

Value in the web of life, or, Why world history matters to geography

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Abstract

Critical geography as a field has yet to reckon with a fundamental geographical blind spot: the historical-geographical patterns of capitalism as a whole. There has been a steady—and studied—reluctance to grapple with capitalism as a historical-geographical place. A geography of value relations must proceed from the unities-in-diversity of capitalism's combined and uneven spatiality. If value relations are central to grasping the geographies of power, capital, and nature, those geographies are irreducibly world-historical. That does not mean imposed 'from above' in any straightforward sense. It means, as Marx and Engels perceptively observe, that value relations entwine everyday life with and within a mosaic of power and capital that operates at the scale of capitalism. Such an understanding situates value relations as unifying thread without positing linear causality or scalar primacy. Dialectical thinking about world history, after all, moves through variation—not in spite of it.

Keywords

world-ecology, Marx, Cheap Nature, environmental history, capitalocene

Kay and Kenney-Lazar (2017) have done a heroic job summarizing a rich discussion of a complex problem: value, nature, and how capitalism works. Of course, I entirely agree: Marx's theory of value is indispensable to interpreting and narrating the history of capitalism.

But I have to confess something. I had a difficult experience reading this paper. Not because it is poorly written (it isn't) but because the synthesis so necessary for further discussion never materializes. I don't think that's a failing of the authors, who have taken on a demanding—and often thankless—task of summarizing diverse arguments. I *do* think the absence of synthesis says something important about Anglo-American geography. There are surely many nuanced ways of putting this

'something important', but let me try a rough-and-ready diagnosis: Human geography has actively discouraged world-historical thinking.

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operates at the scale of capitalism. Such an understanding situates value relations as unifying thread without positing linear causality or scalar primacy. Dialectical thinking about world history, after all, moves through variation—not in spite of it.

I say this because critical geography has yet to reckon with a fundamental geographical blind spot: the historical-geographical patterns of capitalism as a whole. There has been a steady—and studied—reluctance to grapple with capitalism as a historical-geographical place (e.g. Moore, 2010a, 2010b). The conversations surveyed by Kay and Kenney-Lazar reflect this. In my experience, two key problems present themselves, and they are formidable. On the one hand, critical geography continues to privilege the region (and smaller scales like the city and the body) over systemic processes that are no less real, no less historical, and no less geographical that region, city, or body. This means that geographers have been adept at richly detailed regional studies, and at social theory abstracted from analytical history. This has favored the proliferation of empirically rich, and theoretically imaginative, ‘case studies’—but at a cost. We still lack a field of inquiry in geography that engages capitalism as a historical-geographical place with its specific forms of power, re/production, and culture. That’s a problem because regional change in capitalism contains an irreducibly geographical dimension that is world-historical. Capitalism, as a result, is theoretically rather than historically constructed by geographers. As I argue in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), this makes it impossible to resolve the big questions posed by an expanded, historical-geographical conception of value: of paid and unpaid work; of how human organization is a producer and product of the web of life; and of how oppression, appropriation, and exploitation mutually constitute each other. Such questions cannot be adequately address abstracted from world history. Worse yet, arguments about the history of capitalism are routinely dismissed as totalizing.

On the other hand, as Kay and Kenney-Lazar’s discussion of value makes clear, for many geographers, history doesn’t seem to matter. Curiously, the word *history* is mentioned frequently—but there’s no real history here. I can’t see how any historical

observation matters to their framing of value. Here again, I don’t think the problem rests with the authors; I think it rests with critical geography, and especially political ecology’s unfortunate distance from *longue durée* history. (It’s also a reflection of the shallow historicization of most Marxist discussions of value, plagued by a fetishized vision of ‘the’ Industrial Revolution.) That of course is also a bigger problem, reflecting Green Thought’s excessive presentism. Outside of environmental history, history’s purchase on environmentalist thought is weak. But it’s also true that, like critical geography, environmental history has a tough time dealing with capitalism’s world-historical geographies (see Moore, 2003; e.g. Richards, 2003). It’s as if there are two, separated, halves of the amulet—one containing an astute sense of the *longue durée*, the other a penetrating analytical frame to explain how varied geographies are cohered through struggle and difference. How might connect these two vital contributions into a new geographical synthesis?

