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Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Species-Questions

A: al-masāʾil al-mutaʿalliqa bi-n-nauʿ. – F: questions génériques. – G: Gattungsfragen. – R: rodovye voprosy. – S: cuestiones de género. – C: lei wenti 类问题.

'Species-questions precede class-questions' was one of the arguments in the late 1980s with which the supposed obsolescence of the Marxian project was proclaimed. Mikhail **Gorbachev** incorporated it in the 'new thinking' of Perestroika in order to accord preeminence to questions of general humanity over those related to class-struggle. This raises questions regarding the articulation of species-questions [*Gattungsfragen*] and class-questions in **Marx**'s work.

A precise reading can show that, since the *1844 Manuscripts*, the relation of species-questions to class-questions has generally occupied a central, albeit often unacknowledged, position in **Marx**'s thought. An appropriate appreciation of the relevant argumentation can serve to undercut later reductionist/productivist caricatures of his thought. At the same time, it provides the basis for a clear understanding of the environmental contradictions posed by late-twentieth-century capitalist development.

1. The scope of *Gattungsfragen* is set by **Marx** for the first time (whilst still influenced by **Feuerbach**) in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Natural relations and species-beings are understood here as fundamental conditions that are affected by capitalist 'alienation [*Entfremdung*]'. (Capitalist) private property poses threatening species-questions, because it negates the universality of the human species-being in the structure of the 'conscious life-activity' (*MECW* 3, 276) specific to humans, which entails a conscious interaction between individual choice and the structures established by others (accumulated choices). The subsumption of human life-activity under capital, and the appropriation of competencies that goes along with it, negates the species-being of the worker, so that the worker 'only feels himself freely active in his animal functions […] and in his human functions [i.e., work] he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal' (*MECW* 3, 274 et sq.).

This critique of the class-structure is lodged in a more general approach, in which the human species is considered both a part of, and separate from, the rest of nature. Significantly, **Marx**'s initial description of the effects of capital is tied to a conception of the human-nature relation that transcends any particular historical epoch. While **Marx** would later centre his critical analyses on historically specific, class-related questions, he would never forget that these represent just one dimension of a larger reality (**Ollman** 1993, 55 et sq.).

The social-natural relations [*die gesellschaftlichen Naturverhältnisse*] constitute the framework within which class-questions are to be understood and in which the need to overcome them can be acted upon. It is in this sense that the domain of class-struggle is situated, in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, not in human society as such, but in 'hitherto existing' society (*MECW* 6, 482). If humanity is to progress from the condition of class-struggle to one in which 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (506), certain changes will therefore have to take place not only within the human species, but also in its relations to the rest of nature.

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Since **Marx**'s initial formulation of species-questions, the sphere of their practical applications has drastically expanded. The overall trajectory of species-questions can be observed in the following stages: 1. **Marx**'s early discussion of the basis on which human alienation would be overcome; 2. **Marx**'s later treatment of capital in its dual exploitative relationship to the worker and nature; 3. The unfolding of an ecological crisis, which is interpreted by bourgeois ideology as the reflection of an inherent conflict between humanity and the rest of the natural world; and finally, 4. Capital's attempt, emerging from its internal developmental logic, simultaneously to extend its hegemony and to escape its contradictions by manipulating and appropriating life-forms at the microbiological level.

2. **Marx**'s basic response to alienation – whether between man and man or between man and nature – is implicit in his account of its origin. What was imposed by capital will have to be removed by liberation from capital. As retreat to earlier forms of social relations is impossible, advance to a higher form becomes necessary. It is thus in the context of his discussion of humanity's species-being that **Marx** engages in his earliest reflections on communism.

Given the dual aspect of humanity's link to the rest of nature (as being part of it while yet acting upon it), it is significant that **Marx** identifies the nodal issue – the point of convergence between human-to-human and human-to-nature ties – with the question of the relationship between the sexes. In this relationship, 'man's relation to nature is immediately his relation to man' (*MECW* 3, 295). By taking any given historical expression of this tie as the measure of 'man's whole level of development' (*MECW* 3, 296), **Marx** is again stressing an aspect of human life that on the one hand is prior to class, but that on the other hand is inescapably bound up with every form that class-relations – or their transcendence – might take.

