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ECOLOGY/ONTOLOGY A CONTRIBUTION TO HISTORICAL NATURALISM

ABSTRACT

Contemporary debates in political ecology tend more and more to be held on the ontological level, where they are recomposed around the following alternative: should one conceive of nature as the order of reality that transcends society and that should be protected from the excesses of the latter? Or should one renounce the very partitioning of nature and society itself in order to imagine new, more sustainable, ecological arrangements? Examining both Bruno Latour's and Jason Moore's takes on this alternative we argue that it should be overcome in favor of a naturalist and historical ontology of society inspired by the young Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. In this historico-naturalist perspective, social relations indeed appear as both determined by their environmental conditions as well as determining the uses of a collective make of its environment. The interest in this approach is to allow one to conceive of social alienation and environmental destruction as two sides of a same process which should therefore be conjointly addressed.

Keywords: political ecology, social ontology, alienation, capitalism, Karl Marx, Bruno Latour, Jason W. Moore.

For a couple of decades philosophy and social theory have taken an “ontological turn” which transcends disciplinary boundaries and intellectual traditions (Charbonnier, Salmon, Skafish, 2016, 1–20). When one questions the political reasons for such a turn, one quickly stumbles upon the ecological question. It is as if the destruction of the environment practically raised the issue of the reality of nature and of the nature of reality. It is therefore not surprising that ecological debates should recompose around the following alternative: should one conceive of nature as an order of reality that transcends society and that should be protected from the excesses of the latter? Or should one renounce the very partitioning of nature and society itself in order to imagine new, more sustainable ecological arrangements?

Let us put it bluntly: such an alternative is ill-posed. The first part of the alternative, which could be termed a “substantial dualism,” postulates a fundamental heterogeneity between nature and society and is therefore unable to account for both the environmental effects of social practices and the social effects of environmental changes. This is why such a substantial dualism is no longer defended, if it ever were. It is a strawman waved around by those who like Bruno Latour or Jason W. Moore strive to think anew the identity between nature and society: the former in the name of a generalized hybridism, the latter in the name of a Marxist-inspired monism.

Our claim, however, is that such substitute solutions are no more satisfying than the imaginary dualism they confront. In order to understand the environmental crisis one has indeed to account for the identity between nature and society, for only practices that are part of nature can modify it. But in order to criticize this crisis one also has to fix the specific difference between nature and society, for otherwise the idea according to which social practices destroy nature loses all meaning. Consequently, after briefly looking at Latour’s and Moore’s positions we will turn to the young Marx in order to sketch a historico-naturalist social ontology capable of accounting for the continuity as well as the discontinuity between nature and society.

AFTER THE DEATH OF NATURE: BRUNO LATOUR’S HYBRIDISM

The appeal of Latour’s work undoubtedly derives from what appears to be its main provocative proposal: political ecology has to get rid of the very category of “nature.”

From a political point of view Latour begins with the observation that political ecology holds a contradictory position. On the one hand, it claims to seek to “preserve” nature, but, on the other hand, its whole action situates it beyond the nature–society division. Whether they are about protecting ecosystems from the threat of an airport construction, about fighting against massive deforestation in Amazonia, or about opposing installation of garbage dumps in poor suburbs, environmental struggles always mobilize a multiplicity of “actants”¹—human activists, non-human species, scientific knowledge and political institutions—which cannot be subsumed under the categories of nature or society. “Political ecology—Latour writes—is always manifested in practice by the destruction of the idea of nature” (Latour, 2004, 25).

From an ontological point of view, this argument is based on the claim according to which modernity is characterized by the multiplication of *hybrid* entities. Certainly, Latour refuses to turn hybridity into some kind of general ontological determination, as he refuses to turn it into a mere epistemological

¹ Latour defines the concept of actant as a “term from semiotics covering both humans and nonhumans.” Cf. (Latour, 2004, 237).

category. Hybridity, he explains, lays beyond “the impossible distinction, contradicted every day, between ontological and epistemological questions,” beyond “the impossible choice between realism and constructivism” (Latour, 2004, 41). A hybrid object is no more a pure object than it is a pure construction. Rather, it is a network of relations and an arrangement of humans and non-humans whose existence is neither natural nor social but “collected” (Latour, 2004, 94) by devices, narratives and singular evolving practices. In Latour’s view, the concept of collection replaces the division between human and non-human beings. The non-distinction between nature and society does not, however, come from the essence of objects themselves (as realists would have it) nor from the ways we relate to them (as constructivists would have it). Rather, it is linked to the inherent pattern of collectivities. Social groups are always indistinct collections of humans and non-humans which have been arbitrarily distinguished during modernity. There is no *representation* or *construction* of reality because the collectivities we are part of are always the effects of networks composed by scientific knowledge, technical devices and biophysical resources. It seems to us, however, that this an-archaic theory of community *de facto* presupposes an ontology and—we should precise—a non-critical ontology of society.

