

Remarx

Debating Sustainable Development

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In this paper, an overdeterminist value-theoretic and class-based approach is used to intervene in the discussions of ecological sustainability. It is argued that the search in nature for ecological principles to guide society/nature relations is epistemologically suspect. Ecological problems in capitalism are inseparably articulated with the process of extracting surplus value. Moreover, due to their adverse impacts, they instigate struggles over the appropriation of nature that shape the possibility of sustainable development. This analysis suggests that capitalism may be ecologically sustainable, but that is by no means given. It is argued that scientific research and technology development in capitalism, so often presented as a solution, could create new ecological risks. The greening of capitalism is contradictory and socially unjust. Socialism can be expected to be preferable to capitalism on a number of social grounds, including environmental considerations.

Key Words: Knowledge, Value, Class, Ecological Sustainability

Staging the Debate

Sustainable development is often defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, a definition in line with the Brundtland report (WCED 1987, 43). Most neoclassical economists, however, understand sustainable development as development in which consumption is nondeclining through time. They suggest that the concept of sustainability focuses on maintaining production opportunities for future generations, not on bequeathing some fixed quantity of nonrenewable resources to them. This means that sustainability is not determined by natural capital or by natural limits. Productive capacity can be maintained, according to neoclassical economists, so long as reduction in natural capital can be balanced by human-made capital so that output and consumption remain nondeclining over time. This claim is based on the assumption that human-made capital can substitute for natural capital. The policies that neoclassical economists propose to satisfy sustainability basically amount to achieving dynamic efficiency and to compensating future generations for natural

resource depletion and pollution by bequeathing them human-made capital (Hartwick 1977, 1978; Solow 1974, 1986, 1993).

Their proposals, however, have been challenged on several grounds (see, for instance, Georgescu-Roegen 1989; Constanza and Daly 1987; Daly and Townsend 1996). Substitution possibilities between natural and human-made capital have been questioned. In addition, it is argued that even with optimal microeconomic allocation, the scale of overall economic activity can surpass the *carrying capacity* of the biosphere. Using the metaphor of a boat for the earth's ecosystem, it is argued that "optimally loaded boats will still sink under too much weight—even though they may sink optimally!" (Daly and Townsend 1996, 8). Issues of irreversible consequences of human activities on life support systems have also been raised. The utilitarian focus of the neoclassical approach has been challenged in terms of its assumptions about human values and preferences (individualism, optimizing behavior, exogenous preferences) and its biases and failures when assessing cost and benefits of environmental goods and services. In addition, the approach of neoclassical economics to issues of intra- and intergenerational justice has been presented as problematic for sustainability. Consequently, for Daly and Townsend, "nature really *does* impose 'an inescapable general scarcity,' and it is a serious delusion to believe otherwise"; that is accomplished by way of the scarce "ultimate means" (the entropic flow of matter-energy, the *throughput*) which can be used by humanity in the service of "the Ultimate End—which is intrinsically good and does not derive its goodness from any instrumental relation to some higher good" (1996, 19–21; emphasis in the original).

On the radical side, many thinkers, including Kovel (1999) and Barkin (1998), also argue that capitalism is ecologically unsustainable. For Joel Kovel, it is the accumulation of capital and, in particular, the scale of capital that drives ecological crises. According to Kovel, "It is the scale of capital that makes this deadly. Thus the larger problem is accumulation itself and the kind of crises it engenders and through which attacks the ecosystems. Crises are inherent within the accumulation process, and grow in ecological impact with the scale of the system and its chaotic character" (2003, 135). This reasoning leads Kovel to argue that capital's "stewardship of the earth will *necessarily* bring about ecological catastrophe—and with it, the breakdown of the capitalist system and the civilization organized about its reproduction" (1999, 3). A similar line of thinking, although more nuanced, is embedded in Liouakakis's arguments (2003–4).

On the other hand, Burkett (2003–4) argues for sustaining the natural conditions needed for "a healthy and sustainable human development," corresponding to the interests of society as a whole, as opposed to sustaining natural conditions required by capital accumulation. However, to the extent that "sustainable human development" is conceived as a transhistorical category, Burkett's call would resemble Daly's arguments for a sustainable development in the service of an "Ultimate End". For that matter, both would be rooted in idealism (for a critique of this line of argumentation, see Vlachou 2003–4, 1994).

In this paper, I employ an approach to the sustainability question radically different from the above perspectives. I use an overdeterminist value-theoretic and class-based approach to intervene in the discussions of ecological sustainability. In particular, I discuss issues of knowledge about extrahuman and human nature, which

help us to understand the emerging processes and agencies that shape a green capitalist development in actually existing capitalist societies. The overdeterminist class-theoretical approach suggests that capitalism may be ecologically sustainable, but this is by no means given. Capitalism is socially undesirable whether or not it is ecologically sustainable. Socialism can be expected to be preferable to capitalism on a number of social grounds, including environmental considerations.

Knowledge about Nature and Society

Marxist theory, as I understand it, produces its own knowledge of the relationship between nature and society by deploying the concepts of overdetermination, contradiction, and class. Overdeterminism perceives reality as an integrated whole of natural and social processes which cannot be reduced to a mere effect of any of its constituent aspects. Human societies meet nature from the inside and through social labor (itself an overdetermined process, constituted by physical and social aspects) that transforms nature into its historically produced forms.