A similar observation applies to **Marx**'s later discussions of 'value', to which use-value, on the one hand, is prior – 'they [use-values] constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth' (*MECW* 35, 47) – but which, on the other hand, is equally connected to the social forms of capitalist commodity-production that dominate it. Without this methodological clarification, value-theory is permanently threatened by an obfuscation and conflation of capital-relations, provoked by the equivocation of the expression 'value' in 'use-value' and 'exchange-value'. The terminology surrounding the analysis of the value-form [*Wertform*] has remained a source of misinterpretation, the most important of which, in this context, is the interpretation, used as a testimony to an alleged lack of concern with the degradation of the natural world, of **Marx**'s analytic dual thesis, that commodities 'as exchange-values [...] do not contain an atom of use-value' (*MECW* 35, 49) and that things of nature, in cases where their 'utility to man is not due to labour' (*MECW* 35, 51), have no value (in the economic sense of labour-value), even though they can have a price. That this is a non-theoretical misconception is demonstrated by the bold attack with which **Marx** opens his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* of German social democracy. The alleged free availability of natural resources led its authors to state that labour is the creator of all wealth. **Marx** makes clear that 'labour is *not the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values [...] as labour' (*MECW* 24, 82).

In *Capital* Volume I, labour is initially also analysed in the perspective of the species-activity that is both presupposed by and foundational for the capital-relation as 'a process between man and nature, a process by which man [...] confronts the materials of nature as [himself] a force of nature'; but, insofar as he 'acts upon external nature and changes it', he 'simultaneously changes his own nature' (*MECW* 35, 187). Within this frame of reference, which is still without capital, a characteristic feature is the specifically human capacity to anticipate ideally – that is, in imagination – that which is physically realised only afterwards (*MECW* 35, 188). By subsequently robbing the worker of this ability – and with that his species-being – capital simultaneously removes all barriers for the plundering [*Ausplünderung*] of nature; hence **Marx**'s charac-

terisation of capitalist farming as the double exploitation of both worker and soil. The fundamental threat to the natural world is thus rooted not in the human species as such, but rather in the accumulation and consumption-effects of the profit-mechanism, which makes man and nature its twin victims.

3. Although the natural world affects the existence of humanity as a whole, humanity in its entirety affects the natural world in a plurality of ways; this is indicated by the differentiation in energy-consumption between world-regions and historical epochs. By breaking up modes of existence that rested largely on the production of use-values, capitalism introduced an economic calculus that fosters limitless waste.

Bourgeois environmentalism seeks to take away from capital the responsibility for environmental degradation and to place it onto the shoulders of humanity as a whole. In this perspective, the whole human species [*Gattung*] emerges not just as a victim of the ecological crisis, but also as its creator. The primary agents of this supposed species-behaviour are isolated individuals and families, acting as consumers or as procreators [*Versorger*]. Suitably programmed as consumers, they 'demand' ever-higher levels of goods and services; as procreators, their intentionality and objectives may vary, but their practice is shaped overwhelmingly by purely private criteria, whose effects have pointed mostly toward expansion. From such expansion – of both wants and population-size – the 'carrying capacity' of the world has run into an acute crisis. The answer of bourgeois environmentalism oscillates between Malthusian warnings against overpopulation on the one hand and the quest for technological solutions for situations of deprivation on the other (for example, recycling in industry; devices to increase agricultural productivity). The latter, in turn, rely heavily on market-incentives and are thus limited by the basic economic calculus that has led to the crisis in the first place (**Wallis** 1997a, 113ff.).

Without the structural/institutional foundation to tackle wasteful production and consumption, only superficial remedies are possible. On the other hand, the enormous regional variations in per-capita levels of resource-utilisation (even between zones with similar indices of well-being) confirm the potential of human society to reduce its toll upon the natural world. Such a general reduction, appropriate for the dynamics of this crisis, would presuppose a sharp separation of species-interest from capitalist/productivist imperatives. But it is exactly this distinction that bourgeois ideology – in the form of commodity-aesthetics and commercial mass-media – undercuts by conflating consumer-desires with basic human needs. To challenge this conflation is to call into question every dimension of socially organised production (**Wallis** 1997b). It thus raises the most fundamental questions of what defines human society and therefore of what constitutes human species-identity.

