

## Twenty-First Century Species-Being

Nick Dyer-Witheford

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### Introduction: The *Gattungswesen* Game

My recent work has been on virtual play; I won't enhance my philosophic credibility if I tell you that the topic for this talk was inspired by a computer game--a world-making game like *Civilization* where you direct the destiny of entire populations, accumulate resources, build cities, research technologies, wage wars and eventually, if you are not crushed by imperialist rivals or mismanage your food and energy supplies, launch your collective protagonist into interstellar exploration. Reflecting on my fondness for this game, and the genre's wide popularity, I realized what it should be called. This is the *Gattungswesen* game, the game that is, of species being, the game of directed and misdirected collective evolution. And that is the game that capital is playing with us, or rather against us, today, in the era of global warming, biotechnologies and artificial intelligence, in a way that, I will argue makes a notion of species-being, or perhaps better species-becoming, crucial for any twenty first century Marxism. I'm not alone in this suggestion: recent years have seen revived interest in species-being, from Marxist theorists as diverse as Gayatri Spivak (1999), David Harvey (2000), Jason Read (2003) and Paolo Virno (2004); so this is another transmission in a sudden burst of *Gattungswesen* chatter--a Mayday signal, perhaps.

### Chequered History, Diagonal Moves

The concept of species being enters Marxism, as Andrew Chitty (2009) has most recently shown, from Hegel via Feuerbach, making its most famous appearance in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Here the young Marx (1964) analyzes how private ownership of the means of production imposes on humans a four-fold estrangement: from the process of production, from its products, from other producers, and from their "species-being" (*Gattungswesen*) (see Ollman (1971) on this order of presentation. The notion is cryptic, fugitive, tantalizing. The *1844 Manuscripts* are the young Marx's blog, with, in their time, zero-comments: they are episodic, broken off, heavily hyper-linked, brilliant shards. It is clear, however, that by species-being Marx did not mean simply human existence as a biologically reproductive collectivity. Species-being is rather human power to collectively transform this natural basis, making "life activity itself an object of will and consciousness" (Marx 1964, 67). Elements Marx identified as contributing to the unfolding of species-being include not only the cooperative organization of labour, but also the relation of humans to their natural environment ("nature linked to itself, for man is part of nature"), the emancipation of women (from which one can judge "how much man as a species-being . . .has come to comprehend

himself”), the interconnection of people in increasingly “cosmopolitan” collectivities, and application of science and technology not only to industry but to the very “forming of the five senses” (Marx 1964, 112, 129, 134, 141). These components appear in shifting, sometimes nebulous, clusterings. But together they suggest ever widening amplitude of feasible options for human life—hence a growth of freedom. Marx’s account of species-being is not a paean to an organic, functionalist super-being. Species-being is not life as a Borg. It is actualized to the degree that individuals contribute to the growth in social powers, and access these powers as an increase in their own autonomy—as the very grounds for their intensifying individuation (see Johnston, 1995). Species-being is neither individual nor supra-individual: it is “transindividual,” both the ground and compound of a multiplicity of “particular” species-beings (Balibar 1995, 19).

Having made species-being as a keystone in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx shortly thereafter abandoned it, bar a fleeting return in *Grundrisse*. Subsequently, the concept has had a checkered career within Marxism (see Petrovic, 1983). Because the *Manuscripts* were unpublished until 1932, species-being did not enter the lexicon of Leninism. For this very reason it was eagerly embraced by many Western Marxisms most notably by the Frankfurt School. Species-being, with its Hegelian lineage and its suggestive emancipatory amplitude, figures prominently in Herbert Marcuse’s (1972) use of the concept of alienation to challenge Stalinist economism. It is even more important for Georg Lukács, in whose later work, “the rise of the human species in its properly social sense” and humanity’s growing capacity to push back the “natural boundary” of its existence in a directed way is a central pillar of hope even amidst Soviet stultification (1978, 43).

Species being was, however, no sooner resurrected than it was crucified by Louis Althusser (1969). The works of 1844 lay on the wrong side of a fatal epistemological break, tainted with an idealist, essentialist notion of “man” that the mature Marx annihilated in his analysis of modes of production that generated subjects entirely internally out of their multileveled structural apparatus. For Althusser issue of species-being, and questions of the relations of the human to the “hedgehog, dragonfly, rhododendron”, were a philosophic trap; they belonged to theoretical universe divorced from the proper Marxist concepts of “the mode of production, productive forces . . . the relations of production . . . determination in the last instance by the economy . . . and so on and so forth” (2003, 279, 264) Species-being was thus caught in standoff between humanist Marxists—who love it for its emancipatory élan—and structuralist Marxists—who scorn it for residual Hegelianism.

