

Intellectuals, Labour, and the Anthropocene

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Prometheus and the Domination of Nature

In his 2015 article “The Anthropocene Myth”, Andreas Malm writes that “to portray certain social relations as the natural properties of the species is nothing new. Dehistoricizing, universalizing, eternalizing, and naturalizing a mode of production specific to a certain time and place – these are the classic strategies of ideological legitimation”¹. Malm is arguing here that our understanding of “the anthropocene” – and therefore the strategies for dealing with climate change – is flawed. The anthropocene, he writes, seeks to ascribe fossil-fuel dependence on a universal trait of the human species, when in reality, the selection of fossil-fuels as an energy source for industrialization, like industrialization itself, is a product of specific social relations arising from a particular mode of production. Such decisions were not made by the mass of humanity, but by a select few. As a result, the name “anthropocene” confuses – or, in Marxist terms, mystifies – the real nature of the society in which we now live.

For Malm, “the Anthropocene concept suggests that humankind is the new geological force transforming the planet beyond recognition” primarily through the use of fire. “The important thing to note here,” Malm continues, “is the logical structure of the Anthropocene narrative: some universal trait of the species must be driving the geological epoch that is its own, or else it would be a matter of some subset of the species”. In order to maintain its own ideological hegemony, capitalism must hide the fact that “a subset of the species” – industrialists and their hangers on – have created the climatic conditions in which we now live; it must insist that “the anthropocene” is caused by an innate human characteristic, rather than the structural requirements under capitalism for the rapacious consumption of natural resources, primarily by burning them.

Now, this view is far from being universally accepted even among Marxists. In “Marxism and The Anthropocene”, Camilla Royle surveys the landscape of environmental theories among Marxist researchers. She writes that, while there is much to commend Malm’s theory of capitalism as the driver of anthropogenic

¹ Andreas Malm, “The Anthropocene Myth: Blaming all Humanity for Climate Change lets Capitalism off the Hook”, *Jacobin*, March 30, 2015. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/>; Malm has expanded his argument in the full-length *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, London: Verso, 2016.

climate change, “it seems premature to associate the Anthropocene so closely with the industrial revolution”².

Malm tends towards explaining historical developments in terms of class struggle between one group of humans and another where the most powerful group will win out (an approach that could be described as class struggle determinism). This examination of what happens *between* humans gives very little emphasis to the way human societies develop in a relationship with the rest of nature.

The relationship between the human and natural worlds has long been part of the Marxist problematic. Indeed the division between a human and a natural world has been contested – the concept of a “natural world” is a constructed one, and there is no necessary division between the human and the natural. For Marx, human beings were one of the only animals to consciously change its environment rather than simply consuming it or using it to make nests, etc. The process by which humans transformed the world is called work, and is a dialectical process – working on the world changes the world, but it also changes the human being. Given that Marxism – like all modern philosophies and political programmes – arose out of the Enlightenment, it has long been argued that Marxism shares with Enlightenment thinking an attitude of domination towards the natural world. Marx is said to hold a “Promethean” view of nature, one that makes nature the slave and helpmeet to humanity. For our purposes today, it is no coincidence that the gift of Prometheus to humanity is the gift of fire.

William Blake’s question (“And was Jerusalem builded here, / Among these dark Satanic Mills?”³) exemplifies the Promethean view of capitalism. For capitalists, the dark satanic mills are required for the establishment of a new Jerusalem. Humanity’s control over nature is summed up in the coal fires of the industrial revolution. Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, argue that the intellectual foundation for capitalism’s prometheanism derives precisely from such myths around the domination of nature. In their view, the development of Enlightenment rationality and the forms of thought, political institutions, rights and freedoms that came out of the Enlightenment, were inextricably linked with humanity’s material domination of nature which seemed to have reached perfection with the industrial revolution. There is, therefore, a contradiction at the heart of Enlightenment/capitalist society:

The enslavement to nature of people today cannot be separated from social progress. The increase in economic productivity which creates the conditions for a most just world also affords the technical apparatus and the social

² Camilla Royle, “Marxism and the Anthropocene”, *International Socialism* 151 (page numbers?). <http://isj.org.uk/marxism-and-the-anthropocene/>

³ William Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David Erdman, 95.

groups controlling it a disproportionate advantage over the rest of the population. The individual is entirely nullified in the face of the economic powers. These powers are taking society's domination over nature to unimagined heights. While individuals as such are vanishing before the apparatus that they serve, they are provided for by that apparatus and better than ever before.⁴