Human nature itself is constituted by the influences of many natural and social processes in interaction, and, in this sense, it is produced by human nature. Human needs, tastes, and preferences are inseparably molded by interacting social and natural processes (Marx 1969; Lichtman 1990; Vlachou 1994). In particular, the biologists Levins and Lewontin question the attempts to attribute human individual and social life to some underlying ideal uniformity, called "human nature," that could be revealed in and served by human development. The physiological needs of human beings, as well as their vulnerabilities and ways of coping with the environment, are very similar to those of the other mammals, they argue. For example, we share with other mammals the mechanisms of temperature regulation (shivering, sweating, changing the distribution of blood between the body's peripheral circulation and the deeper organs). However, the use of socially developed mechanisms (clothing, shelter, heating and cooling by burning energy) has made it possible for our species to survive in almost all climates, even if it has also created some new vulnerabilities. Consequently, "our temperature regime is not a simple consequence of thermal needs but rather a product of the social and economic conditions" (Levins and Lewontin 1985, 259).

Epistemologically, nature, beyond its simple, unfilled immediacy, can only be conceptualized within particular theoretical frameworks. Knowledge(s) about nature cannot be construed as mere representations of nature in thought, as statements about "what is really out there." They are always mediated by conceptual frameworks (see Resnick and Wolff 1987). Observations, facts, empirical results, and conclusions arise within a theoretical framework, not prior to theory and not in its absence (Feyerabend 1975, 168). As Kuhn indicates, "truth" and "proof" are terms with only intratheoretic application (1979, 256–66).

Knowledge(s) about nature, produced within diverse and evolving theoretical frameworks, are thus contested. For example, the development of ecology as a science, according to Trepl (1994), has been marked by two fundamental approaches, the holistic and the individualistic-reductionist concepts, while Levins and Lewontin

(1994) add another approach in the dialectical view with which they are associated. These different approaches to ecology perform different analyses, produce different knowledges of communities and ecosystems, and arrive at different strategy recommendations.

Levins and Lewontin's dialectical approach, informed by Marxism, centers on the idea of the instability and constant motion of systems: equilibrium and harmony cannot be assumed to be the normal state of nature. Change is an open-ended process. However, the time scales of change differ among species and systems; when they are very slow, a stationary state appears to have emerged. Moreover, organisms are both the subject and the object of evolution. Organisms do not simply adapt to their environment but they also change it. In the struggle for survival, species construct their environments. In addition, communities and ecosystems as 'wholes' are not bound together by mutual need but by history; the integrating principle that gives the 'whole' its dynamics is the array of opposing processes that link its parts and transform them, argue Levins and Lewontin (1985, 1994).

Organisms can often drastically transform the property of an element to their benefit. The case of oxygen discussed by Levins and Lewontin (1985, 41) is telling. Oxygen is a very toxic substance for most constituents of cells, and protection from oxygen must have had a very strong selective value at one time. Some organisms dealt with oxygen by detoxifying it, allowing it to interact with some organic substances in the cell. This not only removed the oxygen as a poison but also permitted the release of the chemical energy stored in those molecules, which increased efficiency drastically. Oxygen-using organisms are, however, faced with new vulnerabilities. Although internal organs evolved to effectively distribute oxygen, conditions that impede distribution (circulatory problems, anemia, carbon monoxide poisoning, etc.) are new threats to survival. Nevertheless, "the oxygen revolution" challenges dismal arguments about the fragile resilience of life mechanisms, often encountered in ecological economics.

Moreover, the dialectical approach to ecology calls into question absolute statements about nonsubstitutability, claiming that removal of a species could bring the whole edifice crashing down upon us. "There is a redundancy in natural communities, species substitutions are common from one forest to the next and many ecosystems are remarkably resilient in the face of even gross perturbations," argue Levins and Lewontin (1994, 39).

In many warnings and calls to embed society in nature, one can actually observe a latent, if not open, naturalistic determinism. Since society always meets nature from the inside, such calls seem to be void. The real issues here are *why* contemporary societies appropriate nature in a destructive way and *how* they can change this pattern. Naturalism often echoes in calls to respect the "rights" of other species and habitats. However, unless one wants to appeal to some form of idealism, rights are social constructs, no matter how socially important it might be to respect other species and natural systems. And as has been noted before, quite a few people might be willing to respect the right of the AIDS virus to be consistent with an "intrinsic rights" line of argumentation (see Grundmann 1991). What people can do is to replace environments that they do not value by those they do value (see also Levins and Lewontin 1994, 39-40).

In short, the search in nature for ecological principles to guide society/nature relations is epistemologically suspect. The causes of ecological problems and the solutions to them should be searched and found in the politico-cultural-economic organization of contemporary societies, to which we turn now.

The Emergence of Environmental Regulation and Adjustments

Pollution and natural resource depletion are the outcome of many diverse processes that take place within capitalist society and interact with each other and with nature. Among them, the class process, defined as the production and appropriation of surplus labor, plays an important role. The destructive appropriation of nature in capitalism has been well documented by many radical thinkers. Capitalist firms, however, need natural resources and conditions since they constitute elements of constant capital in capitalist production. Nature also sustain human life and, for that matter, provides elements that are parts of firms' variable capital. Consequently, capitalism cannot be negligent of its natural conditions of existence for long. On the other hand, this argument does not mean that capitalism will necessarily secure its natural conditions of existence, as will be elaborated later.

