CONCLUSION

problems of a post-capitalist ecological society: objective social process and open-endedness of mediated production

I. Law of value, class struggle and nature: role of subjectivity in logic of capital

In our work so far we have argued for an autonomous society. Such a society has to do away with the heteronomous logic of the self-expansion of value. However, doing away with this logic need not necessarily open the way for a social metabolism with nature which is completely unmediated by impersonal structures. We are not arguing that the political character of capitalist production will be followed by, in an ecological society, a post-political society where no more than an ecological management of society's metabolism with nature is required. The expansion of the political does not mean the death of society or the inception of a society functioning like a huge factory run solely on cost-benefit rationality.

In this conclusion we are going to address a few questions that our foregoing discussion raises. This will involve examining some of the ambiguities and complexities of the Marxist understanding of the social process or the logic of capital. We have pointed out two basic sources of ecological destruction: from the unintended consequences of our productive activity on nature mediated as it is by the structures of science and industry, and from the functioning of the logic of the self-expansion of value. Our discussion however focused mainly on the second. But it was seen that the first source cannot be left unaddressed in any ecological society.

More precisely it was seen that for an ecological society the expansion of the political cannot mean simply doing away with the logic of capital and allowing society to democratically control its metabolism with nature. Given the fact that even apart from the law of value our relationship with nature is anyways mediated by the structures of science and industry, it became necessary that such a democratic control be mediated by an ecological, non-identitarian thinking. This is because the
abolition of the law of value does not by itself provide us the mechanism for society's ecological metabolism with nature.

We must therefore understand that the law of value is not just a mere protuberance on and outside of society. It has a logic of its own, but the extent to which this logic is reified and stands opposed to humans has to be made clear. For it does not just stand opposed to humans but instead also sustains itself through the resourcing and channelling of human subjectivity.

This of course means that the logic of capital is not as self-generating and reified to the extent that human subjectivity is completely jettisoned out of the process. But then it is not just human subjectivity which is constitutive of the logic of capital. Nature is as much an element in the logic of capital which has an absolute dependence on the natural conditions of production. To be sure, as we pointed in chapter 3, nature is internalized in the process of self-expansion of value as the repository of pure value. However, nature as use value, that is, nature as nature is the sine qua non of the logic of capital. “We see then”, Marx wrote, “that labour is not the only source of material wealth, of use-values produced by labour. As William Petty puts it, labour is its father and earth its mother”.¹

If the supposedly self-generating and self-regulating character of the logic of capital is actually dependent on human subjectivity and nature then it represents a real moment in the history of society's metabolism with nature. It is the product of a particular metabolism between society and nature, conditioned by the particular mode of existence of the capitalist and working classes. It is in that sense an expression of class struggle. But in itself it is capitalist society's manner of metabolism with nature. Hence, any future society without the two classes also has to have its mechanisms for its metabolism with nature. We have explored these questions in the chapters above and particularly in chapter 4 where we saw that the expansion of the political has to taken account of the unintended consequences of human productive activity on nature, which is one of our two sources of ecological destruction.

In this conclusion therefore we are going to show how our understanding of the human-nature distinction so far helps in grasping the fact that Marx's notion of the economic logic of capital takes account of the role of human subjectivity and of nature as nature. Our understanding of human distinctiveness from nature and of productive activity can then be seen to lead us in the direction of allowing such a notion of the economic logic of capital. Our rejection of the overburdening of the human subject and the denial of the contradictory nature of reality then assumes crucial importance. But then if reality itself is contradictory so much so that even the otherwise reified logic of capital is sustained at least in part by human subjectivity then we are in the realm where the stamp of subjectivity renders everything, all of reality open-ended. The problem of achieving an ecological society is then not one of replacing one set of 'objective' structures with another more ecological ones but of building structures that are themselves structuring structures.

The contradictory nature of reality derives from the fact that even so called 'objective' structures of the logic of capital manifest the interpersal of human subjectivity and nature. This means that unlike the logic of capital which operates as though it is self-generating and independent of the human and natural resources, an ecological society needs such ways and means of its metabolism with nature so that the interpersal of human subjectivity and nature is freely acknowledged and society is above all conscious of its absolute dependence on nature.