The law of value as a law of Cheap Nature: A world-ecological alternative

Laws of value are those large-scale and long-run patterns that shape and cohere a civilization. They lead a double life. One operates in a domain that is usually called ‘economic’ but is in fact much more expansive. This is the domain of surplus production and distribution: Who gets what and how do they get it? It’s not really economic for two good reasons, and these implicate modern value’s *other* life. First, the question of surplus always implies power. And second, it always pivots on the reproduction of life, from one day, and from one generation, to the next. This second moment is sometimes called social reproduction, but the messy realities that it names go far beyond the ‘social’. Every ‘mode of production’ is at the same time a ‘mode of reproduction’ and therefore a mode of coproducing definite historical natures.

In capitalism, the substance of value is socially necessary labor time. The drive to advance labor productivity is fundamental to competitive fitness.

This means that the exploitation of commodified labor power is central to capital accumulation and to the survival of individual capitalists. But this cannot be the end of the story. For the relations necessary to accumulate abstract social labor are necessarily more expansive, in scale, scope, speed, and intensity. Capital must not only ceaselessly accumulate and revolutionize commodity production; it must ceaselessly search for, and find ways to produce, Cheap Natures that can deliver a rising stream of low-cost food, labor power, energy, and raw materials to the factory gates. (Or office doors, or . . .) These are the Four Cheaps. The law of value is a law of Cheap Nature.

That phrase—*Cheap Nature*—has two principal meanings. There's a Marx moment and a Gramsci moment. One turns on cheapening by reducing the costs of production to the bare minimum. Great booms of capitalist development have turned on the extra-economic appropriation of unpaid human and extra-human work. In this sense, frontiers of uncaptialized nature—including human nature—are indispensable to capitalist survival. A second dimension of Cheap Nature pivots on processes of domination and *cheapening*: reducing the work and lives of women, people of color, and indigenous peoples to the lowest possible cultural priority. This is Cheap Nature as real abstraction and as fundamental to installing a binary code at the heart of modernity. Far from economic, this view of value relations shows money, power, and modern rationality forming through a cascading process of violent binaries: capital/labor, man/woman, master/slave, White/non-White, colonizer, and colonized. The epochal refashioning gendered divisions of labor and the elaboration of modern slavery in the early modern centuries stand as signal moments of such cheapening (Patel and Moore, 2017; Moore, 2017a, 2017b).

Both dimensions of Cheap Nature remade life, land, and sea centuries before the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the centuries after Columbus made landfall on Hispaniola marked an epochal rupture unprecedented since the dawn of agriculture and rise of the first cities. The massive infrastructures of empire and capital that soon emerged—marking the first great wave of planetary urbanization—

reunified Pangea for the first time in 180 million years (Brenner, 2017; Crosby, 1985). Suddenly, the work/energy potential of two continents could be appropriated for Europe's capitalist empires. Across the early modern centuries, fields were planted, forests cleared, indigenous peoples exterminated, mines dug and metals smelted, and peasants dispossessed—all at scale, scope, and speed that exceeded, often by an order of magnitude, the standards of premodern civilizations. They were also formative moments of the law of value as a law of Cheap Nature.

On this view, the law of value represents a determination of socially necessary labor time which occurs simultaneously through organizational and technical innovation *and* through strategies of appropriating the unpaid work/energy of 'women, nature, and colonies' (Mies, 1986: 77). Without massive streams of unpaid work/energy from the rest of nature—including that delivered by women—the costs of production would rise, and accumulation would slow. Every act of exploitation (of commodified labor power) therefore depends on an even greater act of appropriation (of unpaid work/energy). Wages are exploited, everyone else, human and extra-human, is appropriated. To paraphrase an old Marxist joke: The only thing worse than being exploited is . . . *being appropriated*. The history of capitalism flows through islands of commodity production, developing within oceans of appropriated work/energy. These movements of appropriation produce the necessary conditions for the endless accumulation of capital (value-in-motion).

In other words, value doesn't work unless most work isn't valued.

The law of value under capitalism is, then, comprised of two moments. One is the endless accumulation of capital as abstract social labor. The other, the ceaseless expansion of the relations of exploitation and appropriation—congealing surplus value and its necessarily extra-economic conditions—joined as an organic whole. This perspective stresses the historical and logical *nonidentity* between the value form and its necessarily more expansive value relations—the very relations governing the appropriation of human and extra-human unpaid work.

