Engaging with the non-human turn: A response to Büscher

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Abstract
Büscher’s recent article promoted a new language of ‘more-than-human’ and ‘less-than-human’ alongside the concept of surplus alienation from nature, observing that the non-human turn would benefit from an engagement with history. In commenting Büscher’s intervention, I observe that the ‘nonhuman turn’ does not have much traction in the Global South, possibly because the alienation from nature is experienced through the violent realities of primitive accumulation. The non-human turn is hardly compatible with Marx’s understanding of capital and nature–society relations as organised by the law of value. The new language of the non-human turn is founded on an idealistic conception of society and history, reproposing an analytically problematic ‘we’ that perpetuates class-blind analyses.

Keywords
Nature–society relations, ‘nonhuman turn’, Marx, class, value

Engaging with the ‘nonhuman turn’
In this commentary, I reiterate my earlier argument on the incompatibility of Marxist theory with the ‘nonhuman turn’ (Greco, 2015a) by building on one of Büscher’s central intuitions on the idealist character of the ontologies underlying large part of the theories within the ‘nonhuman turn’, a term that includes posthumanism, more-than-human relation scholars, new materialist ecologies, vitalist ecologies, critical animal and multispecies geographies and theories inspired to actor–network theory (ANT), arguing in favour of decentring the human species in discussions about environmental crises.

Engaging with the non-human turn is important, because this increasingly influential scholarship is one of the many expressions of a specific angst that marks our times. Büscher makes some important points, arguing that ‘it is because humans are increasingly – though extremely unevenly – alienated from ourselves and the rest of nature that emphasising “multispecies entanglements” has become important’ (Büscher, 2022); and also that while the ‘nonhuman turn’ takes hold of scholarship, in the world ‘structures of domination do not disappear…quite the opposite…these have continued to intensify’ (Büscher, 2022). There is a recognition that ideologies are a product of material relations, rather the other way round. In Marx’s thought, ideologies are ‘anything but illusions or appearances: they are objective and
operating realities, but they are not the engine which sets history into movement, that’s all. Ideologies do not create social reality, quite the contrary: it is social reality, in its productive structure, which creates ideologies’ (Gramsci, 1975: 436).

The non-human turn as ideology is a product of our current historical moment, marked by the continuous loss of biodiversity and the acceleration of climate change, generating anxiety over apocalyptic endings to the human passage on earth. This angst is the psychological expression of living in the Capitalocene (Moore, 2016). With the non-human turn, the intellectual quest to put a halt to the violent expropriation of nature that is at the basis of the metabolic exchange in capitalism (Bellamy-Foster, 2018) is declined through an ontological idealism that erases capital from the analysis. The argument that the ‘non-human turn’ is itself a consequence of the increased alienation of society from nature is thus extremely valid, as it is its corollary that this scholarship might in fact ‘hamper rather than enable challenging contemporary forms of domination’ (Büscher, 2022).

Büscher aims at nuancing the different Marxist critiques of the non-human turn and proposes two theoretical shifts: a focus on the dialectics of the ‘less-than-human’ and ‘more-than-human’ and applying a Foucauldian understanding of Marx’s concept of alienation – ‘surplus’ alienation – to indicate that contemporary environmental crises are the result of the intensification of historic capitalist alienation that led to ‘more than life’ contexts. I will consider these two propositions before reflecting on the ‘nonhuman turn’ and the Global South.

The vocabulary of the ‘nonhuman turn’

The non-human turn proposes a new vocabulary that challenges dualist conceptions of nature/society, promoting relationality and stressing the agency of non-humans and questioning ‘distinctions and distinction-making mechanisms’ (Büscher, 2022) are the three shared features of an otherwise highly diverse group of theories within the non-human turn. Theories of ‘radical agenticity’ (Escobar, 2008) are premised on ‘flat ontologies’ and ‘can pre-empt the historical dimension of the analysis’ (Greco, 2015: 15). I concur with Arboleda (2017) on the problematic ahistoricism of this scholarship. In the study of environmental questions, the systematic erasure of the historical development of capitalism misses out the specificity of capitalism as a mode of production and of capital as an abstract relation of domination as key drivers of the current environmental crises.