In the Marxist theory of value, the value of a commodity is determined by the *regulating conditions* of production which are the *normal* conditions for industry and the *least favorable* natural conditions for primary sectors, both inclusive of natural aspects. When increased pollution or depletion of better natural resource bases becomes part of the (deteriorating) regulating conditions of production for a particular sector, it registers as an increase in the value of the commodity, *ceteris paribus*. On the other hand, differences in environmental quality, given the regulating conditions, result in reduced or surplus profits, which might be appropriated as *differential rents* by the owners of better lands (Marx 1991; Vlachou 2002).

Changes in prices and differential rents due to increased pollution and scarcity have an impact, in turn, on profits, wages, and other class payments. Environmental degradation may also have direct adverse social effects such as discomfort and pain to human and other living species, not necessarily captured by economic categories. As a result, various conflicts, tensions, and changes can be instigated between producers and various victims of natural degradation. These multiple struggles give rise to environmental regulation and change in contemporary capitalism (Vlachou 2004).

In particular, the *intercapitalist struggle* or *competition* among capitals plays an important role in the shaping of environmental regulation. On the one hand, the capitalist firms that are adversely affected by pollution tend to confront polluting capitalists to make them control their emissions. They may also turn to the state and demand pollution-regulatory institutions and mechanisms. On the other hand, polluting capitalists tend to resist pollution control measures on the ground of cost increases and deteriorating competitive position. However, recent reports and studies suggest that several capitalist firms are beginning to view environmental issues as *an opportunity for entry, change, and growth*. Properly designed environmental regulation can trigger innovation which may in part or in full offset the costs of compliance and may even lead to absolute competitive advantages in global markets. Consequently, concrete

environmental regulation is shaped not only by the struggles between polluters and victims of pollution, but also by the tensions among polluters, based on the different specific circumstances they face (for a further discussion, see Vlachou 2004, 2005).

Policies for the appropriation of nature are also shaped by *the struggles waged by the workers-citizens*. Striving to protect their physical conditions of life and their standards of living, workers-citizens may turn to the state to set environmental and health safety regulations. However, working people might take diverse and sometimes opposing positions on environmental issues, especially when they are expected to result in loss of jobs and in local or regional economic slowdown.

The *state* is thus called upon to mediate the access to nature. In particular, the state becomes engaged in identifying the 'appropriate' level of environmental protection and in establishing different types of regulation, such as emission standards, taxes, permit systems, subsidies, and so forth. The state actually becomes the site of different struggles over access to nature and has to answer many conflicting demands made upon it. Consequently, state policies tend some times to accommodate and other times to restrict access to nature by certain class and nonclass agents (Vlachou 2004).

Capitalists who encounter natural disadvantages (cost increases and/or environmental regulation) may attempt to overcome them through production restructuring and product design. Science and technology, influenced by market forces and state regulation, can develop new environmentally friendly commodities and promote conservation and substitution of man-made capital or renewable resources for exhaustible resources. It is widely recognized that renewable energy sources and, in particular, solar energy with practically an unlimited potential could solve the problem of nonrenewable fossil fuels, if science and technology would focus upon their development (see, for instance, Schwartzman 1996). Exploration and development of new natural resource reserves improved by focused technical change results in pushing depletion further into the future, *ceteris paribus*. Pollution abatement and waste recycling can be induced by regulation and advanced by science and technology to restrict waste to carrying capacity, contain depletion, and help the transition to renewable resource technologies.

An evaluation of current environmental policies and adjustments from a class standpoint provided by Vlachou (2005) reveals that they have been under the strong influence of capitalists. Capitalist firms have attained free initial allocation of permits, extensive exemptions from environmental taxes or revenue recycling, and subsidies. In contrast, the poor and the unprivileged do not only suffer greater harm from environmental degradation than the wealthy and the privileged, but also incur the regressive impacts of environmental regulation. Both these aspects tend to imply that current environmental regulation and change take place at the expense of the working people.

Ecological Sustainability and Scientific Research and Development

Can environmental changes and adjustments achieve the ecological sustainability of capitalism? And, if they do, is an ecologically sustainable capitalism socially desirable?

The answer to the sustainability question depends crucially on the notion of sustainability that it is being used (see also Sandler 1994). The notion of ecological sustainability that I would like to apply to capitalism is a 'narrow' concept, which, however, acknowledges that natural conditions are important for the existence of capital as a social relation. On this ground, I consider capitalism to be ecologically sustainable if it can secure the natural conditions and processes that are necessary for its long-run existence. An *ecologically sustainable capitalism* is still capitalism. The arrival of ecological sustainability in capitalism is not expected a priori to reverse the class nature of the system and its many negative effects on working people (see also Vlachou 2004).

Having said that, I submit that although an ecologically sustainable capitalism is possible on the ground of the transformations described in the previous section, the greening of capitalism is a contradictory and uncertain process. To substantiate this claim, I will only elaborate here on the nature of scientific and technological change since both types are implied in discussions of substitutability, irreversibility, carrying capacity, and so on, and both are invoked for the ecological restructuring of capitalist firms (for other extended arguments, see Vlachou 2004).