There is, however, a more recent third position—a diagonal move—an anti-humanist version of species-being. The starting point for such an interpretation is the unusual, and largely unnoticed, reinstatement of the *1844 Manuscripts* in the opening pages of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1983): those who doubt this apparently improbable assertion may care to consult the footnotes to the first chapter of that book, and consider how Deleuze and Guattari’s notorious “body without organs” is so manifestly indebted to Marx’s account in the *Manuscripts* of nature as humanity’s “inorganic body.” This is an account of mutating, evolving life that, rather than emphasizing the uniqueness and supremacy of the human,

pushes Marx's naturalism to an extreme to break down the distinctions between humans and other species, between speciation and other natural processes, and even between nature and machines. In Deleuze and Guattari's work the human is a provisional, shape in interchanges between and with other entities, such as animals and machines. Unlike Althusser, they retain the early Marx's emphasis on autopoiesis and collective self-transformation, but jettison what for Lukács were ontological fixities: human labour is not radically separated from other natural and transformative processes (there is more affinity than Marx (1964) recognized between the "worst of architects" and the "best of bees"), nor are human "desiring machines" that separate from the technologies they produce. This is not so much a theory of species-being as of species-becoming.

What can this quick three-step version of the history of *Gattungswesen*, from Lukacs through Althusser to Deleuze, offer us for today-or tomorrow? I suggest that any twenty first century version of species-being must recognize, as Althusser did, that parts of *Gattungswesen* are very musty, even toxic. Marx's enthusiastic embrace of Darwin's work is well known, but the species theory that informs his early writings comes largely from Hegel, who was explicitly hostile to evolutionary thought, and reflects pre-Darwinian concept of species as having fixed forms, situated in a clearly hierarchical order with "man" at its pinnacle, displaying a teleological progression. These have been shattered by a contemporary biology. Species are reproductively isolated populations sorted and selected by interaction with natural environments, including other species in shared ecosystems. Such populations are mutable and porous, and their characteristics are statistical, not ideal: assemblages, not essences. We are also increasingly aware that species are taxonomic constructs as well as natural phenomenon: both assemblages of bodies and enunciative assemblages. If humans, as Marx says, become "conscious" of their species being, that consciousness is built by inclusions and exclusions around what or who counts as human, a process in which sexism and racism have been horrifically inscribed, in ways that the 1844 Manuscripts themselves don't entirely escape: if in its pages the full membership of women as species-being is at least emergent, the blazing account of primitive accumulation barely mentions slavery (see Buck-Morss, 2009). Yet, despite all this, it is also apparent that today the existence of a collectively self-identified, even if not really so-special human species, a category in which the subjectivity of everyone in this room is inextricably bound up - is, today, perilous. The emphasis of Lukacs, and of Marx, and on the need for planning and regulation of our metabolic interchange with nature, and with other species, including perhaps species that we are in the process of creating, seems more, not less, crucial. This, then is a resort to the *1844 Manuscripts* and subsequent commentators on species-being, not in an effort at interpretative purity, but rather to cannibalize parts for a new intellectual machine adequate to conditions of ecological crisis and virtual and biotechnological accumulation, archeological futurism, Walter Benjamin's seizure of historical remembrances flashing up in a moment of danger (1969, 254).

### **The Planet Factory**

To define this moment I will quote at length a recent article on chaotic climate change by Marxist urbanist Mike Davis, "Humanity's Meltdown" (2008). This reports a 2008 decision by

another august British society, the Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London, which tracks changes in “mass extinctions, speciation events, and abrupt changes in atmospheric chemistry,” as recorded in the earth’s sedimentary strata. Davis notes that “Although the idea of the “Anthropocene” -- an Earth epoch defined by the emergence of urban-industrial society as a geological force -- has been long debated, stratigraphers have refused to acknowledge compelling evidence for its advent. “ Now however, for the London Society, that position has been revised. “To the question “Are we now living in the Anthropocene?” the 21 members of the Commission unanimously answered “yes.” The Holocene epoch -- the interglacial span of unusually stable climate that allowed the rapid evolution of agriculture and urban civilization -- has ended. Earth has entered “a stratigraphic interval without close parallel in the last several million years.” In addition to the buildup of greenhouse gases, the stratigraphers cite human landscape transformation which “now exceeds [annual] natural sediment production by an order of magnitude,” the acidification of the oceans, and the relentless destruction of biota. This new age, they explain, is defined both by the heating trend and by the radical instability expected of future environments. They warn that “the combination of extinctions, global species migrations and . . . replacement of natural vegetation with agricultural monocultures is producing a distinctive contemporary biostratigraphic signal. These effects are permanent, as future evolution will take place from surviving (and frequently anthropogenically relocated) stocks.” “Evolution itself”, Davis concludes “has been forced into a new trajectory.”