II. Necessary conditions of existence for all societies

This means of course that an ecological society has to tackle with problems at, at least, two levels. One is that if the logic of capital itself is so imbricated by human subjectivity so that an ecological society too has to take account of this, then we are far from a society where humans are presided over by reified structures that control society's metabolism with nature independently of them. Instead we are in a society which has to organize itself, through its own volition, into a self-reflective, political society. An ecological society has to therefore take account of the contentious and multi-dimensional character of the political which in turn derives from the enormous variety that society-nature relations can take. Such an ecological society has to be
Conclusion: problems of a post-capitalist ecological society: objective social process and open-endedness of mediated production

extremely open for what the not-yet, for the unexpected and unintended consequences of human actions on nature as well of nature's own creativity.²

Secondly the precariousness of the political assumes more importance when we realize that even the society of associated producers might have to after all contend with the operation and unintended consequences of certain impersonal structures that will invariably come to mediate society's metabolism with nature.

As pointed out above, both these insights are gained by understanding how the logic of capitalist society is not to be treated as completely self-generating and self-reproducing: in particular we have shown how human subjectivity and nature are indispensable to the sustenance of the system and yet are not fully absorbed and subsumed within it. The way in which human subjectivity and nature interact, in other words, the manner in which society's metabolism with nature takes place raises questions about the 'objective' character of social structures and the precariousness of the political in any future ecological society (first source of ecological destruction).

So far we have made two points about the nature of an ecological society: that though the overwhelming reified logic of society's metabolism with nature might be gone, the mediated character of this metabolism will impose its own necessities. On the other hand, the autonomous character of an ecological society, where society deliberates and discusses its metabolism with nature, means that it is going to be a political society in which the order of human things is in contention.

This means that even if an ecological society no longer possesses a logic which looms large over humans dictating their metabolism with nature, a complete control over this metabolism is going to elude humans for a considerable period of time: the unintended consequences of global human activity is going to impose certain necessities on humans for a long time to come. The transition from the realm of

² This of course needs an eye for the not-yet, beyond the positively given. Guattari writes that "this ecosophical logic — and I want to emphasize this point — resembles the manner in which an artist may be led to alter his work after the intrusion of some accidental detail, an event-incident that suddenly makes his initial project bifurcate, making it drift far from its previous path, however certain it had once appeared to be" (Felix Guattari, "The Three Ecologies", London and New Brunswick, 2000, p. 52).
necessity to the realm of freedom cannot so easily be proposed in the light of

the continued mediation of this metabolism through impersonal structures even without the logic of capital. However we are here not conceiving of an ecological society as having done away with all mediation by impersonal structures so that the autonomous and democratically decided will of humans no longer needs to confront the necessities imposed by society.

Our conception of an ecological society is one which does not internalize human subjectivity and nature as mere repositories of abstract value but as human subjectivity and nature, where labour is the father and earth the mother of value. An ecological society does not generate and reproduce itself by denying the use value of humans and nature. It recognizes that though labour, human subjectivity is the basis of all our actions and transformations on nature, labour itself is a force of nature acting on nature.

Labour is no longer abstract labour in an ecological society. It is a society conscious of the conditions of its own existence and which explicitly takes account of the necessary conditions of society's existence. Thus, human subjectivity and nature recognized and absorbed in the social process as use values would give rise to a much more variegated and heterogeneous reality, even as society with its own necessities and patterns would persist and perhaps sometimes even stand opposed to its own autonomy.

Our rejection of self-generating and self-reproducing character of capitalist society stands opposed to the Foucauldian notion of the society of control. The supposed insularity of present-day society no longer appears so once the human subjectivity and nature is seen as indispensable elements in the sustenance of society. The self-reproducing character of the capitalist society is, for example, severely impaired by the depletion of the natural conditions of production. Wallerstein argues that the rise in the wages due to deruralization of the working force on a world scale has led to

Laclau's claims that Marx fails to take account of the necessary conditions of existence of society does not hold true since Marx was well aware of nature providing the absolute necessary conditions for capitalist production. Marx however pointed out that the logic of capital is articulated under capitalism in such a manner that it appears to be self-generating and self-reproducing. See the first chapter of Ernesto Laclau, "New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time", London and New York, 1990.
the fall in the rate of profit for capitalist firms. Firms therefore would not like to internalize the costs of preserving the environment.