As a product of Enlightenment thought itself, Marxism has long been open to the criticism that it, too, is Promethean, seeking to subjugate and dominate nature for humanity. That point-of-view has been challenged, most effectively by John Bellamy Foster in a series of articles in *Monthly Review*, as well as *Marx's Ecology*. Bellamy writes that

Given the nature of Marx's earlier critique of Proudhon's mechanistic "Prometheanism," it is rather ironic that the *Manifesto*, when read from an ecological perspective, is often viewed as the prime locus of Marx's so-called "Promethean" view of the human-nature relation.⁵

However,

This charge of "Prometheanism," it is important to understand, carried implicitly within it certain anti-modernist (postmodernist or premodernist) assumptions that have become sacrosanct within much of Green Theory. True environmentalism, it would seem, demands nothing less than the rejection of modernity itself. The charge of Prometheanism is thus a roundabout way of branding Marx's work and Marxism as a whole as an extreme version of modernism, more easily condemned in this respect than liberalism itself.⁶

All in all, ecological thinking around Marx has, until recently, tended to discard Marx's ecological insights.

Marx, we are told, ultimately failed to address the exploitation of nature (...) and adopted instead a "Promethean" (pro-technological, anti-ecological) view. (...) As a corollary to the "Promethean" argument, it is contended that, in Marx's view, capitalist technology and economic development had solved all problems of ecological limits, and that the future society of associated producers would exist under conditions of abundance.⁷

⁴ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002: xvii.

⁵ John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000: 134.

⁶ *Ibid*, 135.

⁷ *Ibid*, 9-10.

John Bellamy Foster's work, notably *Marx's Ecology*, has done much to counter this trend, arguing that Marx's dialectical understanding of the relationship between humanity and the environment was much more subtle and richer than is usually understood. Marx, Bellamy argues, viewed nature as a totality (including human beings) in which everything was related in a "metabolism" (i.e. the way the elements of our bodies are related through metabolism) that regulates such things as fertility of the soil, population of species, chemical composition of oceans and air, etc. The exploitation of nature under capitalism can be understood as a disruption of this state of mutual regulation (Bellamy refers to a "metabolic rift"). The "Promethean" drive of industrial development, primarily but restricted to the uncontrolled burning of fossil fuels, is unsustainable and incredibly damaging. This damage is material, as we can now see clearly in the effects of climate change, but it is cultural, political, and psychological, given that, for Marx, historical materialism holds that our material environment and the way we relate to it determines how we understand and order our lives.

On the one hand, then, we have a Marxist theory of capitalism as ecologically unsound, and we have a Marxist view – admittedly not uncontested – that anthropogenic climate change can best be understood not as the product of some eternal and unchanging human nature (the need to burn, for example), but as the result of concrete economic realities which allowed some people to gain control of the machinery (quite literally) of capitalist exploitation. Marxists like Malm and Jason Moore argue that laying climate change at the door of all people and attributing it to some universal characteristic of humanity as a whole, risks descending into fatalism. If humanity is to blame, and humanity has always been this way, then there is nothing to do. This is, indeed, the purpose of such eternalizing. If, on the other hand, the current state of the climate is due to the expropriation of industrial machinery for the profit of a very few, then it *is* possible to change our social, economic, and ecological structures to deal with it. We may already be too late, but at least we are not giving up on the possibility of change.

The motive force of history, according to Marxist theory, is material dialectical change. Politically, this takes the form of struggles between socio-economic classes until a society is formed in which class divisions are not present. It is in the concept of "struggle" that I want to locate the contribution that librarians and archivists can make during the period which we are calling the anthropocene.

Intellectuals and Immaterial Labour.

There is a long Marxist tradition of analyzing the position and role of intellectual work within the capitalist mode of production. For many years, Antonio Gramsci's account of the history and class composition of intellectuals provided fertile ground for research. More recently, investigation into "immaterial labour" has provided an account of intellectual work suited to the dynamics of "late capitalism" which, as we have seen, may be at least provisionally equated with the anthropocene itself.

