

# On the labor narrative of Marx's thought on the human-nature relationship

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**Abstract.** The differentiation and antagonism between humanity and nature produced by capitalist civilization constitute the core of Marx's thought on the relationship between humanity and nature. Through his critique of alienated labor, Marx identified private ownership as the social root of this division and opposition, and clarified that the realization of the "two reconciliations" must be grounded in the sublation of alienated labor. Marx further dissected the internal operating mechanisms of capitalist society and, taking wage labor as his point of entry, elucidated the general laws governing the material metabolism between humanity and nature. In doing so, he identified both the preconditions for the emergence of metabolic rifts between humanity and nature and the conditions under which such rifts may be repaired. Marx demonstrated the rationality of constructing an ideal vision of harmonious human–nature development on the basis of free labor. By following the laws of beauty, free labor enables an initial reconciliation between humanity and nature, transcends alienated and wage labor through the association of free individuals, and thereby propels human society from the realm of necessity toward the realm of freedom. Upholding Marx's thought on the relationship between humanity and nature in the new era is conducive to advancing a new chapter in which labor creates harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

**Keywords:** Marx, humanity and nature, alienated labor, wage labor, free labor

## 1. Introduction

While the modern capitalist mode of production has created productive forces surpassing those of all previous generations, it has also generated crises unprecedented in human history. Marx recognized that the modern capitalist mode of production itself—the very matrix from which it arose—constitutes the source of these calamities. Marx's thought on the relationship between humanity and nature is not an ecological theory in a narrow sense; rather, it is an extension of his critique of political economy. By bringing this critique into the study of the human–nature relationship, Marx advanced his well-known theory of material metabolism, arguing that it is precisely the rupture in the material exchange between humanity and nature that gives rise to the ecological crisis of capitalism.

## 2. Tracing the social roots of the differentiation and antagonism between humanity and nature through the critique of alienated labor

Starting from the capitalist mode of production, Marx explained that the fundamental cause of the "rupture in material metabolism" between humanity and nature lies in the alienation of human practical engagement with nature—that is, in alienated labor. Consequently, the key to resolving the differentiation and antagonism between humanity and nature resides in the sublation of alienated labor and private ownership.

### 2.1. The roots of the differentiation and antagonism between humanity and nature in the alienation of labor

Marx introduced the notion of alienation into the analysis of human labor. By examining, as his point of departure, the alienation of workers from their labor products and from the labor process itself, he demonstrated that the alienation of workers from their species-being and the alienation among human beings are rooted in the effects of alienated labor. He further showed that alienated labor ultimately leads to the differentiation and antagonism between humanity and nature.

First, workers are alienated from their labor products. Marx began his analysis from the economic fact that the more workers produce, the poorer they become. He argued that the reason workers become poorer the more diligently they labor lies in the fact that the worker and the product of labor belong to the same species-being. As Marx pointed out, "The more commodities the worker produces, the cheaper he becomes as a commodity [1]." Labor products thus turn into an alien force that dominates the worker. Under capitalism, the massive accumulation of commodities replaces nature as the means of sustaining the worker's physical survival, and nature gradually ceases to serve as the genuine object of the worker's labor.

Second, workers are alienated from the labor process itself. The labor product is the final outcome of the worker's productive activity. Once workers are alienated from the results of their labor, they are inevitably alienated from labor itself, which becomes something external and hostile to them. In this process, the balanced relationship between humanity and nature is disrupted: the more workers are compelled, under the control of capitalists, to prolong working hours merely to survive, the more deeply nature is plundered.

Third, workers are alienated from their species-being. The species-being of humanity is formed gradually through conscious life activity. In labor, human beings consciously engage in practical activity and take this activity itself as the object of their consciousness. However, under the impact of alienated labor, this conscious and purposive life activity is thoroughly dismantled. Human beings are reduced to submission to purely animal desires; the poetic qualities of nature are transformed, in human perception, into nothing more than sources of raw materials. The relationship between humanity and nature is thus completely severed.

Finally, the alienation among human beings signifies the complete differentiation and antagonism between humanity and nature. Alienation between individuals is the ultimate direction of alienated labor and the final outcome of alienation from species-being. As Marx observed, "The immediate consequence of man's alienation from the product of his labor, from his life activity, and from his species-being is the alienation of man from man [2]." For workers, all their life activities, together with their very existence, confront them as opposing forces; all the fruits of their labor belong to others external to themselves. In essence, the nature of labor is thoroughly alienated, and humanity loses the bridge that once connected it with nature—namely, free and conscious labor.

