People and nature: working out a socialist approach

Capitalism is producing not only financial and economic crisis (the Wall Street meltdown of 2008 and the recession), and political crisis (e.g. in the Middle East) but also what is usually called “environmental crisis”. Untrammelled oil production, a central feature of capitalism for a century, has produced a threat of global warming that the international political elite considers gravely dangerous ... but has proved, at the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009, that it couldn’t even begin to solve. Now discussion in that elite and among its academic advisers is shifting away from any attempt to minimise the use of fossil fuels (the main cause of global warming) towards “adaptation” (i.e. how to reduce the impact of global warming on its economy, while working class people bear the burden) ... anything to preserve capitalism and its economy.

Under these circumstances, socialism and/or communism seem in many respects to be natural partners with environmentalism. (I consider the meanings of “socialism” and “communism” interchangeable; I say what I mean by them in section 1 below.) In some places the potential for socialist-environmentalist partnership is obvious – such as the Niger Delta in Nigeria, where oil companies poison the water supply needed for life and trash communities’ social structures. Where it is not obvious, socialists e.g. form “class struggle blocs” in campaigns against power station or airport construction, form “social ecologist” blocs in trade unions ... or just rebrand themselves “ecosocialists”, “eco-anarchists”, etc. But there are assumptions embraced by many, perhaps most, environmentalists that are diametrically opposed to communist ideas – in particular, the assumption that the fundamental problem is people, and especially the increasing numbers of people.1 In my view, such contradictions can not be solved at the level of activity, politics or political alliances. Nor can they be solved by communists declaring themselves to be environmentalists: the word means so many things as to be almost meaningless.2 The issues need to be addressed firstly at the theoretical level. This does not mean stopping all activity and politics; it does mean thinking about issues concerning people’s relationship with nature, and with each other.

I have written these notes to suggest outlines of an approach to the issues. The sections deal with (1) the movement to communism; (2) the character of alienation; (3) the way that the people/nature relationship and the labour process have changed in the 20th century; (4) sustainability and limits on natural resources; (5) overcoming alienation; (6) what abundance means; and (7) the communist programme. At the end are some suggestions about where future research and discussion might go, and my email address in case you want to respond.

1. The movement to communism

No discussion about the communist approach to the people/nature relationship will get far without some clarity about what “communism” means. To my understanding, communism is

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2 Lovelock again: “Green thoughts range from shades of red to shades of blue. The totalitarian greens, sometimes called ecofascists, would like to see most other humans eliminated in genocide and so leave a perfect Earth. [At the other extreme are] those who would like to see universal human welfare and rights, and somehow hope that luck, Gaia or sustainable development will allow this dream to come true. Greens could be defined as those who have sensed the deterioration of the natural world and would like to do something about it.” (The Revenge of Gaia, p. 179.)
a movement that abolishes private property and the state, and in so doing supercedes the alienated relationships dominant in capitalism. By “alienated relationships” I mean not only the relationship of capital and labour – in which the product of workers’ labour is appropriated (alienated) from them – but relationships between people in a broader sense, and the relationship between people and nature.

If communism is understood (as it is by many people) in a narrower way, as a political movement by means of which the working class overthrows the capitalist state and replaces it with its “own” state, then its view of the people/nature relationship is likely to be correspondingly narrow and political. It might focus e.g. on political measures that workers’ parties might advocate, and such a future “workers’ state” might implement, to address environmental problems. In my view, the prospect of “communism” arriving via a successful seizure of political power by a “workers’ state” is far slimmer than the prospect of the deeper-going transformation I have mentioned.

The seeds, or potential, of the movement to communism are here in the present, but its culmination can only be in the future. I think we need to pose questions about how the people/nature relationship is changing and will change in future, in the course of that movement ... or if that movement doesn’t happen, or fails. The history of the people/nature relationship should be viewed from this standpoint.

2. The character of alienation

Most communists in the 20th century probably saw themselves as fighting, in the first place, to put an end to class exploitation and the private property in the means of production that underpinned it. Communists won influence in the mass workers’ movements and in 1917 came to government for the first time in the Russian “workers’ state”. As a result, communism – including Trotskyism, left communism and other trends that rejected the horrors of Stalinism and Maoism – became, more than anything, a type of politics. In my view it is necessary in the 21st century to develop (or return to?) communist ideas that break out of the confines of politics, and think in terms of a deeper-going transformation. I will try to explain what I mean, starting with the idea of alienation, and the related idea of the movement from necessity to freedom.

When Marx and Engels became communists, the people/nature relationship was at the centre of their view of alienation. Their analysis started with the social relation between people (capital), moved on to labour (the form in which people take from nature the means of subsistence), and then to the people/nature relationship. They clearly stuck with such conceptions all their lives, and, in Marx’s case, particularly in writing Capital.