This clearly shows the dependence of capitalist society on factors that act as the indispensable condition for its sustenance. Hence the organization of social relations, that is, the conditions of class struggle and relative bargaining strengths of capitalist firms determines the profitability or otherwise of capitalist production. Similarly the natural conditions of production and the pressures on these firms to, say, make some real or token expenditure on the preservation of the environment also goes to determine the costs of the production and hence the rate of profit. Clearly, one cannot adequately appreciate the conditions and basis of capitalist production without taking account of the role of labour and nature in the entire process. Though capitalist production has its own reified logic of the self-expansion of value it is very important to realize that this logic itself thrives on a particular organization of social relations and of a particular production of nature. The necessary conditions of capitalist production are too obvious to be overlooked.

Human subjectivity and nature as the necessary conditions of production however do not exist separately except of course for capitalist production which treats human subjectivity in the form of abstract labour, that is, as a force in itself. As for nature, as we have already discussed, the process of capital treats it as the repository of exchange value and not as use value. The capitalist production of nature therefore takes in or internalizes labour and nature as mere homogeneous value, as labour-time.

However, as we tried to show, labour and nature do not exist separately. Our capacity for labour itself is a product of human activity on nature. But this is about the character of our activity on nature, related to our suggestion about the need for positive ecological thinking, so that society's democratic management of its

4 Writes Wallerstein, "Deruralization is crucial to the price of labour.... Persons long resident in urban areas, even if they are temporarily unemployed in the formal economy and living in terrible slums conditions, generally demand higher wage levels before accepting wage employment" (Wallerstein, "Ecology and the Capitalist Costs of Production", in Walter L. Goldfrank, David Goodman, and Andrew Szasz, eds., "Ecology and the World-System", Connecticut, 1999, p. 6).

5 As Wallerstein writes, "given the deruralization of the world and its already serious effect upon the accumulation of capital, the implementation of significant ecological measures, seriously carried out, could well serve as the coup de grace to the viability of the capitalist world economy" (Ibid., p. 7).
metabolism with nature does in fact remain ecological. This is to ensure that
desire’s democratic and conscious metabolism with nature is in fact informed
by the fact of our ontological dependence on nature.

Now this becomes particularly pertinent in addressing the question of the necessity
arising out of the social process which we noted above. This is so since the post-
capitalist (post-law of value?) social process might still be functioning in a more or
less autonomous manner vis-à-vis society’s democratic planning. Society’s control
over its metabolism with nature must be based on the fact that human subjectivity,
labour is not a force in itself but itself derives its energy from nature. Hence our
position, following Marx, that human distinctiveness from nature is itself derived
from our character as a natural, objective being has to be taken account of in the
social process of our metabolism with nature.

Such a notion of human subjectivity undermines capital’s tendency to engender what
we called the overburdening of the human subject in the form of abstract and
homogeneous labour. For capital, human labour, practice is the starting-point of
history. Marx however pointed that it is nature which is the starting point of history. 6
What has to be therefore explained is not our unity with nature but our gradual
separation from nature. Marx’s entire analysis of capitalist production can in this
sense very well be seen as trying to show us how human labour or subjectivity gets
torn apart from its basis in nature.

By treating living labour, that is, labour as a force of nature embodied in humans as
mere abstract labour, as labour-time and nature as the repository of exchange value,
capital lets loose a tremendous flow of self-expanding value. This flow of value
does not know nature as nature but only as, and to the extent that it serves as, the
repository of value. The flow of value therefore very often clashes with the need for
maintaining and sustaining the life-sustaining capacities of nature, leading to the
ecological destruction of nature. The capitalist production of nature is therefore very
often ecologically destructive. This is our point in chapter 3.