Scientific research and technical development is a relatively autonomous but complex social activity that produces uncertain outcomes. In particular, given that knowledge is produced, as mentioned above, within diverse and evolving theoretical frameworks, it is fragmented, incomplete, and contested. Scientists deploy path-dependent intellectual resources developed and shaped not only by competing scientific traditions throughout the centuries but also by the contested needs and resources of the wider society. Knowledge is always influenced by social divisions and conflicts in each historical epoch (Freeman 1994; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999).

In the process of technical change, economic issues have always been a very important aspect for the success of an invention. In particular, in contemporary capitalism, firms introduce new technologies to increase productivity and reduce costs, thus increasing relative surplus value. Significantly, the first capitalist firms to innovate are able to reduce their individual unit costs and capture excess profits. Technological change is an important element of capitalist competition (Marx 1991).

Research and development has become an important economic activity in itself. Firms specialize (or partly invest) in research and development activities with the motive to secure a profit rate as high as in any other alternative investment. The work of natural and social scientists is now more than ever conditioned by the entrepreneurial organization of research. Moreover, the division of labor within science tends to resemble that in other economic activities. "The creative parts of scientific work are more and more restricted to a small fraction of the working scientists, the rest are increasingly proletarianized, losing control not only over their choice of problem and approach, but even over their day-to-day, and sometimes, their hourly, activity" (Levins and Lewontin 1985, 202). These conditions apply to environmental and natural resource research and development as well.

In particular, important scientific assessment research involving physical knowledge is financed by business in order to comply with regulatory requirements. For example, in an article regarding the long-term effect of genetically modified crops, Butler et al. reported that "at present, risk assessment research in agricultural

biotechnology is primarily driven by regulatory requirements, based on the fact that companies wishing to undertake field trials need to provide detailed information on inserted genes, their expression and stability” (1999, 653). The fact that most countries also run research programs relating to more general problems identified by ministries’ scientific advisory committees suggests a possible countervailing force to the strong influence of biotechnology business interests on such research. Such a possibility, however, seems to be currently very limited. For example, in 2000, the U.S. National Research Council (NRC) released the report *Genetically Modified Pest-Protected Plants*, which investigated threats to human health, possible disruptions of natural environments, and threats to agricultural production from a more rapid evolution of resistant pests. Lewontin observes critically that “the real problem revealed in the NRC report, although it did not seem to bother the panel, is that the data on which ‘safety assessment’ is currently based are not produced by the federal agencies themselves but are provided by the parties who are asking for approval to distribute the new variety in the first place” (2001, 354). Moreover, the approach to scientific assessment followed by the NRC is suspect. Lewontin notes that by investigating only whether the product is harmful to health or the environment and by discounting the process of production (conventional genetic manipulations or transgenic transfer of DNA), “no one seems to have noticed that there is, in fact, an aspect of *the process* of genetic engineering that does make that process unusually likely to produce unpredictable results” (354). In particular, the process of genetic engineering itself has a unique ability to produce deleterious effects and, contrary to the recommendations of the NRC report, this justifies the view that all varieties produced by recombinant DNA technology need to be specially scrutinized and tested for such effects. For example, a genetically engineered tomato might start to produce toxins not only in parts of the plant not ordinarily eaten but also in the fruit (355).

Similarly, Butler et al. noted that green groups are concerned by the relatively large numbers of government scientific advisers in countries such as Britain with links to the biotechnology industry. “Biosafety is being driven by commercial interests, says Peter Riley of Friends of the Earth UK. We need to get down to basics and hand money freely to universities to do fundamental research and make the science of genetic engineering predictable” (Butler et al. 1999, 653).

At present, however, we experience the commodification of university science as well, which results, as expected in the current era of neoliberalism, from the financial needs of universities. These needs are fulfilled by research grants from corporations and (less and less) from government agencies, and by tuition fees charged on students to be employed mostly by the business sector. Scientists in the universities are being pressured in this context to turn their research in more profitable directions. For instance, several scientists have pointed out that research on health risks of genetically modified crops is unattractive to researchers as it tends to yield negative results that are difficult to publish and to account for to funding agencies (Butler et al. 1999, 653). Scientists, of course, need to publish in time for tenure review, a job hunt, or a raise, and in journals that confer prestige, which turns out to be practically impossible without funded research projects. Scientists may thus become pragmatists and limit their research agenda to the domain of the acceptable by the current capitalist social order (see also Levins and Lewontin 1985, 207).

Given a global capitalist system, the kind, the level, and the economic valuation of research and development will thus depend on the particular market developed for it. In short, the *nature*, the *direction*, and the *pace* of technological change are shaped by, among other social factors, the class and other economic aspects of capitalist firms and markets. These arguments point not only to the fragmented and incomplete nature of knowledge(s) about nature but also to its class-biased expansion in capitalism, an aspect that is neglected by many advocates of sustainable development.

In particular, in the world of business, the concept of sustainability has been coined to forcefully promote profitable ideas of radical change through new technology (information technology and biotechnology). Robert Shapiro, the former chairman and chief executive officer of Monsanto, for example, maintained in 1997 that “far from being a soft issue grounded in emotion or ethics, sustainable development involves cold, rational business logic” (Magretta 1997, 81).

As it is inseparably interwoven with capitalist motives and institutions, the pro-ecological development of science and technology can only be uneven, contradictory, and class-biased. Significantly, in the process of dealing with certain environmental risks, scientific and technical change may even create new ones. Actually, the case of Monsanto and other companies’ genetically modified crops reveals the many hazards arising from the hasty and unsafe path of change and development in biotechnology.