In 1844 Marx wrote in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts about “the objectification of the worker” and the estrangement (i.e. alienation) of his product. He started by stating that labour is itself an act of interchange with external nature: “The worker can create nothing without nature, without the sensuous external world. It is the material on which his labour is realised, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces”. He then discussed the alienation of the products of labour from the worker, and sketched a critique of political economy, which “conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labour”. But then, he wrote, there is another aspect of estrangement to consider:

“The estrangement is manifested not only in the result but in the act of production, within the producing activity itself. [...] If the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation.” Further on he concluded that labour, by alienating people from nature and from themselves, dehumanises them: “In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, estranged labour estranges the species from man.”4

The people/nature relationship was also central to Marx’s understanding of the movement to communism. In the section of the manuscripts discussing communist ideas, Marx listed: first, forms of “crude communism” as some type of universal private property; second, communism that is “still political in nature – democratic or despotic”, “with the abolition of the state, yet still incomplete, and being still affected by private property”; and, third, “communism as the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement, [...] as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being”. This third type of communism, of which he obviously approved, is communism “as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man.”5

This idea of labour as an interaction between people and nature remained central in Capital. In his discussion of the production of surplus value (Capital, vol. 1, part III), Marx preceded his analysis of labour under capitalist conditions with some general points about labour. He described it as “a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material reactions between himself and nature”. In a lengthy discussion of the labour process, he defined the “elementary factors” of it as (1) “the personal activity of man, i.e. work itself”, (2) “the subject of that work” and (3) its instruments. The soil, water, and other natural resources are the subjects of labour, while instruments of labour are tools and machines. He wrote many pages describing this process, in which “nature’s material [is] adapted by a change of form to the wants of man”.6

The fact that Marx thought in this way about the people/nature relationship does not, of course, mean that anyone should do so 150 years later. But I think that returning to this aspect of communism, and pulling aside more political ideas that have been built upon it (or buried it?), is a good way to understand what are usually referred to as “environmental” problems. If we accept not only that the products of labour are alienated under capitalist ownership of the means of production, but also that the labour process itself alienates people from their own nature, from each other, and from external nature, then “environmental” problems caused by

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4 ibid, pp. 65 and 67.
5 ibid, p. 90.
6 Marx, Capital vol. 1 (Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 173-176. These are just a few of the many passages in Capital where Marx considered the people/nature relationship. Marx also had this relationship in mind when he wrote his most well-known comment on issues of programme, the Critique of the Gotha Programme. Before the well-known and controversial passages about the transition to communism and his understanding of freedom, his very first objection to the German workers’ party programme is to a phrase that says “Labour is the source of all wealth and culture”. He responds that nature is “just as much the source of use values as labour”, and that “labour is itself only the manifestation of a force of nature”. (Marx, The First International and After (Penguin, 1974), p. 341.) Such passages show clearly that while Marx valued highly technological development, including industry, he understood the importance of a balanced, sustainable relationship between people and nature. They undermine the claim by some environmentalists that Marx was a monstrous “promethean”. Such issues are discussed in detail in John Bellamy Foster, Marx’s Ecology (Monthly Review Press, 2000).
humans can be understood, in the first place, as the results of the labour process as conducted under capitalism, labour which is “estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself”.

Putting it another way: labour (human interaction with nature, to provide the means of subsistence and the basis for culture), has been deformed, i.e. turned into alienated labour, through a succession of hierarchical societies, of which capitalism is the latest. This has also deformed relationships between human beings (which are increasingly conducted as the relationship of things, exchangeable commodities) and the relationship between humans and nature (which is conducted not in a human way, but according to the dehumanised logic of production and exchange under capitalism). The labour process under capitalism at one and the same time forces people to engage in tasks that bear no relation whatever to their human needs, in exchange for wages, and also causes e.g. excessive greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, or ruination of fresh water systems.

It is a commonplace that damage to the environment is caused by human activity. I would argue that such a statement conceals the main point: damage to the environment is caused in the first place by dehumanised activity, i.e. alienated activity carried out under a succession of hierarchical and increasingly alienated social relations, of which capitalism is the culmination. This is not a semantic argument. Unless the deformation of the people/nature relationship is understood this way, then people – instead of the dehumanised social relationships under which people live and work – will be seen as the problem. The only realistic way to address the rupture of the people/nature relationship is in the movement towards communism, i.e. the movement to overcome alienation.

3. What happened in the 20th century

Ask any communist about the most important events of the 20th century, and s/he might talk about political, social and economic events: the Russian and other revolutions and the resulting obstacles to, or interruptions of, the law of value; the two world wars; the post-war boom, the 1970s turning point and subsequent crises; “financialisation” and “globalisation”. Here I draw attention to gigantic changes in the labour process at the level of the interaction with nature, i.e. the way in which labour works upon the natural “subjects of labour” under the given social conditions. Two especially important changes were:

1. Industrial-scale production and use of energy, i.e. the invention and mass production of electricity; of power stations to produce electricity and the use of gas turbines in these power stations and in industry; and of motor cars. Between 1900 and 2000, there was a 15-fold increase in the amount of energy generated by hydrocarbon fuels, much greater than the four-fold increase in global population in the same period.7

2. The “second agricultural revolution”, distinguished by the industrial approach to farming and the widespread use of chemical fertilisers, leading to unprecedented levels of productivity and of food production.8

These changes were in turn crucial to the development of new branches of industry, of motor transport, of different types of cities (with skyscrapers as well as slums) – and, of course, the industrial-scale production and use of weapons of destruction (tanks, machine guns, aerial

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8 Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, A History of World Agriculture (Earthscan, 2006), from p. 375.
bombardment, and chemical, biological and nuclear warfare), which made it easier for wars and dictatorships to kill millions of people, instead of just tens or hundreds of thousands. Towards the end of the 20th century came the technological and communications revolution made possible by electronics, semiconductors and mass-produced computers. Furthermore, these changes gave rise to the greatest ever acceleration in world population growth. (As far as I understand it, such accelerations very often follow big technological improvements in agriculture, which in turn lead to the wider availability of cheap food.)