As Frédéric Neyrat puts it, the project of unifying the world by the collecting of human and non-human beings reveals that Latour’s “ultimate goal is not to let the multiplicity of actants be, but to produce the *One*” (Neyrat, 2016, 186). Without any partitioning between objects and subjects, society and nature, the collection of beings becomes a closed totality with no exteriority. But, in order to understand the environmental crisis, one does have to account for the ways social practices affect natural processes which are relatively exterior to them. To use Alf Hornborg’s example: carbon cycles have certainly been modified by fossil capital’s polluting activities, but the composition of carbon’s atoms, which is the very conditions of the cycles’ modification, remains independent from human activities (Hornborg, 2015, 59). To melt the natural and the social into a general “hybridism” is to give up on criticizing the destructive effects of societies, on assigning real causes to the environmental crisis and on effectively opposing it. “Hybrid” is thus the name of a world where critique is impossible. Is it possible, then, to account for the identity of the natural and the social while maintaining the possibility of ecological critique? Such is the problem Moore addresses in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

BEFORE THE DEATH OF CAPITAL: JASON MOORE’S MONISM

Just like Latour, Moore considers that substantialist dualism, which he deems “Cartesian,” represents the main obstacle to the understanding of the environmental crisis. Unlike Latour, however, he claims that this crisis has its roots in an historically specific mode of production: capitalism. He thus engages

in an ecological critique of capitalism which seems more promising than Latour's hybridism.

In *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, Moore indeed elaborates an original theory of the nature–capital relationship grounded on a “double internality” (Moore, 2015, 1). On the one hand, capitalism emerges and develops out of geographical, climatic and environmental conditions, so that he ought to be positioned within the whole of nature. But, on the other hand, the natural energy provided by wind or water streams, oil or coal, human or animal effort, fuels capitalist accumulation, so that nature ought to be positioned within capital. Where the first internality seems to imply a naturalist realism, in light of which nature appears to preexist and include social practices, the second internality, for its part, seems to imply a socio-centric constructivism, in light of which nature appears to be what capital poses as the presupposition of its accumulation. In order to synthesize these two contradictory ontologies, Moore withdraws into a monist position whose key concept is that of the “*oikeios*.” This concept indeed simultaneously designates an ensemble of flows and ecosystems from and through which human practices unfold *and* the essential unity between nature and society (Moore, 2015, 35–36). Now, we think that this monist ontology undermines the ecological critique of capitalism it is meant to ground.

As far as the *ecological critique* is concerned, the subsumption of nature and society under the all-encompassing notion of *oikeios* tends, in the Latourian way, to deny the exteriority of the natural processes that are affected by capitalist production. True, Moore does acknowledge the fact that productive activities have profoundly modified the environmental conditions in which they unfold. But inasmuch as capital is equally internal to nature as nature is to capital, one only ever witnesses a self-transformation of the *oikeios*: “Nature—writes Moore—can neither be saved nor destroyed, only transformed” (Moore, 2015, 45).

As far as the ecological critique of *capitalism* is concerned, a singularly indeterminate definition of this mode of production results from Moore's monism. This monism indeed allows him to portray capitalism as a mode of appropriation of nature in which the exploitation of labor through the extraction of surplus-value is but a particular case of the universal domination of human and non-human nature. There is obviously no question that capital appropriates nature. But, contrary to what Moore tirelessly asserts, it is impossible for this appropriation of nature to be value-producing in itself. Let us take the example of extractivism. It is not the quantity of ore extracted from a Brazilian mine that makes up its value, but the labor-time that is socially necessary for extracting it. In the same way in which he confuses nature and society in the *oikeios*, Moore confuses value-producing activities with the productivity of nature (Bellamy-Foster, 2018, 122–133). This leads him to identify in his definition of capitalism the conditions of the reproduction of the production process with the valorization process of capital. The fact that one implies the other does not mean that they are one and the same. Moore's contradictions thus pose the following chal-

lenge: how to account for the immanence of capitalism within nature while making justice to the exteriority of nature to capitalism? In order to face this challenge, we will now turn to Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*.