Concluding Remarks

The ecological modernization of capitalist firms is a class-embedded process. Scientific and technological change is a contradictory process, rendering the possibility of an ecologically sustainable capitalism uncertain. Moreover, so long as environmental quality will be enjoyed unequally by the rich and financed by the poor, greened capitalism will be environmentally unjust and thus not socially defensible. However, labor and social movements can organize effectively to resist the establishing of environmental regulation at the expense of workers-citizens. Importantly, the struggles of radical movements for ecological sustainability and other social desiderata could bring forth a revolutionary transformation of capitalism into an ecologically viable, postcapitalist society.

In particular, the many and diverse subjectivities emerging out of the process of environmental and social struggles are expected to form, hold, and get mobilized by different goals and visions of future society. However, only by building strong alliances can they become more effective politically. Toward this direction, ecosocialists can offer their vision for an ecologically defensible socialist society. For many socialists, the predominance of collective nonexploitative production relations is a worthy goal in itself as it connotes egalitarian economic well-being, cultural freedom, democracy, social justice, and ecological sustainability. Commitment to this cause is an ethical and aesthetic judgment emerging out of our constitution as “products” of the exploitative societies in which we were born and live and against which we rebel, albeit in different and conflicting ways.

The social organization of surplus in communism, as I understand it, will ensure that the people who collectively produce the surplus are also the people who collectively receive and distribute it. The nature/society relationship in a society of predominantly collective production and appropriation of surplus labor will be overdetermined by communal culture, politics, and economics. The concrete concept of ecological sustainability will be then socially defined and hopefully nurtured as a desideratum for this society by communist culture.

Given the deficiencies in human health and safety, in environmental and social justice, and in concern for other species in capitalism, and people's longing for such social qualities as proved by the various struggles waged over them, I am inclined to believe that communist ecological ethics will celebrate such qualities as communal values. Similarly, diverse ways of human life will be socially accepted and respected. The development of science and technology will turn towards a pro-ecological and humane (socially envisioned) path as it will be overdetermined by collective surplus appropriation and communal ethics and politics. Knowledge about nature (and society) will become available to all communal producers so that decisions will be reached by the people concerned, not by experts alone. The incomplete and fragmented knowledge reached by society about extrahuman and human nature will ground the precautionary principle in society's interchange with nature, including issues of nonsubstitutability, irreversibilities, and relative scarcity. In particular, the precautionary principle would first require that when the physical/ecological impacts of a social action are uncertain, the potential long-term harmful effects should be carefully studied in advance. Furthermore, it may also involve socially reached restrictions on such action, informed by the available knowledge, in order to avoid socially undesirable risks for present and future generations.

All surplus-producing societies use social (direct and indirect) labor to transform natural elements into specific use values. In this sense, nature is also an important source of wealth for a society that organizes a collective surplus appropriation. I believe that such a society will develop stronger incentives to engage its members in a more careful and just management of society's interchange with nature than capitalism does. This is because the impacts of important decisions regarding the interaction between nature and surplus production will be equally experienced by surplus producers and appropriators, as they are the same people. For instance, deteriorating natural conditions will harm human health, decrease labor productivity and surplus produced and, *ceteris paribus*, could jeopardize the reproduction of collective appropriation and/or restrict options for a good life as then defined. In particular, negative environmental effects may need greater forces of production to be balanced out, to the extent that they are reversible, implying in turn harder work for all collective producers/appropriators. Irreversible ecological choices, according to the existing state of knowledge, could result in serious, long-lasting damage to collective producers. These examples suggest that ecological sustainability will be valued by collective producers. They also imply that collective appropriation and ecological sustainability could be mutually supportive.

In conclusion, ecological sustainability will be collectively managed in future communist societies within the interacting scientific, technological, and social contexts then available, not according to absolute demands and principles dictated

to human beings by nature or by its positivistically conceptualized intermediary, science. An important different constitutive element of communal as compared to capitalist ecological sustainability will be the predominance of collective rather than capitalist surplus appropriation. However, achieving a collective organization of surplus does not necessarily guarantee ecological sustainability. This is because of the tensions that may arise between collective surplus production and ecological sustainability in certain instances. Such an instance could be the absolute priority that increasing surplus can assume over ecological sustainability through the use, for example, of a nonenvironmentally friendly technology, available at the time—a priority that may be justified by a number of legitimate objectives such as improvements in education and health services in a particular period of time. Therefore, collective producers have to desire and struggle for ecological sustainability in order to make it happen.

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Did Somebody Say Liberal Totalitarianism?

Yes, and Despite the 5-1/2 (Mis)uses of the Notion

Zeynep Gambetti and Refik Güremen

Revisiting the concept of totalitarianism, together with and in spite of Slavoj Žižek, has utmost importance at a time when the post-9/11 world takes on totalitarian forms. These forms seem to escape both the logic of “everyday totalitarianism,” as elaborated by Žižek, and that of “Empire,” described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

Key Words: Totalitarianism, Liberalism, Iraq War, Empire, Concentration Camps, Biopolitics, Political Action

Slavoj Žižek is spot on when he contends that the term “totalitarianism” has been used, misused, and abused as a stopgap to “tame radicals” and to prevent anyone from considering alternatives to the liberal democratic hegemony (2001, 1–3). But this denunciation need not lead us to discard the notion altogether. And we certainly have no reason to agree with an expeditious footnote in Negri and Hardt’s *Empire* stating that the “numerous shelves of our libraries that are filled with analyses of totalitarianism should be regarded only with shame and thrown away with no hesitation” (2000, 421 n. 9).