## 2.2. Private ownership as the social development mechanism of labor alienation

In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1,844, Marx examined the "elementary concepts" of political economy—wages, capital, profit, and rent—and identified private ownership as the social development mechanism that generates labor alienation. It is precisely through the operation of private ownership that alienated labor gradually takes shape, ultimately giving rise to a sharp antagonism between humanity and nature.

First, the profit-seeking drive of capital generated by private ownership gives rise to labor alienation. Under capitalist private ownership, capital's desire for profit reaches its extreme. The profit-driven nature of capital inherently runs counter to natural laws, as it subjects all production and consumption to monetary calculation. Money becomes, for human beings, the only thing deemed valuable, practical, and reliable, while nature is increasingly reduced to a mere instrument for capital's pursuit of profit. To satisfy its intrinsic greed, capital necessarily demands ever-expanding production, thereby leading to the predatory exploitation of nature.

Second, capital expansion under the impetus of private ownership deepens labor alienation. Under capitalist private ownership, all participants are drawn into a "game" of profit-seeking. When domestic natural resources can no longer meet the needs of capital for expanded production, capital inevitably breaks through narrow geographical, ethnic, and even national boundaries. In the pursuit of maximizing surplus value, capitalists continuously intensify the global plunder of natural resources, forcing ecological protection to remain subordinate to the imperatives of capital expansion. This process ultimately results in worldwide resource depletion and environmental degradation.

Finally, the hedonistic propensity inherent in private ownership exacerbates labor alienation. By constructing an alienated order in which "things dominate people," private ownership turns hedonism into an ideological instrument that both conceals and deepens labor alienation. In this process, workers, in order to obtain consumer goods that symbolize social status, are compelled to extend working hours and intensify labor. While hedonism appears to offer workers a momentary form of psychological consolation, it in fact obscures the rupture between workers and their own species-being under conditions of private ownership.

## 2.3. The sublation of alienated labor as the prerequisite for realizing the "two reconciliations"

The "two reconciliations" constitute one of Marx's classic propositions, referring to "the reconciliation of humanity with nature and the reconciliation of humanity with itself." Under private ownership, capital as "dead labor" grows and expands through the "living labor" of workers, thereby laying the groundwork for both the alienation of humanity from nature and the alienation of human beings from one another.

First, alienated labor brings about the dissolution of the unified relationship between humanity and the land. This unity represents the long-term process of material metabolism between humanity and nature; its dissolution signals the gradual intensification of antagonism in the human–nature relationship. Under the feudal system, humanity and nature were bound together in a "communal and affective" relationship. The emergence of alienated labor shattered the feudal system of land ownership by separating landowners from actual cultivators. For its nominal owners, land thus becomes potential capital that can be converted into profit at any time.

Second, alienated labor produces a comprehensive alienation of the relationship between humanity and nature. In capitalist society, the alienation of the human–nature relationship involves not only the separation of people from land but also a multidimensional alienation encompassing production, consumption, and demand. Production was originally aimed at acquiring material wealth; however, under alienated labor, the purpose of production and labor shifts toward the pursuit of the "exchange value" of products, that is, commodities.

Capitalists are concerned solely with whether the commodities they produce can be sold, not with their genuine usefulness. Any commodity that can be exchanged will be produced without restraint. It is precisely this alien force that drives the boundless appropriation and destruction of nature.

Finally, alienated labor divides society into two classes. While alienated labor generates the differentiation and antagonism between humanity and nature, it also inevitably produces alienation among human beings. The alienation of humanity from nature simultaneously entails alienation among individuals. Alienated labor separates the means of production from the producers themselves; as a result, "the whole of society must necessarily be divided into two classes: the class of property owners and the class of propertyless workers [2]." This social division, in turn, further intensifies the alienation between humanity and nature. It thus becomes evident that the relationship between humanity and nature and the relationship among human beings share a profound homogeneity—one that is particularly evident in modern capitalist society.

### **3. Revealing the general laws of material metabolism between humanity and nature through an analysis of wage labor**

Labor constitutes the crucial nexus through which material metabolism between humanity and nature is realized. Accordingly, only by dissecting the internal operating mechanisms of capitalist society through the lens of wage labor can one fully comprehend the preconditions for the emergence of "rifts" in the material metabolism between humanity and nature, as well as the conditions under which such rifts may be repaired. This, in turn, makes it possible to achieve an integrated understanding of natural material transformation and social material metabolism.