In **Marx**'s understanding, humanity's species-interest would come to prevail conjointly with the culmination of working-class struggle, i.e., through the creation of a classless society. The practice of those organisations and states who identify themselves as 'Marxist' of interpreting species-questions as *opposed to* class-questions, and not as *constitutive* to the background (or the culmination) of such questions, could only emerge on the basis of a crude flattening of **Marx**'s approach. Such reductionism has been a routine aspect of bourgeois thought, as the bourgeoisie has always tried to present its own interests as being those of the entire society. The Soviet régime was unable to transcend such reductionist transpositions. It began by one-sidedly rejecting the bourgeois approach and affirming the primacy of class-interests, but it suppressed workers' self-management in favour of despotic industrialism. In the race against capitalism, the ideology of quantity over quality [*Tonnenideologie*] and inability to transition from extensive to intensive growth amplified the destructive interaction with nature. When uncensored transparency and certain forms of democratic participation were finally revived under **Gorbachev**, the 'real dialectic between class and humanity in its totality under the contemporary concrete conditions' (**Gorbachev** 1988, 111; cited in **Haug** 1989, 81) moved to the front of official statements. As

liberating as the general goals of Perestroika were, the conception of the relation of species-questions and class-questions remained unclear. The phraseology of the generically human eventually ended up leading to an ignoring of class-antagonism. The self-defeating implication of such non-politics [*Unpolitik*] would soon become evident, as, now more than ever, capital's global expansion continued unimpeded. What began as a vote of support for the unification of the species [*Gattung*] as well as the subordination of the 'competition of social systems based on class-antagonism' to the 'question of species-survival [*Gattungsfragen des Überlebens*]' – concerning which, it must be remembered that competition of systems would 'change its position and its form of movement [*Bewegungsform*], without disappearing as such' (**Haug** 1989, 67) – ended up as capitulation to the most favoured class. What followed was an epoch characterised by the completely unrestricted primacy of the now globally dominant interest of capital over questions of humanity and the species [*Gattung*] as such.

4. Even as the overexploitation of nature begins to show the gravest consequences, in the form of increasingly severe climate-related disasters (**Davis** 1998, 63 et sqq.), it effectively remains the agenda of the capitalist global market to expand relentlessly the appropriation of natural processes. The destructive-illusionary character of such appropriation in the long-run was already expressed by **Engels**: 'For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us' (*MECW* 25, 460); for as control is gained within a limited sphere, the broader conditions for predictability – for example, in agriculture – are undermined. Irrigation-systems can accelerate desert-formation; forest-clearance ultimately reduces cropland by causing flooding; air-conditioning systems increase global warming, and so on.

Much as the capitalist cycle repeats itself, however, so does each stage in the illusory appropriation of nature. The more man 'tames' natural processes, the more they spin out of control, provoking new and more aggressive 'taming' measures with increasingly disastrous outcomes. Thus, diverse ecosystems are indiscriminately broken up; species-equilibria are disrupted; 'pest'-species multiply; synthetic poisons are applied; new strains of the pests evolve, requiring stronger poisons with increasingly severe side-effects, and so on. The outcome threatens the survival of many species, including that of humanity itself.

At an advanced stage of this 'taming' cycle appears the practice of crossing species-boundaries; that is, using genetic manipulation to alter the traits of a given species in such a way as to make it resistant to the effects of the cycle's earlier stages. Thus, one of the most common applications of biotechnology is the creation of plant-species with particular immunities. The alleged purpose is, typically, to counteract the effect of a given herbicide. The immediate result is an economic one: to create a captive market for the herbicide (i.e., farmers compelled to grow a plant-strain on which no other herbicide can be used). The uncalculated side-effects, however, include the propagation of the particular immunity (via natural processes) to other plant-species, thereby generating new varieties of 'super-weeds' with enhanced immunities (**Altieri** 1998, 67; **Rifkin** 1998, 82 et sq.).

Man's appropriation of nature and nature's defiance of such appropriation thus appear to advance simultaneously. On the one hand, the farmer, even if still a landowner, is increasingly drawn into a net of vertical integration in the agricultural sector, in which the inputs to every stage of the growing process – whether of crops or of livestock – must be obtained from the same monopolistic firm (**Heffernan** 1998, 53 et sqq.). On the other hand, this extreme level of control unleashes its side-effects chaotically in every direction. The physical effects include soil-depletion, water-pollution, and an array of degenerative processes affecting wildlife as well as livestock; consumers as well as farmworkers (**Altieri** 1998, 65; **Rampton** and **Stauber** 1997). The social effects are all those implied by the imposition of a modern form of debt-peonage, notably, decaying rural communities incapable of supplying their own needs, and with populations prone to various forms of anomic behaviour.