In the search for a new language, Büscher proposes to reorient the focus towards the dialectics of the ‘less-than-human’ and ‘more-than-human’. Who sets the threshold against which some are rendered ‘less’ human than others? This terminology points to the contempt of human life that we witness in capitalism, expressed by the failure to meet basic needs and thus ‘de-humanise’ some social groups. However good the intentions, this language is based (if only intuitively) on a quantifying approach revolving around an undefined threshold, which normalises and universalises the intrinsically violent quantifying abstraction of capital, rendering what is considered ‘human’ related to the ideology of development (of capitalism) that normalises not only the meeting of basic needs, but also the standard of living of the middle classes in middle-income and rich countries. The basic needs of food, water, shelter, health and education are not what is catered for in capitalism. Capitalism revolves around the extraction and accumulation of value, rather than the satisfaction of social needs, hence the persistence of poverty and disease for the majority in the Global South, not despite but because of sustained capitalist accumulation (Selwyn, 2017). New, real social needs are relentlessly induced and created to sustain capital accumulation, while millions of people fail to meet basic – though still socially determined – needs. While middle classes have substantially shrunk in rich countries during the neoliberal era, their standards have never been achieved by the majority in Africa, Asia and Latin America, while remaining aspirational ideals that form the mainstay of the ideological domination of capitalism in the Global South: the idea of development. These ‘doctrines of development’ (Cowen and Shenton, 1996) perform an ideological role in perpetuating the myth
that the majority can achieve not only the satisfaction of basic needs through different forms of integration into capitalism, without risking global ecological collapse, but well beyond that: the extension of conspicuous consumption worldwide. In Büscher’s proposal, the dialectical relationship between poverty and capital accumulation is sidelined in favour of a conceptualisation of ‘more-than-life’ contexts. In this global context, I doubt that bundling the poor and the dispossessed into the category of ‘less-than-human’ is politically empowering.

The ‘nonhuman turn’ and the Global South

Büscher, whose past work has shown a sharp awareness of global divides (see, e.g. Büscher, 2013) acknowledges that alienation from nature is experienced differently across the globe, because of the persisting dynamics of the uneven and combined development of capitalism. Even if the process of abstraction from nature operated by capitalism affects everyone, by positing money as a general equivalent, the survival of large sections of the working people (Shivji, 2017) in the countryside of the Global South depends on access to natural resources. Resistance against land and water grabs has marked the rural politics of the last three decades (Moyo and Yeros, 2007; Araghi, 2009). The working people in most countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are daily confronted with a form of alienation from nature which is not necessarily ‘intensified’ in the same ways experienced by users of digital platforms within ‘platform capitalism’.

In the Global South, primitive accumulation – the violent separation of producers from the means of production (Marx, 1990 [1867]) – is an ongoing process that generates resistance. Rural and urban middle classes and bourgeoisies, alongside transnational capital, benefit from dispossessing the workers of land, water, mining and biodiversity. Resistance is met with political repression and state-sanctioned violence (Amanor, 2008; Ayelazuno, 2011; El Nour, 2019; Greco, 2015b; Kamata, 2008). Struggles for survival are intertwined with the consolidation of a class that excludes the majority from free access to resources and rural livelihoods, often in contexts where environmental conservation aggravates ongoing evictions (Brockington, 2002; Brockington and Igoe, 2006; Fairhead et al., 2012). This might explain why the non-human turn is not that influential in the Global South – neither in the social movements, nor in academia – and remains limited to the Global North.

Pardon, who? The problematic ‘we’

Bundling together the ‘less/more than human’ can look like a ‘progressive’ tool to discuss the structural diminishment of the majority of people in the capital value relation. In this language the very problematic ‘we’ that Büscher sees as a weakness of the non-human turn reappears, reproducing an idealistic, class-blind and non-dialectical analysis. The fact that a class is gaining from the environmental crisis is silenced. The quest for a new language implodes by erasing the relation between class and the violent expropriation of nature.