#### **3.1. The emergence of "rifts" in the material metabolism between humanity and nature**

Labor plays a decisive role in the formation of humanity itself. After human beings emerged from nature, labor became a defining attribute of the human–nature relationship. Humanity cannot exist in the material world apart from labor.

First, labor is the precondition for the construction of the relationship between humanity and nature. Nature exists prior to humanity; long before the appearance of human beings, nature already existed in the objective world and had formed a complete system of material generation and metabolism. As Engels observed, "We, with our flesh, blood, and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst [3]." Labor is not only essential to the formation of the human–nature relationship, but also determines whether human beings can transform themselves from natural beings into social beings. Human beings do not exist as social beings external to self-subsistent nature; on the contrary, they are by nature natural beings embedded within self-subsistent nature.

Second, labor is an essential attribute of the relationship between humanity and nature. This labor-based relationship does not disappear with the development of social and economic forms; rather, it endures permanently alongside human existence. This is because the limitless development of human needs renders labor ceaseless. Driven by diverse needs, labor unifies humanity and nature. Yet embedded within this unity are elements of opposition: there is always a tension between productive forces and natural forces. Although human beings are capable of actively transforming nature in accordance with their needs, they are not only social beings but also natural beings, and therefore cannot exist independently of nature.

Finally, labor serves as the mediator of material metabolism between humanity and nature. Labor is neither a purely subjective expression of human will nor a purely objective activity of nature; rather, it manifests as the concrete process of material exchange between humanity and nature. In fact, the process of material metabolism between humanity and nature "is not a one-way movement from 'nature to humanity' ... but a

closed cyclical process of 'nature → humanity → nature [4].'" However, in capitalist society, capital's profit-seeking impulse endows labor with a new value orientation—namely, the "pursuit of wealth." While this drive may generate rapid, leapfrogging increases in productive capacity in the short term, it ultimately violates the bidirectional laws governing the material metabolism between humanity and nature.

### 3.2. An integrated understanding of natural and social material metabolism

Under the operation of wage labor, natural material metabolism and social material metabolism are bound together in an unequal manner. This unequal relationship between the two can be fundamentally transformed only upon the advent of communism.

First, wage labor alters the equal standing between humanity and nature. In pre-capitalist societies, human beings lived within nature: their survival and reproduction depended on nature's "benevolence," and their subsistence and mobility relied on nature's "endowments." Capitalist wage labor, however, destroys the egalitarian relationship of "material exchange" between humanity and nature, reducing nature to an appendage of capitalism. Wage labor requires the separation of workers from the means of production; workers are stripped of ownership of the land and gradually reduced to objectified instruments for capitalists' pursuit of surplus value. Ultimately, wage labor creates "an irreparable rift" between humanity and nature [5].

Second, wage labor inflicts extensive destruction upon nature. Wage labor profoundly transforms traditional egalitarian attitudes toward nature, and the capitalist mode of production it dominates causes severe environmental damage. After the completion of primitive accumulation, large numbers of rural inhabitants were driven into cities, triggering a sharp increase in housing demand and, consequently, excessive deforestation. The destruction of nature under wage labor extends beyond the surface to the geological strata themselves. With the products of the industrial age, the relationship between humanity and nature comes to resemble that between a painter and a canvas: human power has extended into the geological layer and can leave traces on the Earth "in a geological sense." In this respect, production dominated by wage labor is, in essence, predatory exploitation.

Finally, wage labor renders the human–nature relationship one-dimensional. Under wage labor, the originally bidirectional material metabolism between humanity and nature is transformed into a one-way appropriation of nature by capital, which inevitably leads to a one-dimensional relationship between humanity and nature. In this context, the relationship between capitalists and nature becomes one of unilateral plunder. This is not limited to capitalists alone; workers, too, are implicated. Although every product created by workers derives from nature, they are unable to genuinely perceive nature's presence. Ultimately, the mystification of capital replaces the former reverence and awe that people once held toward nature.

### 3.3. Repairing the "rift" in material metabolism between humanity and nature

Marx held that "the human essence of nature exists only for social humanity [2]." 187 This indicates that the relationship between humanity and nature is, at its core, a relationship between humanity and "humanized nature." "Humanized nature" refers to nature that has been incorporated into the sphere of human practice and social life. Accordingly, only by situating the human–nature relationship within the critique of wage labor can the "rift" in material metabolism between humanity and nature be genuinely repaired.