Gramsci's account of the role of intellectuals in capitalist society tends to see them as working alongside particular socio-economic classes. On the one hand, the ruling class finds certain intellectuals already present when it achieves dominance. The victorious bourgeoisie after 1848 found certain intellectual groups already in existence: teachers, priests, professors, librarians, etc. These intellectuals could be harnessed to the hegemonic mission of the bourgeoisie in order to create an intellectual justification for the socio-economic changes that were a dialectical component of the rise of the capitalist class⁸. Jurgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, shows how intellectual milieux (newspapers, coffee houses, etc) were vital for the "self-representation" of the bourgeois class to each other⁹ while Alistair Black¹⁰ has traced the role of the public library in Britain with instilling bourgeois values among the subaltern classes of Victorian capitalist society. These "traditional intellectuals" are recognized as intellectuals by virtue of their profession, social position, and so on: "When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals"¹¹.

Gramsci's view, however, was that although only certain members of society are recognized as intellectuals, everyone is an intellectual in the sense that we all participate in intellectual activity. Intellectuals who are not "professional intellectuals" must be cultured within a class in order to give that class an intellectual orientation with respect to society as a whole (Gramsci is writing from the perspective of an active communist politician). "The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists therefore in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development"¹², that is, the question of being an intellectual becomes, for Gramsci, a question of education. The role of organic intellectuals which emerge from the ruling class is to exercise intellectual and ideological control over the traditional intellectuals, winning them over to the victorious ideology of bourgeois capitalism, leading to hegemony of capitalist ideology over all others. (Organic intellectuals can also arise from subaltern classes, in which case their role is to challenge and offer alternatives to the hegemonic, dominant ideology.)

More recently, the focus of the Marxist study of intellectuals has become less about social position and more about the kind of work being performed. In the world of late capitalism, commodities are not merely material items that satisfy use-values,

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971: 10.

⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Thought*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991: 29.

¹⁰ Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts, 1850 – 1914*. Leicester University Press, 1998.

¹¹ Gramsci, op cit, 9.

¹² Ibid, 9.

they possess “informational, cultural, or affective”¹³ characteristics which are often entirely unlinked to a material form. One thinks of computer software, for example, or the financial derivatives market. Labour has moved on from Marx’s view of the dialectic transformation of the material world through work. The “information society” that arose in the late 20th century has created the conditions for immaterial, cultural, or emotional labour in the 21st. In his 2005 paper “Cognitive Capitalism and the Contested Campus”, Nick Dyer-Witheford writes that “universities in the era of cognitive capital are sites of immaterial labour in a double sense. Along with other educational institutions, they are the locales where future ‘immaterial labourers’ are trained and taught. And this training and teaching is itself an immaterial labour, in which information and communication is used to shape the emergent commodity – the student – that will result from the academic process”¹⁴.

I would argue that libraries – both academic and public – and archives are also implicated in this double role of both engaging in immaterial labour and producing immaterial commodities. For academic libraries, we are complicit in producing students whose (immaterial) labour power becomes the only commodity they have to sell when they leave the university and enter the labour market. Public libraries continue to perform their hegemonic function supporting the ideologies of capitalism; but they also help to create immaterial commodities as people use public libraries to retrain, reskill, or prepare for entry or re-entry into the educational system. Archives, by retaining a connection to the physicality of archival material, keeps one foot in the material world, while being used as raw material for the “immaterial labour” that goes into the production of scholarly commodities, all of which are increasingly immaterial (ebooks, digital exhibits) and which then fall under the purview of librarians whose work deals less and less with the physical and more and more with the virtual.

The nexus where immaterial labour and the burning of fossil fuels meet is precisely in the material infrastructure which underpins the virtual. Immaterial labour in the 21st century plays out in an informational landscape hosted by server farms, data centres, fibre optic cables, power plants, heat sinks, uninterrupted power supplies, network drops, etc, etc. As the IT witticism goes, “the cloud is just someone else’s computer”, and we forget that all of our “virtual reality” requires a substrate of physical computing hardware – driven by vast amounts of energy - at our peril.

Because it is precisely this computing layer that links the immaterial and intellectual labour of librarians and archivists (and many others) with the very material effects of the burning of fossil fuels.

¹³ Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996: 261.

¹⁴ Nick Dyer-Witheford, “Cognitive Capitalism and the Contested Campus”, in *Engineering Culture: On ‘The Author as (Digital) Producer’*. Plymouth, UK: Autonomedia (DATA Browser 2), 2005: 77 (page numbers are 71-93).

In this respect, then, immaterial and intellectual work, such as that performed by librarians and archivists, is subject to the same Promethean orientation as that described by Horkheimer and Adorno. The domination of nature – through the extraction of fossil fuels and the transformation of the material world into computer hardware – is the precondition for the intellectual work that we do. Unless we find a way to change that orientation – something which Horkheimer and Adorno felt was impossible – then we will remain subject to its effects, on the planet, on the Earth’s ecosystems, and on our societies.