While Marxist political economy has taken value to be an *economic* phenomenon with systemic implications, the inverse formulation may be more plausible: Value relations are a *systemic* phenomenon with a pivotal economic moment. Far from denying the centrality of socially necessary labor time to capitalist civilization, such an approach affirms Marx's greatest contribution. Thinking of value as a systemic phenomenon with a pivotal economic moment allows us to connect the production and accumulation of surplus value with its necessary conditions of reproduction. It recognizes, moreover, that these conditions extend beyond the circuit of capital: The accumulation of abstract social labor is possible through the appropriation of unpaid work (human and extra-human). The value form (the commodity) and its substance (abstract social labor) depend upon value relations that configure wage-labor with its more expansive conditions of reproduction: unpaid work. Importantly, capital's appropriation of unpaid work transcends the Cartesian divide, encompassing both human and extra-human work as outside, but necessary to, the circuit of capital and the production of value.

Against historical-geographical flattening: Towards a revolutionary ecology

To abstract history from our thinking about value flattens the very historical geographies that we, as geographers, have worked so hard to illuminate. It also flattens our understanding of the web of life, now endorsed by critical geographers as 'Nature-Society' geography—perhaps because it's expedient, or perhaps out ignorance of the historical movements of genocide and expulsion that Nature and Society, as real abstractions, have enabled since 1492 (Patel and Moore, 2017).

But what if we embrace a historical-geographical vision of capitalism's value relations as unfolding at the knife edge (or gun barrel) of valorized and devalorized work/energy, channeled into specific human and extra-human forms across the *longue durée*? This encourages us to go beyond the now-commonplace and rarely specified invocation of

Nature as one of several crises facing Humanity today. A radical challenge to such Malthusian binaries will take value relations as one angle of vision on how capitalism is not only a producer of the web of life—but a product of it.

Such a radical challenge asks us to reflect upon our well-worn conceptualizations of capitalism: as economic system, as social system, and as commodity system. For if the production of surplus value has been the strategic pivot of capitalism, to an even greater extent accumulation has unfolded through the appropriation of planetary work/energy. Such appropriation—yes of cheap resources ('taps') but also of cheap garbage ('sinks')—does not produce capital as 'value', but it does produce the relations, spaces, and work/energy that make value possible. Capitalism *does* generalize commodity relations, but the actual reach of such generalization depends on an even greater generalization: the appropriation of unpaid work/energy.

Here Marx's emphasis on work is important—and necessary for a revolutionary ethic of care and life. Marx may offer a way to cut through the mystifications of the Labor/Nature dichotomy—a binary embraced even by many Marxists. That binary will serve 21st-century radicals no more than the gendered, racialized, and colonial binaries helped socialists of a century ago. Among the virtues of dialectics is its insistence on connecting first, connecting second, connecting always. Marx opens his discussion of the labor process in *Capital* with precisely this emphasis, highlighting a triple transformation: of human and other humans, of humans and 'external nature', and of the totality of humans in the web of life (Marx, 1977: 283). To speak of 'labor and nature', in these terms, is to engage a dialectical, diverse unity: labor-in-nature; nature-in-labor. The two are not separate—not in the 16th-century's sugar plantations, silver mines, iron forges, and shipyards; and not today, in the 21st-century's sweatshops, call centers, and fast food chains. Work is always work in nature, and human work is always work *with* nature.

If the process is more complex for civilizations, these too must 'work'. What is civilization but a specific apparatus of mobilizing work—of humans, but also of plants, animals and geology—for specific purposes? At the center of such work is the

work of care, especially but not only the domain of ‘women’s work’ and unpaid work of social reproduction. It is precisely the symbolic erasure, the invisibilization, of care work that has been the necessary condition of capitalist development (Federici, 2004).

Reimagining work—and therefore value—in capitalism provides a way forward in today’s unpleasant reality. A radical politics around an expanded conception of value offers resources for connecting struggles that are often disconnected. A revolutionary vision must be able to articulate a politics that links the crisis of the biosphere and the crisis of productive and reproductive work. A revolutionary politics of nature that cannot speak to the questions of precarious and dangerous work, of surplus humanity, and of racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence will be doomed to failure. A revolutionary labor politics unable to speak to the ongoing crisis of planetary life will be equally doomed. The time has come for a conversation about how to forge a radical vision that takes as its premise the organic whole of life and biosphere, production, and reproduction—and the kinds of care that will be necessary to heal five centuries of capitalist violence.

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