Let us look at these two intertwined dimensions of class and value. The ‘humans/nonhumans’ narrative erases class relations – the quite substantial fact that a powerful, ruling minority of ‘humans’ is not only benefitting from the current organisation of production and society, but crucially depends on it for its survival. Through this erasure, the ‘nonhuman turn’ is consistent with the ways in which the ‘liberal capitalist reason domesticates climate change’ as a problem of collective action (Wainwright and Mann, 2020: 103), conveniently resuscitating a ‘we’ when talking about collective responsibility for the environmental crisis. This same ‘we’ erases class through an ideological sense of collective action and a shared common good that prioritises the stabilisation of a system in crisis, rather than the radical overhaul of the said system. With Malm, the sense of collective responsibility is ‘one of the most common tropes in climate change discourse. We, all of us, you and I have created this mess together and make it worse each day’ (Malm, 2016: 430).

Now, class is often misunderstood for a direct social relation. Environmental activists attack the failures of the predominantly white and male COP26 representatives of the capitalist class (Klein, 2014), who in turn defend their vested
interests through cyclical, and increasingly ludicrous commitments towards environmental reform, though only insofar as these reforms are effective in sustaining capital accumulation and countering the recurring crises to which capitalism is prone. While these symbolic attacks are important, they do not challenge class relations, because they do not threaten the ownership and control of the means of production, nor the production process; and they do not put into question the value relations which dominate social life, through money as the universal symbol of value.

This brings us to the second aspect: the value-form and what happens to nature–society relations in capitalism (Harvey, 1974). The moralising narrative of environmentalism as a lifestyle choice obscures that ‘any social or democratic attempt to regulate the ecology of production is trumped by the global law of value’ (Huber, 2017: 49). Capital presents itself as the objective and incontrovertible reality, naturalising a social system rooted in class domination. Narratives based on unproblematic ‘we’ present a unity that does not exist in real social relations, which are inherently antagonistic.

Missing the importance of class and value in capitalism, the ‘nonhuman turn’ becomes politically toothless, when not outright an obstacle to those groups, initiatives and narratives that are actively posing a real challenge to the domination of capital, as Büscher has rightly argued. But the language of ‘more/less than human’ does not advance on the dialectical understanding of class.

Conclusions

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

The specificity of capitalism as a historical formation is the class antagonism between capital and labour has reached a point where the exploited class cannot free itself without freeing the whole of society, abolishing the capitalist value-form and class relations. Capital appears as an autonomous movement of value self-valorising itself, hiding the systemic expropriation of nature and the exploitation of people.

Büscher goes in the right direction by proposing to the ‘nonhuman turn’ to take a historical approach and correctly identifies as ontological idealism the reason for the ‘non-human turn’ to posit a ‘we’ as a valid analytical unit of analysis, observing that this erases the antagonism of class relations. Given this substantial insight, the rest of the paper is a bit of an anticlimax, as Büscher argues in favour of an ‘expanded we’ constituted by humans and non-humans, rather than proposing class analysis. With Arboleda (2017), the ontological idealism of this scholarship cannot be corrected solely by adding historical analysis to the mix. Marx introduced the method of historical materialism in opposition to idealist conceptions of history as the expression of a generalised ‘we’ – the ruling class interest masquerading as general, collective interest – and as a corrective to crude materialism. Capital as a totality is expressed as a real abstraction of value and as a system based on the fundamentally antagonistic social relations of class. These two dimensions are dependent on each other, but their relation is mediated. There are no ‘humans’: there are social classes, which are dialectically dependent and intrinsically antagonistic, with the working people holding the key of history in our potential to liberate all classes and abolish class society. This is why ‘humans’ as a species are not a suitable analytical unit to understand contemporary capitalism and nature–society relations.

It is unclear whether the ‘nonhuman turn’ scholars are willing to engage with the class politics of the value relations (Greco and Apostolopoulou, 2019). Workers can expropriate the dominant class and supersede capital’s law of value. This is the force of the future in the present, reclaiming the whole of life, for the whole of society and nature, from the grips of the past. Liberation of living labour from past dead labour, and from the entanglements of mediation and abstraction on which value in capitalism is based – of the deadly embrace of dead labour appropriated by capital over living labour. If capital weights like a nightmare on the living, it is living labour and class not only as domination, but as a coming together of revolutionary potential that needs to be the focus of our understanding of what it means to become truly liberated humans in nature.
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