Our claim is that the works of two thinkers, Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, deserve to be kept in our libraries and given a scrupulous rereading if the post-9/11 world is to become intelligible. These thinkers demonstrate to what extent the totalitarian experience has altered our political universe. We hold that the lessons to be drawn from this experience can, and should, provide the negative blueprint for any radical political project. Our double aim therefore is, first, to show how totalitarianism is still inherent in today’s political formations, including *Empire*; and, second, to underline the need for a political project aiming at a radical turn in our contemporary existence away from the conditions that sustain the totalitarian peril. In other words, we propose using totalitarianism as a negative model to guide future political engagement, without falling into the trap of providing radical politics with a positive content.

It should be noted from the very start that we do not use the term “totalitarianism” to connote some severe form of dictatorship. Totalitarianism does not oppress; it aims to dominate. The only totalitarian *regimes* in history were Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s USSR. The political experience to which these regimes corresponded was not the extreme ossification of the status quo but, on the contrary, a state of permanent instability, incessant movement, and continual blurring of all established lines of demarcation. It is also important to note that we are especially using the term “*liberal* totalitarianism” to distinguish ourselves from those politologues who claim that liberal democracies are either the antithesis of totalitarianism or its antidote. Totalitarian regimes were the result of the crystallization of “totalitarian elements” inherent in the modern “liberal” world. These elements were the antecedents of Hitler and Stalin’s regimes, but they were and are still being reproduced in the discourses and practices of the liberal world even after the collapse of those regimes.

Taking up Arendt’s analysis of the concentration camps, Agamben notes that if her achievement was the conceptualization of the specificity of totalitarianism and of the camps, while being indifferent to the phenomenon of biopolitics, Foucault’s achievement was the conceptualization of biopolitics while being indifferent to the phenomenon of the camps. Agamben ingeniously establishes the relationship between

biopower and the camps. Reiterating Agamben's point of view, we will argue in the following that although *Empire* is entirely constructed through the perspective of biopolitics and biopower, it lacks the conceptual instruments required to detect the inherent possibility of totalitarian politics in an age when politics is wholly transformed into biopolitics.

According to Agamben the point one should not overlook in dealing with biopolitics is that the radical transformation of politics into biopolitics legitimated and necessitated something like total domination, which was carried to its extreme in the concentration and extermination camps. For Agamben, it is not by chance that a hitherto unknown political regime like totalitarianism could be "invented" in the twentieth century. Since life itself comes to be what is at stake in politics and remains so, one can expect new and unexpected "reinventions" of totalitarian politics, Agamben warns us. What is missing in *Empire* is this tense and inherent relation between biopolitics and totalitarian politics. Negri and Hardt lose sight of totalitarianism at the very moment they see it.

According to Agamben, this tension operates through the political circumstances determining the relationship between *zoe* and *bios*. The Greek term *zoe* expresses the simple fact of being alive common to all beings, whereas *bios* signifies "the form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or group" (Agamben 2000, 2). Thus, *bios* stands for culture while *zoe* corresponds to the naked fact of life. Agamben argues that "(p)olitical power as we know it . . . always finds itself—in the last instance—on the separation of a sphere of naked life from the context of the forms of life" (3). The body politic of a modern *imperium* is constituted through the inscription, that is to say, the inclusion of this isolated *zoe* (man) into *bios* (citizen) while trying to hide the traces of this articulation as much as possible. This inscription creates a peculiar tension or ambiguity which Agamben believes is implicit in the very title of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789. According to Agamben, the "hidden kernel" of modern sovereignty lies in this ambiguous title because "it is not clear whether the two terms *homme* and *citoyen* name two autonomous beings, or instead form a unitary system in which the first is always already included in the second" (1998, 126–7). The constitutive biopolitical gesture of modern sovereignty is accomplished by the inclusion of man's naked life into the mechanisms of power. But one should pay attention here to the fact that what is to be controlled and repressed by the sovereign power is actually the *bios* itself, since there and only there lies the possibility of a *counterbios*—that is, an alternative *bios* capable of standing against the sovereign *bios*.

Hardt and Negri reject the possibility of totalitarianism because they see a productive dimension in biopower, a dimension which also accounts for the paradoxical nature of this power. The productive dimension is expressed as such: "Biopower . . . refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 24). Hence, in "the biopolitical sphere, life is made to work for production and production is made to work for life" (32). One should notice that the terms "production," "work," and "life" are employed to designate an all-embracing process, including "after-work" (say, the realm of reproduction) and the affective capacities accompanying it. Yet, for *Empire*, the paradox of imperial power lies precisely in this *productive* dimension

of biopower: while power “unifies and envelops within itself every element of social life . . . at that very moment [it] reveals a new context, a new milieu of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularization—a milieu of the event” (25). Because it bears such a paradox, imperial power can no longer tame the *excess* of the multitude—that is, its *bios*. According to Hardt and Negri, this very paradox allows the multitude to organize and reappropriate its *bios* as *counterempire*. It is because imperial power is a totalizing biopower that the notion of totalitarianism loses its relevance.

