Species-beings: For Biocommunism

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Introduction
Recent years have seen a convergence between lines of Marxist thought and a Foucauldian biopolitics of “life itself,” a rendezvous most explicit in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire and Multitude. My paper aims to contribute to this intersection, but from a different angle. I suggest that Marxism has always, and from its earliest documents, had a “biopolitics,” announced by the term “species-being.” I further propose that this theoretical category of “species-being” is crucial for any twenty-first century re-conceptualization of the communist project. What follows briefly addresses three questions. First, what did Marx mean by “species-being”? Second, why might the idea of “species-being” have a renewed relevance today? Third, what politics could inform, and be informed by, this reconsideration of “species-being”?

The Fourth Alienation
The concept of species-being enters Marxism in the famous discussion of alienation in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, where the young Marx analyzes how private ownership of the means of production imposes on humans a four-fold estrangement: from the products of their labour, from the process of production, from other producers, and from their “species-being” (Gattungswesen). In the Manuscripts this notion of species-being is cryptic, fugitive, tantalizing. Elements Marx allude to as constituting species-being include the cooperative organization of labour, the relation of humans to their natural environment, the emancipation of women, the formation of new needs and sensory capacities, and the application of science as technology to industry. Overall, however, it is very clear that Marx did not mean by species-being simply human existence as a biologically reproductive collectivity. It is rather, the power to collectively transform this natural basis, making “life activity itself an object of will and consciousness.” Marx’s “species-being” might really be better termed “species-becoming,” the activity of a species whose nature is to change its nature, and whose only “essence” is a historical plasticity increased with each augmentation of productive power.

Having adopted Gattungswesen from Feuerbach, Marx shortly thereafter abandoned the term, bar a fleeting return in the Grundrisse. Subsequently, species-being had a checkered career within Marxism: prolonged invisibility (the Manuscripts were unpublished until 1932), enthusiastic embrace by Marcuse and Lukács, followed by heavy criticism from Althusser, who placed the concept on the wrong side of a fatal epistemological divide between early, immature, and late, scientific, Marxism. Recently, however, the concept has drawn renewed attention from theorists such as Gayatri Spivak to David Harvey, Jason Reed, Paolo Virno and others. Building on, though for reasons of speed not fully acknowledging, these authors, I suggest species-being is a necessary concept for any contemporary communism. Such a return to the lexicon of 1844 is not an exercise in antiquarian purity, but rather in archeological futurism, cannibalizing parts for a new intellectual machine adequate to conditions of virtual and biotechnological accumulation, a step to the collective composition of a 2044 Manuscripts. This would be to take up the issue species-being again 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-exterminist risks of species termination.\textsuperscript{14}

In this context, 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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{15} In Marx’s original account, there is, however, also a second stage of this process, hinted at in the \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{16} Today, we might propose another, 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 “successor-species.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{The Factory Planet}

\textsuperscript{21}Althusser said the 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 separate universe than 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.”\textsuperscript{18} But what price this contention, when the genome itself becomes a force of production, rhododendrons are spliced with frog genes to increase the harvest of flower plantations, and the Pentagon designs remote-controlled bomb-sniffer cyber-insects?\textsuperscript{19}

If in 1844 we had the factory, and by the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century the “social factory” of Fordism, now we have the factory planet, or perhaps the planet factory.\textsuperscript{20} 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. This is the moment Marx intersects with Foucault, when capital becomes a regime of biopower. In \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{121} Today, “life itself” becomes theorize-able as a productive force because capital has made it a real abstraction.
The work of the planet factory is not merely “immaterial labour”, nor even material fabrication: it is the 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, capitalism’s 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. All these species altering aspects converge in the one activity where Marx underestimated capitals transforming powers: the means of destruction, in a military apparatus that now operates through autonomous killer drones 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 winter and viral strikes.

**Biocommunism**

Can we think, even start to think, a communism adequate to these conditions, something we might call a biocommunism? 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. 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, but on the condition that this is a mass transit, a collective reappropriation of the powers privately expropriated in the planet factory. It cannot be a crusade to save humanity (or nature) as it is, or was, or is supposed to have once been. But nor can it be a self-annihilatory surrender to the delirium of techno-capital. A politics of species-being would instead be a struggle to intensify tendencies to socialization and commonality implicit in the new forces of production and destruction. 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 termed “communal activity, and communal mind.” ‘Commons’ is a recurrent term in contemporary activism; I will just gesture to four sorts of common campaigns that might be thought as proto-biocommunist struggles.

First, the idea of basic income, to which my co-panelists will speak, is, I propose, an expression of species-being politics. Such a guarantee should, however, be conceived at a planetary level, not just as the ancillary privilege to the inhabitants of capital’s advanced sectors. A guaranteed income of $2 a day would effectively double the income of nearly one third of the world’s population, could be achieved for an annual cost of $4.7 trillion, by proportional tax of 11.9% levied on a global income of $39.4 trillion--a bailout not
for banks, but for species-beings. The idea that every child, woman and man should be guaranteed a livelihood independent of a job is not only an ethical expression of species solidarity. It is also an affirmation of the interdependence of all levels of the universal labour—including the many invisible labors—that build the planet factory. It is additionally a recognition the levels of production and productivity generated by that factory, and especially by its tide of automation and robotization, are capable of supporting everyone, even the populations “superfluous” by the logic of capital, at a modest level.

Second, in the domain of the avatars, the tendency lies through what can broadly be termed the “open source” movement—using this term, however, to designate not just the innovations of Linux, Apache and the like, but the whole array of formal and informal de-commodification of digital networks, including liberal “creative commons” initiatives and criminalized pirate struggles. These show how radically digital reproduction and circulation subvert private property. Every one of these digital commons is vulnerable to cooption. But the articulation of open source and peer to peer networks with more classic socialist economic experiments, in Latin America, India and elsewhere also shows that the virtual has become a new dimension of free association. Further, today’s battles over piracy, in music, games, films are only a shadow of those that are emerging as software is linked to various forms of micro-fabrication, so that the traffic in specifications necessary for industrial or indeed biological production are subject to the same reappropriative process. This is potentially a real, deep contradiction between forces and relations of production.