To return to Malm’s point that the characterization of the anthropocene as due to the eternal requirement of all people at all times to burn fossil fuels is a tool in the legitimization (or hegemony) of capitalist ideology, this indicates the role that intellectuals and immaterial labourers play in both supporting and challenging the ideology. To insist that anthropogenic climate change is the product of particular historical dynamics and specific structures of the capitalist mode of production opens up space to resist these structures that are closed if we understand climate change as an eternal product of human activity which we are powerless to change. Librarians and archivists, as intellectuals, have a role to play in the hegemonic dominance of capitalist ideology, both in the work that we do and (within educational organizations) in the production of workers of the next generation. It is up to us to choose whether to go along with the “anthropocene myth” and therefore contribute to the legitimacy of continuing to burn fossil fuels heedless of the consequences, or whether we can offer challenges and alternatives to this legitimacy, both on our own behalf, and that of generations to come.

Recent manifestations of resistance – intellectual and physical – have been seen in the NoDAPL and other anti-pipeline protests, as well as the continuation (and perhaps expansion) of labour struggles within the universities in both Canada and the US. Nick Dyer-Witheford focuses on strategies of student resistance, but it is evident, I think, that student and academic resistance must be mutually reinforcing. At the University of Manitoba strike last fall, which included faculty members, librarians, and archivists, student support for the strike was mobilized to an incredible extent¹⁵. Radical faculty members took the opportunity to teach on the picket lines¹⁶. As Henry Heller argues in his 2016 book *The Capitalist University*,

¹⁵ Shaden Abusaleh, “UMFA is supporting students in its strike mandate”, *The Manitoban*, October 26, 2016. <http://www.themanitoban.com/2016/10/umfa-is-supporting-students-in-its-strike-mandate/29447/>; CBC News, “U of M strike: students march on picket line as bargaining continues”, November 18, 2016. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/university-manitoba-strike-students-march-1.3857556>

¹⁶ Jessica Botelho-Urbanski, “U of M strike rages on, nine days and counting: Teacher hosts a protest ‘teach-in’ on Wednesday”, *MetroNews*, November 9, 2016. <http://www.metronews.ca/news/winnipeg/2016/11/09/u-of-m-strike-continues-into-ninth-day.html>; Henry Heller, “Protesting the Capitalist University”, *Pluto Press Blog*, November 7, 2016.

academics can resist the deprivations of the neoliberal university (and therefore, as I have argued, the material capitalist underpinnings of immaterial labour), through unionization¹⁷.

As important as participation in protests and labour struggles are, universities – including libraries and archives – can also become regular, everyday sites of resistance to capitalist ideology. As contestation to the ideology of capitalism develops, especially as we see the rise of the far-right in bourgeois parliamentary politics,

universities will be key in this contestation. The possibility of such an academic counterflow exists because, to effectively harness mass intellect to accumulation, capitalism must maintain a certain degree of openness within the universities. Part of what it seeks in its invasion of academic is the creativity and experimentation of immaterial labour-power, qualities vital to a high-technology economy based on perpetual innovation. But if industry is to benefit from such invention-power, it cannot entirely regiment the institutions of education.¹⁸

Additionally, the contradictions of cyber-capitalism continue to sharpen, leading to ever more immiseration of the cyberproletariat. Worsening living conditions and worsening effects of climate change are, without a doubt, going to lead to a situation in which, as Lenin wrote, will lead unavoidably either to revolution, if we are to avoid the apocalypse of a global climate disaster:

for a revolution to take place it is not enough for the exploited and oppressed masses to realise the impossibility of living in the old way, and demand changes; for a revolution to take place it is essential that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way. It is only when the “*lower classes*” do not want to live in the old way and the “*upper classes*” cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nation-wide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters).¹⁹

Capitalism has proved adept at surviving political and economic crises; it is doubtful that it will survive the global crisis of climate change.

<https://plutopress.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/protesting-the-capitalist-university-by-henry-heller/>

¹⁷ Henry Heller, *The Capitalist University: The Transformation of Higher Education in the United States since 1945*. London: Pluto Press, 2016: 196.

¹⁸ Dyer-Witthford, op cit, 90.

¹⁹ V.I. Lenin, *‘Left-Wing’ Communist, an infantile disorder*.

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