Historically, however, totalitarian regimes were extreme examples of a kind of power that was biopolitical *and* productive, but resistant to the paradox of power hailed by Hardt and Negri. Totalitarian regimes discovered that the total (re)production of the social *bios* lies in controlling and regulating life as a whole. One must acknowledge that the Nazi regime was quite aware of the fact expressed in the following passage in *Empire*: “[The collective biopolitical body] is . . . both production and reproduction, structure and superstructure, because it is life in the fullest sense and politics in the proper sense” (30). The point that *Empire* posits as the paradox of power was discovered by totalitarian regimes and employed as their very founding principle. What makes these regimes historically singular is that they organize and mobilize *animal laborans* as their constitutive force and show us, paradoxically, that *animal laborans* is not altogether deprived of a capacity for *bios*. Totalitarianism is the political regime that violently extracts, at any cost, (the capacity of) *bios* from *animal laborans*, which under “normal” circumstances is not its inherent capacity. Hence the cruel inscription “*Arbeit macht frei*” (Work liberates) at the entrance gates of Auschwitz. Hence also the significance of Arendt’s (1958b) analysis of *animal laborans*, which is the closest she gets to an analysis of biopolitics. Totalitarianism has the power of presenting, to *animal laborans*, its “worldlessness” as its world proper.

Therefore, the fact that power is essentially paradoxical is not a guarantee against totalitarian domination, since the latter is precisely the regime that can organize its own paradox to totalize itself. Besides, having a productive dimension does not necessarily mean that an unmanageable paradox will inhabit power itself. The historical example of totalitarianism shows that the (re)production of life, in which Hardt and Negri locate the paradox of *Empire*, could actually turn into a site of intervention where the tension between biopolitics and totalitarian politics could cease being just a tension and transform itself into the very ground of a biopolitics constituted as totalitarian politics.

There are two other venues that render totalitarian interventions possible: the inherent nomadism of the multitude, and the lack of mediation between life and power.

For Hardt and Negri, the evacuation of the places of power (that is, desertion and exodus) is the fundamental mode of resistance in the postmodern age of *Empire*. As they put it, nomadic migration is an issue of control: “All the powers of the old world are allied in a merciless operation against” the specter of migration haunting the world (2000, 213). We argue that it is right here, in the merciless operations of the powers of the old world against migration, that one should identify and expect the comeback of the “age-old” totalitarian reflex of these powers. To express it in

Agamben's words, the totalitarian impulse could be reactivated because of the difficulties faced by Empire in inscribing nomadic bodies into a *bios*. The refugee is the figure that brings to light and puts into crisis the originary fiction of modern nation-states. Agamben observes that nation-states are constituted upon the political gesture of clothing Man (call it birth or naked life) with the rights of Citizen (*bios*). The fundamental sovereign gesture is, therefore, to institute a fictional continuity between man and citizen. The fiction here is that "[rights] are attributed to man (or originated in him) solely to the extent that man is the immediately vanishing ground (who must never come to light as such) of citizen" (1998, 128). When man as naked life tends to come to light as such in the figure of the refugee, the fiction of nationality is faced with a crisis that threatens to reveal the hidden kernel of sovereignty. Hence Agamben's penetrating insight: "When the hidden difference . . . between birth and nation entered into a lasting crisis following the devastation of Europe's geopolitical order after the First World War, what appeared was Nazism and fascism, that is, two properly biopolitical movements that made of natural life the exemplary place of sovereign decision" (1998, 129).

Any *body* that puts the sovereign fiction of the Man-Citizen indistinction into a crisis carries the potential of provoking totalitarian reactions. This is precisely the case of the *sans papiers* in Europe and illegal aliens in the United States. Although Hardt and Negri acknowledge that the mobility caused by desertion and exodus "most often leads to a new rootless condition of poverty and misery" (2000, 213), they fail to heed Arendt's warning about the resurrection of totalitarian solutions: "The Nazi and the Bolsheviks can be sure that their factories of annihilation which demonstrate the swiftest solution to the problem of overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses, are as much of an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social or economic misery in a manner worthy of man" (1973, 459). Considering the issue from this perspective can also account for the rise of right-wing parties in Europe.

Lack of mediation between life and power is the third site of tension where biopower can become totalitarian. Hardt and Negri's theoretical claim is that the relationship between life and imperial power is unmediated. The juridical constitution of Empire corresponds to the process whereby the mediation between the juridical, ethical, and political poles of power are eliminated. Power no longer operates with reference to an external symbolic framework but becomes truly performative—that is, identical with its own operations. But the crucial question that cannot be asked within the framework of *Empire* is the following: can the lack of mediation also be the condition of totalitarianism? Historically, a total lack of mediation has also been the very paradigm of the camp. The concentration camp according to Agamben is, in its pure state, the zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoe*, norm and fact: "[T]he camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation" (1998, 171). Hardt and Negri treat the life of the multitude as if it were a life that could never be subjected. It is as if the confrontation between the life of the multitude and imperial biopower had no effect on the multitude, or as if the only

response power could generate when confronted with the disintegrating force of the multitude were to adapt itself to the new demands. Although Agamben's idea that today *bios* lies in *zoe* (1998, 188) is implicit throughout *Empire*, Hardt and Negri miss Agamben's warning concerning biopower's capacity to incessantly isolate naked life from *bios*, thus obscuring the chances for a Nietzschean affirmation of life as such.