First, Marx acknowledged the positive aspects of wage labor. Although Marx subjected wage labor to profound criticism, wage labor itself represented a transcendence of earlier forms of labor and was capable of accommodating productive forces far exceeding the sum of all previous labor forms. To this day, wage labor under capitalist civilization has not lost its vitality and has even assumed new forms, indicating that its historical mission has not yet been completed and that its full productive potential has yet to be realized.

However, recognizing the positive aspects of wage labor does not imply that it can heal the rift in material metabolism between humanity and nature. On the contrary, wage labor is itself a major force responsible for the rupture in this metabolism.

Second, wage labor "barbarizes" the relationship between humanity and nature. Wage labor generated by capitalist society differs from all previous labor forms in that it is premised on the separation of workers from the means of labor, which inevitably leads to the concentration of the means of production. Such concentration brings about an expansion of production scale, which in turn yields increasing profits. Under the operation of capital, profits are reinvested into reproduction, that is, into ever-larger scales of production. In this way, the continually expanding productive capacity draws both the proletariat and nature into its vortex, transforming the proletariat into the capitalists' "living resources" and nature into their "dead resources."

Finally, the repair of the rift in material metabolism between humanity and nature is possible only under communism. The existence of alienated labor and wage labor in capitalism determines that reconciliation between humanity and nature can occur only in a communist society. Neither wage labor nor the capitalist civilization that gives rise to it can realize harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. New problems may emerge from the womb of the old order, but they cannot be fully resolved within it. The value logic of wage labor is oriented toward the pursuit of commodity exchange value; all production and exchange are conducted under the domination of capital. Environmental protection activities that generate no exchange value therefore find no favor with capital. In essence, capital is inherently incompatible with a circular economy and sustainable development.

## **4. Constructing an ideal vision of harmonious development between humanity and nature through free labor**

The aspiration for the ultimate reconciliation between humanity and nature clearly cannot be fulfilled under the conditions of alienated labor and wage labor in capitalist society. Only a mode of free labor grounded in communism can genuinely construct an ideal vision of harmonious development between humanity and nature.

### **4.1. Free labor and the principle of construction "according to the laws of beauty"**

Free labor embodies the reconfiguration of human labor from instrumental rationality to aesthetic creation. It achieves a dual unity of natural necessity and human emancipation, and constitutes the sole form through which practical human freedom can be realized.

First, free labor represents a reconfiguration from instrumental rationality to aesthetic creation. Marx's aesthetic view that labor creates beauty may be understood on two levels. On the one hand, the worker, as the subject of labor, embodies social beauty, expressing the beauty of human creativity. On the other hand, the material world, as the object of labor, embodies natural beauty, representing the intrinsic beauty of nature. Through labor, human creative beauty and nature's intrinsic beauty enter into a new aesthetic relationship, and the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature signifies precisely the emergence of a new organic ecological whole. For this reason, Marx proposed that labor should proceed in accordance with both the objective laws of nature and the value尺度 inherent in the human inner world.

Second, free labor realizes the dual unity of natural necessity and human emancipation. Prior to Marx, Western ecological aesthetics had not transcended the metaphysical framework of subject-object dualism, continuing to treat humanity and nature as separate domains. As early as ancient Greece, Western philosophy had established this subject-object dichotomy as its basic analytical orientation. Marx argued that the

relationship between humanity and nature must be understood from labor itself, for it is labor that integrates humanity and nature. Through the long course of human labor, nature has already become humanity's "inorganic body," just as humanity cannot exist apart from the means of production provided by nature. By adhering to the principle of construction "according to the laws of beauty," free labor dissolves the subject-object opposition and prevents nature from being reduced to a cold repository of raw materials.

Finally, free labor is the only form through which practical human freedom can be realized. Practical freedom represents the mode of life envisioned in Marx's ideal, and it does not mean that human beings may arbitrarily transform the external world. Rather, it is realized on the basis of the unity between conformity to objective laws and the realization of conscious purposes. Marx held that practical freedom can be achieved only when labor truly becomes free labor. As the subject of practice, human beings will then organize production "according to the laws of beauty," a mode of production Marx summarized as that of the "association of free individuals." The realization of practical freedom signifies the complete dissolution of the opposition between humanity and nature, enabling human beings to genuinely balance natural laws with human will in the labor process and to achieve an integrated grasp of natural material metabolism and social material metabolism.

#### 4.2. Free labor and the organization of production through the "association of free individuals"

In Marx's vision, the principal form of production in a future communist society is organized through the "association of free individuals," in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all," and in which "individuals obtain their freedom within and through their association" [2].