6 In *EPM*, Marx writes that “only when science proceeds from nature, is it true science” and
thereafter that “history itself is a real part of natural history, of nature developing into man” (Marx,
III. Problems of post capitalist ecological society: the two necessities

We argued above that any post-capitalist ecological society might be able to do away with the reified logic of capital thereby opening the way for conditions that would enable society to consciously plan its own metabolism with nature. Towards this end we suggested, particularly in chapter 4, that we need to take account of both production in general and specific production, that is, we need an expansion of the political which will not only free the process of production and consumption from the reign of the logic of capital and subject it to society's democratic control through a rational plan, but also inform this democratic and rational control with a properly ecological consciousness and non-identitarian thinking. In all this, human subjectivity and nature still persist as the two poles for the necessary conditions of such a post-capitalist society's existence. The problems we located at the levels of production of general and specific production are not entirely irrelevant here. The post-capitalist ecological production of nature will in all probability face at least two necessities.

Now under production in general we discussed the character of human productive activity as such and we noted that human labour is a force of nature acting on nature. We attacked the manner in which the capitalist production system treats labour as though it does not derive from nature. The result is the overburdening of the subject which leads to the both the ambiguities of the liberal humanist project whereby the individual freed from pre-capitalist natural relations is, on the one hand, tapped for the capitalist production of nature and, on the other hand, given political rights that

7 The notion of a plan has to be clarified particularly after the experiences of the Soviet Union and China. A planned society is to be understood as a society which allocates labour time according to the consciously decided and democratically agreed upon needs of the society. Labour which involves the transformation and production of nature for human needs should not be allowed to be produced and allocated as homogeneous labour time according to the tyrannical logic of capital. As Meszaros writes, “the question is, therefore, whether considerations of time play the role of the all-important determinant in the historically specific form of social metabolism, or, on the contrary, the labour time of society - both its production and allocation - is regulated and determined by the objectives which the members of an advanced socialist society set themselves, within the framework of a genuine plan devised by them”. A plan in this sense means that a particular social transformation of nature will take place, that is labour will be expended on it, only when society consciously and voluntarily decides so, considering its social utility and its foreseeable ecological consequences (Istvan Meszaros, "Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition" Vol. 2, Calcutta, 2000, p. 746).
Conclusion: problems of a post-capitalist ecological society: objective social process and open-endedness of mediated production

are completely divorced from any real say over society's vital metabolism with nature.

Thus we saw that even though labour as such is a force of nature the dominant social process of our metabolism with nature, deriving from the capitalist social relations of production, means that this fact is never taken account of. This shows that human productive activity, as represented in production in general, which according to Marx is the universal feature of all societies, takes place under conditions given by the prevailing social relations, by the specific production system.

Production in general and specific production are of course conceptual terms that have been used here, following Marx, to describe any historically specific form of social metabolism. Production in general corresponded to human productive activity as such and its examination showed us the true character of human labour as a force of nature acting on nature. This meant, as we discussed above, that the expansion of the political for an ecological society requires that society's democratic control over its metabolism with nature must be informed by an ecological consciousness and non-identitarian thinking. Specific production in turn allowed us to examine the reified character of capitalist production. This meant any post-capitalist ecological society must do away with the logic of capital and take the process of its metabolism with nature in its own hands. Our notion of the expansion of the political in chapter 4 sought to show how such an ecological society is possible.

The problems arising out of such an expansion of the political revolved around what would ensure that society's democratic control over its metabolism with nature would indeed be ecological at the same time. While this problem was sought to be resolved by including ecological thinking as the substantive rationality of such a democracy, the question regarding the conditions for the possibility in the first place of society's autonomous control over its metabolism with nature was itself not considered. Of course we did delve into the reasons why society should jettison the stranglehold of capital and consciously control its metabolism with nature. The other factor which needs elaborate attention is that of the unintended consequences of our productive activity on nature.
Any post-capitalist ecological society has to encounter the problems arising from both the unpredictability and contentious character of human affairs, and the character of human productive activity in itself. This would compromise much of the autonomy of society in deciding its own affairs. That is, even without the operation of the law of value and the apparent shelving of the rule of capital the transition to the realm of freedom is not so easily accomplished. For what should be kept in mind is that such a post-capitalist society which controls its own metabolism with nature does not control everything that affects it.

For that matter, one doubts whether Marx thought that even his society of associated producers would be free of any impersonal reified structures of mediation. Andre Gorz for example criticises Marx for assuming that the society of associated producers would do away with all impersonal mediation. Our claim here is that any post-capitalist ecological society at least for a long time to come cannot act as though everything is in its control. With its rigour drastically lessened, given the abolition of the law of value, the realm of necessity will still continue to exert itself. Gorz writes that in Marx's society of associated producers, "nothing shall exist there independently of them". This means that society is taken to be completely self-regulating in complete freedom and self-will.