The hitches inherent in the three sites mentioned show that biopower could be expected to reactivate a totalitarian reflex when faced with a crisis. Hardt and Negri's optimism thus becomes ill-founded.

The totalitarian moment is understandably, but incorrectly, missing in the scheme that Hardt and Negri call *Empire* because it incorporates three types of regime only: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. In contrast, Agamben's analysis makes plain that *Empire* actually opens up not one, but two paths. The first leads to the possible victory of the democratic forces of the multitude, as Hardt and Negri claim. But a second path leads to the possible employment of totalitarian strategies, which consist of the total suspension of *bios*, leaving nothing but pure naked life or pure *zoe*.

The figure of the "Muselmann", analyzed by Žižek (2001, 76–88), acquires heightened importance here.¹ The Muselmann is the concentration camp inmate who has lost all capacity to react. The Muselmann is nothing but the manifestation of the fact that, in the camp, "being-in-the-world" is suspended, hence all the worldly qualifications of "being human" also are suspended. In a Heideggerian perspective, however, it is precisely because it is qualified that *Dasein* or human existence is an always mediated and political existence—that is, a *zoe* which is necessarily qualified within a *bios*.

To insist with Arendt and Agamben on the essential interlacement of *bios* and *zoe* is to claim that only *bios* can harbor the possibility of the freedom to change the coordinates of human existence, and not *zoe*. We in fact contend that there is no indestructible human kernel or essence, that political freedom and resistance are conditional and dependent on the political form taken by *Dasein* or *bios*. We join Arendt and Agamben in decrying the risks of conceptualizing politics as biopolitics, of confounding *zoe* with *bios* and the Muselmann with a qualified being-in-the-world. The risk, precisely, is in becoming impervious to the specifically political character of human existence and to the totalitarian reflexes of power.

These reflexes were manifest in the 2003 Iraq war. The war is not merely a slip-of-hand made by *Empire*, but an indication of its totalitarian underpinning. The war lacks juridical justification, even in the new paradigm of rights claimed by *Empire* (Hardt and Negri 2000, 13–21). It is self-referential and self-legitimizing. It is an example of pure performativity where the act of war itself becomes the law (like the law of the Führer). Therefore, Iraqi space and the *zoe* inhabiting it become the subject of the pure performativity of imperial power. Iraq is turned into a camp that is, in Agamben's words, "the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to

1. This word pejoratively denotes the Muslim in the German language, but it was used, particularly in Auschwitz, to denote the concentration camp inmate who had lost all willpower and human qualities. Unlike Žižek and Agamben, we prefer using the original form of the word "Muselmann" to avoid possible misunderstandings.

become the rule” (1998, 168–9) and when the latter “ceases to be referred to as an external and provisional state of factual danger and comes to be confused with juridical rule itself” (168).

The Iraq War and the proliferation of ethnic and religious divisions within the multitude all demonstrate that imperial power has no obligation to comply with the kind of progressive ethics that usually preoccupies the multitude. That is to say, in order to conserve its sovereignty, Empire could very well abandon its pact with democratic forces and resort to totalitarian tactics.

If Arendt and Agamben’s warnings are to be heeded, our task, then, is to develop the theoretical and political conditions of possibility of an antitotalitarian ethics. Neither theoretical immanentism nor a purely negative ethics will suffice. Neither provides us with any political criteria with which to distinguish the Holocaust from Porto Allegre or the human Being-in-the-world-with-others from animal vitality.

The *Muselmann* is a mode of existence brought about by historico-political conditions. It is a determined being, having a positive existence in the extermination camps. It is not an ontological nothingness. It is, however, a deprived being, one deprived of the qualifications that make us beings-in-the-world. The *Muselmann* is worldless. Even if he were the “zero-point of humanity” (Žižek 2001, 76), Arendt would adamantly insist that he has lost his capacity to generate freedom because the political conditions that brought him into being make the constitution of a public sphere highly improbable (1973, 437 ff.).

The constitution of a public sphere that redefines the conditions of collective existence gains heightened importance when seen from this perspective. Jacques Taminiaux’s distinction (1992, 161–2) between being-in-the-world and being-of-the-world can be interpreted as meaning the following: being-of-the-world is acting in such a way that other actors now have to take this into consideration—that is, imposing oneself on the world, becoming a conditioning factor, touching the lives of others. This is not possible without establishing relations on a large scale, without initiating a new and collective framework of references and connections. We admit that there can be no society without a founding antagonism or a Real, but if freedom is the possibility of resymbolizing, of instituting a new symbolic order that takes into account or that accounts for the impossibility of a perfect harmony, then a purely negative and disruptive politics in the style of Adorno’s negative dialectics may be said to constitute nothing at all.

As Hardt and Negri admit, the spontaneous presence of local struggles is not enough to counter Empire. This, in our perspective, amounts to saying that no local or “natural” solidarity could reconstitute a global political realm because our present problem is rootlessness, or the lack of any substantial links. Rootlessness is not the precondition for a politics of authenticity or of resistance to Empire, but the precondition for totalitarian politics. This means that, theoretically or politically, we should orient ourselves back to politics, and not back to life.

It is with these thoughts in mind that we propose not only to hold on to the notion of totalitarianism instead of discarding it, but also to revisit it and invigorate it by giving it a fresh meaning. For what if, after all, the misuses and abuses to which the

term “totalitarianism” has been subjected were part of an effort by the liberal democratic hegemony to conceal its own totalitarian reflex?

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