First, free labor realizes human emancipation. The so-called "inverted world," characterized by abstract communal production in earlier historical forms, is destined to be replaced by a new mode of production based on the "association of free individuals." The proletariat, long subjected to oppression, will thus become fully realized human beings in a concrete and substantive sense. On the basis of the critique of "alienated labor" and "wage labor," Marx demonstrated, from both historical and contemporary perspectives, the non-eternal and unjust nature of capital, revealing the inevitable exit of this "inverted world" [6]. The fundamental contradiction between the expansive imperatives of the capitalist mode of production and the finite capacity of ecosystems determines that only within the production mode of the "association of free individuals" can an ideal vision of harmonious development between humanity and nature be reconstructed.

Second, free labor enables the direct association of production. Associated production founded on the "association of free individuals" reconnects producers with the means of production. This mode of production not only stimulates workers' initiative but also enhances the efficiency of resource utilization. By reducing the costs of exploiting natural resources and eliminating the waste generated by market competition, associated production lowers society's overall demand for natural resources, thereby alleviating pressure on ecological cycles and promoting harmonious development between humanity and nature. This signifies a further rationalization and ecological transformation of production, marking the end of a historical pattern characterized by unrestrained exploitation and destruction of nature.

Finally, free labor brings about new developments in science and technology. Marx explicitly criticized the capitalization of science and technology while emphasizing that science and technology themselves constitute vital forces for the liberation of humanity and nature. In a future society, science and technology will no longer serve capital but humanity as a whole, liberating human beings from arduous physical labor. As science and technology contribute to human emancipation, they also transform the relationship between humanity and nature. With the advanced development of science and technology, humanity's extraction from nature will gradually diminish. This does not imply the disappearance of human needs vis-à-vis nature, but rather a

transformation in the mode of practice—from a direct relationship between humanity and nature to one mediated by science and technology.

#### 4.3. Free labor and the transition from the "realm of necessity" to the "realm of freedom"

The historical horizon in which free labor constructs an ideal vision of harmonious development between humanity and nature lies within communist society. Such a vision can be realized only after humanity has achieved the transition from the "realm of necessity" to the "realm of freedom."

First, free labor presupposes a high level of productive forces. The transition from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom is not driven by subjective will, but rests upon the advanced development of productive forces. Without a sufficiently developed level of productivity, it is impossible to liberate workers from heavy physical labor, let alone to accomplish the leap into the realm of freedom. Only through the high development of productive forces and science and technology can necessary labor time be reduced to a minimum, thereby allowing individual free time to expand substantially.

Second, free labor enables human beings to appropriate productive forces more fully. As an essential human activity, free labor dissolves the constraints imposed by alienated labor on human subjectivity, enabling individuals to fully appropriate and develop society's general productive forces. In communist society, public ownership of the means of production reconstructs the social foundations of labor relations, freeing workers from the dual constraints of material scarcity and class oppression. Labor thus ascends from a survival-oriented activity in the realm of necessity to a creative activity in the realm of freedom. As a result, the relationship between humanity and nature is significantly improved, and science and technology begin to be genuinely applied to the restoration and improvement of the ecological environment.

Finally, free labor enhances the level of human civilization. Free labor achieves a dual liberation of material and spiritual production, deepening human cognition and elevating the overall level of civilization. Marx's theory of labor holds that once labor is freed from the alienated condition of dependence on "things" characteristic of capitalist civilization, workers are able, through autonomous practice, to objectify their essential human powers as social wealth. This transformation represents not merely an enhancement of individual capacities, but a substantive advancement in the level of human civilization as a whole.

### 5. Conclusion

In essence, ecological and environmental problems originate in modern capitalist modes of production, which function as their underlying matrix. Marx was distinctive in recognizing that this mode of production itself constitutes the root cause of a wide range of social and ecological crises. In this sense, Marx's conception of the relationship between humanity and nature is not an ecological theory in the narrow sense, but rather an extension of his critique of political economy. By bringing the critique of political economy into the analysis of the human–nature relationship, Marx advanced the well-known theory of metabolic interaction, arguing that it is precisely the rupture in this material metabolism between humans and nature that gives rise to ecological crises under capitalism. Accordingly, Marx's vision of ecological civilization is grounded in an analysis of the relationship between "real individuals" and "humanized nature," and it approaches environmental problems through the lens of the labor relationship that mediates humans and nature. Put succinctly, Marx identified the fundamental cause of the breakdown in the human–nature relationship as the severing of this mediating bridge—namely, the effects of alienated labor and wage labor.

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