AN ONTOLOGY FOR TODAY: HISTORICAL NATURALISM

The *1844 Manuscripts* are useful for our purpose because the young Marx articulates his critique of capitalism with a naturalist social ontology. From a critical point of view, Marx argues that capitalism is alienating because the property relations that prevail in this social formation dispossess individuals of the products of their action, of their own activity, and of human and non-human nature (Marx, 1982, 368). From an ontological point of view, he consequently analyzes the relationship between these two "natures." In the *1844 Manuscripts*, non-human nature is conceived of as an ensemble of physical, chemical and organic forces. As for human nature, it is conceived of as an ensemble of "essential forces" amongst which Marx mentions needs, senses and species abilities such as speech, thought and work (Marx, 1982, 408–409; 165–166). Just like Latour and Moore, Marx therefore refuses to hypostasize "non-human" and "human" natures as two heterogeneous substances, for the latter is nothing but a transformed product of the dynamism of the former. But he nonetheless argues that the specificity of humanity's "essential forces" is that they only actualize under determinate social relations. And he defines these relations as exchange relations through which human beings satisfy and diversify their needs as well as cooperation relations; through them human beings develop their abilities and transform their environment (Marx, 1981, 452). Unlike Latour and Moore, Marx therefore conceives of society as the ontologically specific level of reality which distinguishes itself from nature as it transforms it. As a result, each social formation can be analyzed as a way of structuring the practical transformation of the environment and of organizing the development of human abilities. In this perspective, the characteristic of capitalist societies is to structure humanity's relationship to the environment in a destructive way and to organize the development of human abilities in an alienating way.

Beginning with the critique of the alienating effects of property relations, the young Marx thus came to a naturalistic and historical social ontology. Marx's social ontology is not only naturalistic because it apprehends social formations from the standpoint of the actualization of the "essential forces" of the human species, but also because it replaces these social formations within the preexisting nature with which they have to interact. This naturalistic social ontology is historical, for it holds that each and every social formation transforms itself as it transforms its environment. Now, this *historical naturalism* is not unfamiliar to those engaged in ecological debates. It was, for example, developed and promoted by Carolyn Merchant who defines ecofeminist historiography by its

“special sensitivity to the dialectical relationship between human behavior and institutions, on the one hand, and the natural environment, on the other” (Merchant, 1990, 42). We think that this historico-naturalist attitude is worth being followed by contemporary ecological strategies, for at least two reasons.

The first reason is that by focusing on the *ecological* conditions of the becoming of societies, historical naturalism allows for an understanding of environmental destruction and social alienation as two moments of the same process. The dynamic of capital’s accumulation leads to extracting ever more biophysical resources and to the degradation of working conditions of proletarianized populations. This is why the struggles against multinational companies in Ecuador, Honduras or Columbia are not only struggles against the preservation of mangroves, but also struggles for the survival and development of traditional activities which are less alienating than industrial shrimp farming.

The second reason for actualizing historical naturalism in the contemporary conjuncture is that by focusing on the *social* conditions of the becoming of the Earth, it allows for an understanding of the fact that the sustainability of ecosystems depends on nature uses which are themselves allowed by social relations of property. As a matter of fact, ecological struggles are never limited to a dispute over antagonistic land or resources uses. They are always also struggles over ways of possessing and appropriating wealth. Going back to our previous example, one can notice that the struggles for the safeguard of the mangrove raise the issue of property rights on forest: private property rights for multinational companies, communal property rights for the natives. In the same way, the ongoing struggle in Notre-Dame-des-Landes does not only raise the issue of land *uses*, but also of the social relations that organize the *rights* on the territory and thereby of the state which guarantees these rights.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that ontological debates about the nature of reality are not indifferent to the ways one conceives of actually existing ecological struggles. Therefore as conclusions we would like to draw some political consequences of the young Marx’s naturalist social ontology.

The first consequence has to do with the relationship between two strategies which are often opposed to each other: the strategy of the *seizing of State-Power*, which would belong to the workers’ movement tradition, and the strategy of *autonomy*, which arguably characterizes environmental struggles. On the one hand, these struggles would aim at autonomously promoting sustainable uses of the Earth, often in a communitarian way. On the other hand, working class struggles would aim at abolishing capitalist property relations by seizing, in order to break it, the State. Now, historical naturalism leads us to think that the uses of the Earth are not separable from the property relations that legitimize

them. As a result, the main strategic issue political ecology should confront is that of the autonomous environmental struggles' relationship to State power.

The second consequence has to do with the endless tactical debate about the articulation of heterogeneous struggles, *the articulation between environmental and anticapitalist struggles*. On the one hand, the radical autonomy of environmental struggles is illusory, for the patriarchal culture of nature domination and the predaceous appropriation of the Earth are integral parts of capitalism's historical dynamic. But, on the other hand, it would be equally illusory to think that anticapitalism will by itself guarantee the resolution of the environmental crisis, which has a temporality of its own. The invention of new, more sustainable forms of life is just as urgent as the death of capital, a mode of production whose destructing effects are already measured in centuries, if not in millennia. If political ecology has to think of itself as anticapitalist, it is therefore in the sense that it is one of the main front of the struggle against capital and its "drowned world."

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