The dynamic in question develops through the global enforcement of 'intellectual property-rights', and the practice of patenting intrudes into the very nature of species (**Shiva** 1997). In some cases, this extends to the acquisition by capital of particular cells of the human body, meaning that any medical use of such cells (regardless of whose body supplied them) is tied to a premium demanded by the patent-holders (**Rifkin** 1998, 61 et sq.; **Shulman** 1999, 33 et sq.). Moreover, such patents do not even presuppose any genetic alteration of the cells in question; it suffices to have isolated them. As a result of such privatisation of generic human body-parts, control over a given kind of cell, tissue or organ can become subject to market-transactions. The particular persons whose bodies are made available for such procedures are to that extent absorbed into a matrix comparable to the slave-market, or the child-labour market. The victims are in all cases drawn from among those who have fallen below the essential conditions of a minimally human species-existence.

Although the commodification of labour-power, the alienation of labour, and the assault on man's species-being pertain to the entire working class, **Marx** was well aware of the differentiation of conditions *within* the working class. He could thus call attention to those women in nineteenth-century England who were 'still occasionally used instead of horses for hauling canal boats, because the labour required to produce horses and machines is an accurately known quantity, while that required to maintain the women of the surplus-population is below all calculation' (*MECW* 35, 397). Capital thus found use, in the most primitive of ways, for those very sectors of the population that had been rendered 'superfluous' by the most advanced machinery. In a similar way, the biotechnology of the late-twentieth century threatens to transmute hierarchies of class and empire into biologically distinct communities, in which those with the necessary resources will attain formidable physical resistance and longevity, while the excluded sectors, increasingly deprived of all bases of sustenance, will sink to previously unimagined depths of misery, from which they will again become available for uses incompatible with their humanity.

5. **Marx** was the first to see the rule of capital as a threat to human species-existence. Beyond his philosophical discussion of *Entfremdung*, he later documented the extreme physical degeneration of workers drawn into the factory-system (*MECW* 35, 275). The many improvements that were subsequently gained through workers' struggles have not altered the underlying dynamic. In part, the centres of misery have shifted away from the industrial core; in part, the health-destroying impact has spread from the immediate environment of the factory to the larger environment of the earth's ecosystem; and in part, with the aid of new technologies (informational as well as genetic), the difference in levels of power-resources available to ruling and subject classes has been carried to unprecedented heights.

The dynamic affecting the natural as well as the social world is thus one in which, as anticipated in the *Communist Manifesto*, the response of the bourgeoisie to each emerging crisis only paves the way for 'more extensive and more destructive crises' (*MECW* 6, 490). **Marx**'s approach to the humanity/nature relation, by establishing the context for his treatment of the social relations of production, equips us to understand the global crisis as it appears at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The newly felt dangers presented by the natural world represent the accumulated costs of the devastation imposed upon it by capital. Any large-scale alleviation of these dangers will require a correspondingly vast shift in the system of social relations. The core-*Gattungsfrage*, namely the question of human survival, will thus remain inextricably linked to the resolution of the class-question.

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Accumulation, agrobusiness, alienation, appropriation, biologism, body, Chernobyl, class-society, commodification, communism, consumer/user, consumism, crisis, destructive forces, domination of nature, earth, ecology, eco-socialism, electrification, energy, entropy, evolution, exchange-value, excrements of production, genetechnology, geography, Gorbachevism, human-nature relation, immiseration, industrialism, labour, life, limits to growth, Mathusianism, means of life, metabolism, need, use-value, production of life, productivism, recycling, social costs, social relations with nature, subsistence-production, surplus-population, sustainable development, value, waste.

Agrobusiness, Akkumulation, Aneignung, Arbeit, Bedürfnis, Biologismus, Destruktivkräfte, Elektrifizierung, Energie, Entfremdung, Entropie, Erde, Evolution, Exkremente der Produktion, Gebrauchswert, Gentechnologie, Geographie, gesellschaftliche Naturverhältnisse, Gorbatschowismus, Grenzen des Wachstums, Industrialismus, Klassengesellschaft, Kommodifizierung, Kommunismus, Konsument/Verbraucher, Konsumismus, Krise, Leben, Lebensmittel, Leib/Körper, Malthusianismus, Mensch-Natur-Verhältnis, nachhaltige Entwicklung, Naturbeherrschung, Ökologie, Ökosozialismus, Produktion des Lebens, Produktivismus, Recycling, soziale Kosten, Stoffwechsel, Subsistenzproduktion, Tauschwert, Tschernobyl, Übervölkerung, Verelendung, Vergeudung, Wert.