This is why Marxism with a future needs a perspective on speciation that doesn’t stop with Engel’s (1940) famous account of the co-evolution of the human brain, hand and tool use. To revive the issue of species-being in 2009 is, however, to return to it in the context of a planetary high-technology capitalism, in the age of the Web, the Genome Project, the Predator drone and the onco-mouse, where the constitution of the human figures alongside the market-driven fabrication of the post-human, an equally market-driven regression across parts of the globe to in-human conditions, and neo-extremist risks of species termination. If in 1844 we had the factory, and by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the social-factory of Fordism, now we have the factory planet, or perhaps the planet factory. The characteristic of the factory planet is the capitalist subsumption not just of production, not just of consumption, not just of social reproduction (as in Fordism), but of life’s informational, genetic and ecological dimensions, with the implications reverberating back on all the other moments of its circuit. In this hyper-subsumption, classic forms of exploitation persist—and are often intensified—but capital taps the psychophysical energies of species-life at every point on its circuit: not just as variable capital (labor), but also, as a circulatory relay (consumerist consciousness, “mind share”), a precondition of production (the general pool of biovalues and communicative competencies necessary for “general intellect”), and even as constant capital (genetic raw materials).

Here Marx intersects with Foucault (1984); capital becomes a regime of “biopower.” This is in accord with Marx’s own dictum that ‘the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete developments, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone’ (1973, 104). In *Capital*, Marx notes that the concept of “labour” only became thinkable once the capitalist mechanization and

marketization homogenized a range of work or trades—smith, cooper, weaver—so that they could be theorized as sharing an identity, being made of the same “stuff.” Today, “life itself” becomes theorize-able as a productive force because capital has made it a real abstraction. Althusser’s indifference to issues of species-being and the “hedgehog, dragonfly, rhododendron” when the genome itself becomes a force of production, hedgehogs inhabit mega-diversity reserves speculatively financed by bio-prospecting capital, rhododendrons are spliced with frog genes to increase the harvest of flower plantations, and the Pentagon designs remote-controlled bomb-sniffer cyber-insects?

The work of the planet factory is not merely “immaterial labour” (Hardt & Negri, 2000), nor even material fabrication: it is the augmentation, production and destruction of species. Let’s just gesture at four instances, corresponding to the four moments in the great expanded circuit of capital as factory planet: in the moment of production, capitalisms long march to automate labour out of existence has proceeded from the assembly line to increasingly autonomous artificial intelligences and robots; in the sphere of circulation, the drive to digital communications is creating new virtual territories where those who can access them live “second lives” as avatars; in the field of social reproduction biotechnologies already offer screening and selection processes, and promise radical cognitive, affective and physical augmentation up to and including cloned self-replication; and in the sphere of the reproduction of nature, a series of ecological transformations, of which anthropogenic climate change is only the most titanic, not only annihilate millions of plants, insects, and animals, but to terraform the planet into a place radically different from that on which human civilizations developed.

Species-being can be thought of as the emergent capacity of the human biological collectivity to identify and assemble itself as a species and alter itself—to be a species not only in itself, but for itself and transforming itself, directing its own evolution. “Alienation,” the central problematic of the *1844 Manuscripts*, is not an issue of estrangement from a normative, natural condition, but rather of who, or what, controls collective self-transformation. It is the concentration of this control in a sub-section of the species, a clade or class of the species—who then acts as gods (albeit possibly incompetent gods)—to direct the trajectory of the rest. The *1844 Manuscripts* focus on the initial moment of this process in capitalist history—the subjection of the dispossessed labourer to the rule of the factory master. There is, however, also a second stage of this process, hinted at in the *1844 Manuscripts* and amplified on in later writings, where the mechanism of domination, the system of technological powers and social institutions, created by this group actually assumes an autonomy, a life of its own, so that “in the end an inhuman power rules over everything, including the capitalist himself” (1964, 156). Today, we might propose a third stage, as this out-of-control market-military macro system generates its own micro-systems of control which, assembled from digital, genetic and mechanical components, approach powers of self-replication and artificial intelligence that bring in sight the production of what is sometimes frankly spoken of as a post-human singularity, or even as a successor-species.