Without going into the details of the actuality and possibility of Marx's society of associated producers and the criticisms it has faced, it will be argued here that Marx's understanding of the human relationship with nature is such as to always take account of the natural conditions of our existence and the dependence of our own social or human existence on the final and absolute conditions given to us by nature. That is why he viewed the reduction of living labour to abstract, homogeneous labour under capitalism as degradation of the individual.

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8 Gorz attacks Marx for having thought that the "abolition of the state as an apparatus of law and administration standing outside the control of individuals; abolition of political economy with its own laws that impose themselves upon social actors......", would "render impossible everything which exists independently of individuals" (Andre Gorz, "Critique of Economic Reason", London and New York, 1989, pp. 26 - 27).
Marx's attack on what we called the overburdening of the subject and his understanding of human labour as a force of nature acting on nature meant that he always took human subjectivity and nature as providing the necessary conditions of existence for any society, not excluding the society of associated producers. Thus it is difficult to accept Gorz's claim that Marx sought to found a society where "nothing shall exist independently of them (the producers - S.G.)". Marx did not envision a society where the real is completely comprehended as the rational.

What applies to Marx's society of associated producers will quite obviously apply to our transitional post-capitalist ecological society. In spite of doing away with the law of value and instituting society's conscious and democratically planned control over its metabolism with nature the real only comes progressively closer to the rational but never goes beyond approximating the rational. "To realize the unity of the real as the unity of Reason", as Gorz suggests Marx hoped for in his ideal society, is not possible for any society. And Marx clearly saw this, given the fact that his thinking is, as we saw above, permeated with this idea of how all societies are bound by their absolute dependence on nature and how, in addition, modern societies have to confront the fact of the contentious character of human affairs. That is, the open ended character of capitalist society and any society that follows it can be located at the levels of both nature and human subjectivity, and their interrelationship.

Our post-capitalist ecological society, then, will in all probability face the necessities arising from two sources. First will be the necessity imposed by the persistence of some social process or logic which might follow the operation of the law of value as such. Secondly the mediated character of our productive activity on nature will mean that there will always be the possibility that the unintended consequences of our activity on nature would be ecologically destructive. This is of course the second source of ecological destruction which we had pointed out above but was not part of our main discussion.

Conclusion: problems of a post-capitalist ecological society: objective social process and open-endedness of mediated production

Here we clearly enter into an area of complexity where human or social systems interact and intermesh with natural systems leading to a socio-natural relationship whose inner relationships and interconnectedness cannot be anticipated with any degree of precision. One problem area is of the continuance of some form of the social process which would in any case emerge in spite of the otherwise democratic and ecological control of our metabolism with nature. This might happen since even in a classless society various hierarchies would continue to exist and secondly the cumulative or final effect of various individual wills might very well clash with what society had collectively intended. The second problem area is that of the intractability of comprehension and control of our productive intercourse with nature mediated as it is by the structures of modern science and industry.

Before we close, it is worth noting here that at least one possible way of addressing these two problems and helping a post-capitalist society to deal with the necessities we described above would be to inform our expansion of the political with non-identitarian thinking which we tried pointing out in chapters 2 and 4.

What we have, however, hopefully succeeded in showing in our discussion here is that for an ecological production of nature the logic of capital has to go. However this is not enough since for an ecological society to come about we should be able to found a society which would be extremely attuned to the complexities and contradictions arising out of the very fact that human subjectivity has to engage in productive activity with the very nature from which it itself derives its sustenance. The open-endedness of this relationship even in a post-capitalist ecological society derives as much from the autonomy of socially expressed human subjectivity regarding the particular metabolic relation society establishes with nature as from the very complexity of the processes and mechanisms of nature in their interplay with the structures of modern science and industry that mediate society's relationship with nature. At least our post-capitalist society will be a political society in which the expansion of the political will have the role of ensuring not only that society has its conscious and democratic control over its metabolism with nature but this democracy which legitimizes this control should itself be informed by a properly ecological consciousness and non-identitarian thinking.