Third, any biocommunism must confront the potentials of biotechnology, again broadly defined as range of life science interventions in nature and the human body at the molecular level. To date, such a politics has manifested mainly as resistance against of corporate power to own and alter life by gene patenting, in struggles against Terminator seeds and GM food. These are crucial refusals to entrust species-being to financial steering. But a biocommunism might also raise the possibility of positive reappropriations of this post-genomic field. The recombination cells, tissues and organs in this field constitutes a global corporeal commons, the very literal composition of what Marx called a “social body” that profoundly challenges the possessive individualism of capital’s homo economicus. One can glimpse this de facto socialization in two decades of social struggles around the HIV/AIDS epidemic that not only addressed issues of class, poverty, race and gender, but place sexual habits in a new collective context, and challenged big pharma’s ownership of the retroviral drugs necessary to sustain the life of the 40 million infected with the disease. In the process these struggles have raised about species vulnerability and interdependence, universal health care provisioning, and the priorities of medical research that will characterize future specie-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. Today, on what is an expanding planet of slums, this poisoning nevertheless reaches unprecedented biospheric dimensions. In the last five years has dramatically discredited
the benevolence of an invisible hand. Multiple environmental catastrophes, interlocking with crises of food and energy production, have forced into the foreground the alternative to marketization that capital tried to make unthinkable, that of the governmental direction of the conditions of species life. In the Kyoto era, even the most reformist attempts to digest the eco-crisis, such as corporate “cap and trade” emissions scheme or carbon taxes, tacitly accept that that the market’s internalization of what were once thought of as environmental externalities requires a discipline super-ordinate to profit, even as they attempt to deny this truly inconvenient truth. What would a mere decade ago have been held unspeakably totalitarian thoughts, such as an equalitarian rationing of carbon emission quotas across the planetary population, are today utter-able. Despite obvious efforts at containment, a tectonic alteration in political ground has occurred: the planned economy is back, at a species level.

Conclusion: “The Present Living Species”
Planetary global income, open sourced production, a public post-genomic health care, eco-planning. This is a sketch of biocommunism, not a program. It does not purport to supplant classic socialist struggles aimed at the other three alienations, 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, the sort of a communism for a planet whose biosphere needs tending like the fragile life support systems of some crippled orbital space station, inhabited by a population biogenetically coded for solidarity and biophilia, interconnected by universal and free communication networks, coexisting with companionate artificial intelligences and robots. 29

Meanwhile, however, the world market and its military apparatus continues to compile the informational, mechanical and cellular components for what is now sometimes spoken of as a post-human “singularity”, or even 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 another more recent theorist put it, “we have always been post human.” 30 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. 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 who destroyed lives feeds 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

atastic religion, turn on each other and on themselves in increasingly terrifying wars, what Marx called “the present, living species” seeks a diagonal move, searches its lines of fight and flight, scribbles its 2044 manuscripts, awaits its biocommunist manifesto.31
Bibliography


Harriford, Diane, and Thompson, Becky. 2008. *When the Center is on Fire: Passionate Social Theory for Our Times*. Austin: University of Texas.


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2 Marx, 1964. The order of presentation of the different moments of alienation varies in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. At one point Marx lists the workers’ alienation from “species-being” before that from his “fellow man”; at another he groups these two moments together. In enumerating estrangement from species-being as the fourth alienation, I follow the reconstruction of Marx’s logic by Ollman, 1971, p. 138.

3 ‘That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature.’ Marx 1964, p. 112.

4 From which one can judge “how much man as a species-being . . . has come to comprehend himself.” Marx, 1964, p. 134.

5 “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.” Marx, 1964, p. 141.

6 Marx, 1964, pp. 142-144.

7 Marx, 1964, p. 67.

8 On “species-becoming”, see the unusual, and largely unnoticed, reinstatement of themes from the *1844 Manuscripts* in Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s vitalist Marxism (1983. p 4). Other interpretations along these lines include Margolis, 1992, and Mulhall, 1993.


10 On the history of this reception see Petrovic 1983, pp. 9-15.

11 Marcuse, 1972; Lukács, 1978 & 1980; Althusser 1989, 2003. Although Althusser’s polemics on this topic were deeply entangled in the internal conflicts of the French Communist Party, his immediate target was the psychologised appropriation of the concept of alienation by Fromm (1961).

On “archeological futurism” see Jameson, 2005.

On “exterminism” see Thompson, 1982.

Marx, 1964, p. 115.

Marx 1964, p. 156.


On “cyber-insects”, see Kitchener, 2006; on rhododendrons, see Homeyer, 2003.

The idea of the “social factory” is from the Italian operaismo or “workerist” school. See Dyer-Witheford, 1999, pp. 74-76.


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 “biocommunism” 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 species-changing processes whose course is contested between the factory planet and biocommunism.

Marx, 1964, p. 137.

Fumagalli & Morini, 2008

These calculations, using 2006 World Bank figures, were very kindly done by my colleague James Davies, editor of a recent (2008) major study on the global distribution of personal wealth.

Marx, 1964, p. 85.

The best guides here are, at least as much any social theory, contemporary works of science fiction including Iain Banks Consider Phlebas (1987) and his other novels of “The Culture”; Ken MacLeod’s Fall Revolution series (2008; 2009), and Chris Moriarty’s Spin State (2004) and Spin Control (2007).


Marx, 1964, p. 112.