From one point of view, Marx’s account of species being warns against apocalyptic and euphoric views of this event, because it reminds us that humans have always made themselves

by a series of grafts, symbioses and prostheses with tools, nutrients, altered landscapes of a second nature—that, as Kathryn Hayles put it, “we have always been post human” (1999, 278-9). But the *1844 Manuscripts* are also a denunciation of this transformational process from the point of view of those who are its sacrificial victims, and a critique of the catastrophe tendencies of such inequality. His account of species-being reduced, as labour, to the status of “beasts” or “machines” opens to a consideration of the post-human as catastrophe, not by reason of deviation from a supposedly essential nature but from an unequal scheduling of departure times, or because some step onto the train across the backs of others. Today’s species transformations are fuelled not just by the continuing labors of industrial proletariat building machines for its own replacement, but a new realm of vitalist proletarians whose role is to provide the raw materials for the creation of alien life, for the fabrication of successor species: the organ sellers, surrogate mothers, the experimental subjects of big pharma, the plant and animal breeders dispossessed by corporate biopiracy, the coltan miners, e-waste scavengers, and chip assemblers, the laborers of the singularity, who destroyed lives feed the next mutation in life itself.

When the bio-rifts of neoliberalism make the masters of the planetary economy more and more literally “alien” from those they rule, no wonder archaic fundamentalisms are the reactive response. As these two complicit alienations of species-being, futuristic capital and atavistic religion, turn on each other and on themselves in increasingly terrifying wars, all these species altering forces converge in the one activity where Marx underestimated capitals transforming powers: the means of destruction. The famous passage from the *Manuscripts* where Marx writes of how expropriated labour stands over and against the worker as a force that is not only “alien” but “hostile” must be read with a crassly literalism. Today, the American armies operating in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are indeed alliance forces—an alliance of humans and robots, with over 4,000 semi or fully self directed autonomous mechanical agents, conducting reconnaissance, disarming IEDs, identifying targets and launching attacks. And these robots drones and tanks, the Predator, the Reaper, the Talon, are only one manifestation of a post-humanized military apparatus that operates in a networked battlespace with bio-augmented soldiers and thermonuclear ecological change agents. Here any contemporary theory of species life has to strip off the last vestiges of Hegelian teleology: enhanced species being means more risk of species *not* being, of the unfolding not of absolute spirit but of nuclear winters, viral strikes and marching plagues.

### **Biocommunism**

The aim of thinking about species-being again is not, however, to amplify on the power of capital. It is to inform opposition to that power, to find theory adequate to struggles already occurring, and suggestive of their future strategies. So in the last section of this paper, I want to suggest how a twenty first century species being theory might alter the way we conceptualize movements against capital, and alternatives to capital.

In Marx, the concept of species-being emerges from that of labour, and the struggle to reappropriating species being is the struggle of the working class. Once species-being has

appeared as a real abstraction, there should, however, be an analytic counter-flow in which it reflects back on and transforms the initial notion of labour, and work. A species politics highlights the activity not so just of production but reproduction; the historically female labour child-birth and child-care (the raising of young species-members) (see Hartsock, 1983) and also ecological reproduction (relations with other species and with the natural habitat). In this perspective the capitalist command over waged labour at the immediate point of production remains critical, but re-appears transfigured, as a point of control exercised beyond the immediate point of production over a web of invisible, unremunerated, reproductive, subsistence and ecological labours. This in turn alters concepts of where and how challenges to species-altering capital appear. As Donna Haraway (2008, 18) says, "Species reeks of race and sex." If one lays aside the apparently abstract (but in fact implicitly masculine and Eurocentric) way in which the notion of species appears in Hegelian-Marxist line, a contemporary species-politics has to be an invitation to think not just human sameness but difference; to recognize that this species comes with two sexes, multiple genders, and various geographically distributed genetic drifts and clusterings. The notion of species-being invites us to see class, the categorization mechanism of capitalist command, as a grid forced down with brutal but uneven pressure, into the varied flesh of an intrinsically heterogeneous biological collectivity. A rewriting of species-being thought may, therefore offer a bridge from Marxism to a horizon redefined over the twentieth century by feminist, ecological and anti-racist movements, and a way of re-inscribing Marxian analysis within the plane of actually occurring struggles around war, environmental destruction, global health and poverty, where the practical operating consciousness of activists is not so often only anti-capitalist, or anti-corporate, but also implicit or explicit feminist, anti-racist, and ecological.

