of species being where survival and thus reproduction is the primary link between individuals to the concrete universal where every human being regardless of gender (and today we could add sexuality) are both beings for themselves and for others— i.e. the individual is valued both in terms of who they are and what they can become as well as being a representative of the species being for others. In order for human beings to develop in this way, it is necessary that we become true individuals, detached from those primitive bonds with the community. As Marx notes later in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere, this is part of the progressive element of capitalism.

Today, however, one could argue that this individualism has started to become an impediment to further progress toward gender equality. This is where the politics of difference comes in. Certainly, the ability to express one's gender identity without harsh social, political and economic repercussions is important. But one can begin to wonder where the possibility for common ground between these identities comes in. However, even with the seemingly most different individuals, there is always some commonality. Moreover, it is this commonality that provides the ground for difference to even be discussed.

It is this commitment to difference on many sides of the debate that many others are just beginning to question. For example, in the US, it is now clear that same-sex marriage is not the answer because discrimination can and does come in many forms whether it is refusal to provide business services because of religious belief, bathroom policing or physical violence. Simply asserting identity and difference is not enough--some commonality must be found. This is not a call for some abstract and unmediated unity, but instead a call for dialog about these intersections among those committed to full human emancipation for all. Marx, while far from perfect on these issues, seems to point in the direction of how these changes in gender relations came about, and more importantly, how to work toward that extremely difficult yet extremely important goal of “creat[ing] a new economic [and social] foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes”^[20] (and one could add gender) today, particularly in the *1844 Manuscripts*, *Capital*, and the *Ethnological Notebooks*, among many other places.

As an organization, it is imperative that we engage directly in these debates involving both ecological and gender concerns. In both instances, we can put forth a unique perspective. In terms of ecology, ours is one of the few perspectives that offers the opportunity to overcome the nature/culture dualism inherent in much theorizing on

ecology with our fully dialectical method that calls for an integrated understanding of both the human and natural worlds in their unending interaction rather than in their separation. Moreover, the need to move beyond capitalism and its despotic control over nearly everything and everyone that comes into its grasp is an important contribution of our organization to the discussion. In the long term, human survival is dependent on a sustainable alternative to capitalism—something that our organization has prioritized for many years.

The battles over gender rights, equality, and emancipation for all are also very significant. Capital has opened up a great deal of space for the expression of difference on many fronts. However important the expression of individuality is, it is nothing without the recognition of humanity within each individual. The struggle to come to terms with these multiple identities for women and men throughout the world regardless of their sex, gender and sexuality is one of the foremost challenges of our time. Here again, our emphasis on the incompatibility of capitalism and positive gender relations is important, but perhaps most significant will be our continuing work on a truly inclusive, non-hierarchical and ecologically sustainable alternative to capitalism.

[1] Masters, Jeff. “A Minimum Temperature of 42.6 °C (108.7 °F) in Oman on June 26, 2018: A New World Record?” <http://www.climatesignals.org/headlines/minimum-temperature-426-%C2%B0c-1087-%C2%B0f-oman-june-26-2018-new-world-record>

[2] “NASA, NOAA data show 2016 warmest year on record globally,” January 17, 2017.
<https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2537/nasa-noaa-data-show-2016-warmest-year-on-record-globally/>

[3] Malm, Andreas. 2018. *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*, p. 10. Verso.

[4] The World Bank puts US per capita production of CO₂ in 2013 at 16.40 metric tons while next on the list, China produces 7.55 metric tons per capita.

[5] Malm 2018, p. 10.

[6] Marx 1973, *Grundrisse*, pp. 409-410. Penguin Books Ltd.

[7] “China needs more water. So it's building a rain-making network three times the size of Spain,” *South China Morning Post*. March 26, 2018.
<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2138866/china-needs-more-water-so-its-building-rain-making-network-three>

[8] Dunayevskaya, 2000. [1958] *Marxism & Freedom: From 1776 until Today*, p. 93. New York: Humanity Books.

[9] Marx, Karl. 2004. [1844] *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 105 in Erich Fromm, ed., *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Continuum.

[10] Malm 2018, p. 10.

[11] Marx, “Address to the Communist League”, p. 305 in McLellan, David, ed. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Second Edition. Oxford University Press.

[12] Povoledo, Elisabetta, Raphael Minder and Yonette Joseph. “International Women’s Day 2018: Beyond #MeToo, With Pride Protest and Pressure.” *New York Times*. March 8, 2018.

[13] “Ireland Votes by Landslide to Legalise Abortion,” *The Guardian*. May 26, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/26/ireland-votes-by-landslide-to-legalise-abortion>

[14] “Ireland Becomes First Country to Legalise Gay Marriage by Popular Vote,” *The Guardian*. May 23, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/23/gay-marriage-ireland-yes-vote>

[15] Ghoshal, Neela and Kyle Knight. “Rights in Transition: Making Legal Recognition for Transgender People a Priority,” *World Report 2016*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/rights-in-transition>

[16] Ghoshal and Knight. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/rights-in-transition>

[17] And as Iranian policy on transgender and homosexuality shows, promoting certain transgender rights can have negative implications for other oppressed groups.

[18] “Far from abolishing these factual differences, its existence rests on them as a presupposition, it only feels itself to be a political state and asserts its universality by opposition to these elements.” Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, p. 53 In McLellan, David. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*: Oxford University Press.

[19] Marx, Karl. 2004. [1844] *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 103 in Erich Fromm, ed., *Marx’s Concept of Man*. New York: Continuum.

[20] Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 620. New York: Penguin Books.