To propose a politics of species-being is not to suggest supplanting classic socialist struggles aimed at the other three alienations Marx charted, from work, product and community, struggles around workers rights and wages, cooperative and public ownership, though it does feed back into and transmute them. But a politics against the fourth alienation, the alienation of species being, will have to produce a post-capitalism order as different from industrial socialism as industrial socialism was from the agrarian commune. Can we think, even start to think, a communism adequate to these conditions, something we might call a *biocommunist*? (Such a category is of course an antagonistic inversion of the concept of "biocapital" proposed by Rajan (2006). However, while Rajan restricts his illuminating discussion of biocapital to the field of postgenomic medicine, the concepts of "factory planet" and "biocommunist" in this essay have a wider provenance; similarly, Eugene Thacker's (2005) valuable account of species-being as a contemporary critical concept is, as he notes, limited to its application to biotechnological issues, while this paper includes these as one of a series of linked, and contested, species-changing processes) The gamble of Marxism is that liberation lies through, not prior to, alienation. There can be no return to earth, only the recapture of the strange planet to which capital has abducted us. High technologies such as digital networks and genetic engineering are species-level projects. In the social cooperation required for their production, the scale of their implementation, and their collective consequences, they tend to what Marx (1964, 137) termed "communal activity, and communal mind."

I will gesture to four commons campaigns as proto-biocommunist struggles.

First, the idea of basic income, that every child, woman and man should be guaranteed a livelihood independent of a job is, I submit, an expression of species-being politics, an affirmation of the interdependence of the universal labour—including the many invisible labors—that build the planet factory, and of its capacity of supporting everyone, even the populations “superfluous” by the logic of robot capital, at a modest level. Second, in informational domain, the species-being tendency lies through what can broadly be termed the “open source” movement-- using this term to designate a whole array of formal and informal de-commodification struggles show how radically digital reproduction and circulation subvert private property. Third, any biocommunism must confront the potentials of biotechnology, again broadly defined. To date, such a politics has manifested mainly as resistance against capital’s power to own and alter life, in struggles against Terminator seeds and GM food. But a biocommunism might also raise the possibility of positive reappropriations of this post-genomic field, whose recombination cells, tissues and organs constitutes a global corporeal commons, the very literal composition of what Marx called a “social body” that profoundly challenges the possessive individualist subjectivity. One can glimpse this in struggles around HIV/AIDS epidemic, interleave class, poverty, race and gender, place sexual habits in a new collective context, challenge big pharma’s ownership of retroviral drugs , and raise questions of universal health care provisioning, and medical research priorities that will characterize future species-being politics. Fourth, biocommunism is ecological planning. Integral to Marx’s original concept of species being was the need for a regulated metabolic exchange between nature and humanity that would prevent the “universal poisoning” of the new industrial cities (1964, 85) a poisoning that today reaches biospheric dimensions, that has dramatically discrediting the benevolence of the invisible hand, compelling a tacit acceptance, even in reformist cap and trade or carbon tax schemes, that industry requires a discipline super-ordinate to profit, and even making utterable formerly unspeakably thoughts, such as an equalitarian rationing of energy use across the planetary population. On all these fronts, the issue Marx saw as critical to human species-being, the possibility for its democratic, distributed, associative planning, comes to the fore.

The *1844 Manuscripts* proposes a species-being whose nature is to change its nature, and whose only essence is its collective capacity for transformation. Since species-being incessantly modifies its own basis, its commonality can only be constantly recreated in the very acts of cooperation it appears to presuppose, founded in a shared foundationless condition. A species-being politics cannot adhere to a fixed image of the human. It should rather admit mutation, evolutions that spring new senses and extensions, on the condition that this is a mass transit, a collective reappropriation of the powers privately expropriated in the planet factory, an intensification of tendencies to socialization and commonality implicit in the new forces of production and destruction. It is, today, tempting to speak of a mission to “save the human.” But this would be a flight departing too late. The human as we know it is a historical creature whose material and ontological grounds are already subverted. The complex articulation of biological facts and discursive formations from which it was constructed, formations that were only coalescing in 1844, have since 1944 been chiseled loose by technoscience; tremulous

today, they will by 2044, under the hammer blows of molecular biology, neuroscience and nanotechnologies, be rapidly falling away into the abyss. Deprived of a naturalistic basis in “common-sense” humanity, or in common human senses, the new solidarity can only be grounded in the imminent, cooperative requirements of the productive networks that sustain biosocial existence, and make possible a further unfolding of what Marx called “the present living species.”

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