I believe that we need to rethink the history of capitalism in the 20th century, paying closer attention to these titanic shifts in the people/nature relationship. Some key points, arising from the changes mentioned above, are:

- The increase in the use of energy, particularly energy generated by hydrocarbon fuels, has been the single largest contributor to anthropogenic global warming, the single most obviously unsustainable human impact on the ecosystem.

- The development of industrial agriculture (i) resulted in a massive increase in agricultural productivity, which in turn pushed significant population increases; (ii) bankrupted small farmers, and proletarianised the rural population, driving people off the land (as smallholders) or out of the countryside entirely, particularly in Asia, on a scale that overshadowed the same process in 18th and 19th century Europe; and (iii) was the main factor creating the imbalance of the nitrogen cycle (a way in which the capitalist economy is transgressing natural limits (see below, section 4)); and (iv) contributed via fuel consumption to climate change, via deforestation to biodiversity loss, and to pressure on water resources (i.e. to other transgressions, or potential transgressions, of natural limits). At the same time, new imperialist relations were established in the world food trade, with land effectively expropriated from small farmers in the global south used to grow animal feed to support meat consumption in the richest countries.⁹

The result is that we arrived in the 21st century facing a gigantic series of ruptures in the people/nature relationship. As I argued above, these ruptures should be understood as the results not of human activity per se but of dehumanised, alienated activity (the labour process under capitalism). What appears as “environmental crises” is essentially the ruination caused by this labour process. It not only chews up and spits out hundreds of millions of people, violently urbanising and remaking social relations on an unprecedented scale, it also chews up and spits out natural resources unsustainably.

There is nothing new or unique about the unsustainable use of resources. Humans interacting with nature, in a succession of sets of social relations, frequently came up against the limits of natural resources on a local basis (e.g. by excessive hunting, deforestation, or excessive diversion of fresh water from rivers). There are many instances where, by their own actions, people exhausted local resources beyond the point at which they could adapt (given the prevalent social relations and level of technology). The result was that humans dispersed from, or died out at, a particular location. One well-known example is the Mayan civilization in central America: anthropologists consider that important reasons for its collapse included unsustainable use of freshwater resources, deforestation and a deterioration of soil quality due

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⁹ Philip McMichael, “Feeding the World: agriculture, development and ecology” in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds.), Socialist Register 2007: coming to terms with nature, pp. 170-194, is a summary of these issues by a socialist critic of “development” policies.
to agricultural intensification that the hierarchy failed to deal with. What is new and unique about the late 20th century is that the people/nature relationship began to be deformed on a truly global scale.

The expansion of the capitalist economy in the late 20th century has, while producing these ruptures in the people/nature relationship, at the same time transformed the working class and other oppressed classes. While socialist writers have rightly paid attention to the high level of urbanisation (the urban population grew to more than 50% of the whole some time in the first decade of this century), there seems to have been less consideration of the equally important emergence of a gigantic rural class of wage-workers, semi-peasants and temporary migrants to urban areas, numbering many hundreds of millions. An argument has been put forward that the distinction between workers and peasants, around which so much Marxist political thought in the 20th century revolved, has been qualitatively transformed and to a large extent left behind by history. This is surely an important theoretical issue to be considered.

A related issue is that of the demographic changes. The post-war economic boom and the “second agricultural revolution” led to a sharp increase in population, particularly in developing countries. In the last 20 years there followed a further burst of population growth (partly because the larger contingent of women born during the 1960s-1980s grew to child-bearing age), and the rapid expansion of the young population of developing countries. However there is now a further significant trend, which to my knowledge has not received much comment from Marxist writers: a steep fall in fertility rates (i.e. the number of births per woman) not only in rich countries, where this has been going on for some time, but across the developing world too. As far as I understand it, the reasons for this probably include (i) urbanisation (e.g. millions of young Chinese women quitting their villages for newly industrialised areas, instead of staying put and giving birth); (ii) changes in agricultural technology (the increase in yield per hectare e.g. in India means that many farmers can maintain output with less labour power, reducing the incentive to have large families); and (iii) perhaps most significantly, the widespread availability of cheap contraception has given young women the ability to exercise greater control over their fertility, i.e. the woman’s right to choose. The demographic consequence is that the world population is expected to peak in 2040, but perhaps the political consequences – springing from deep-going changes in the way that women participate in working-class life – will be more profound. Is this an intimation of what might happen to population trends in a communist society – i.e. where people have greater, and increasing, control over their personal destiny? Is it to do with other changes in family structure and the life lived by urban and rural workers? A combination? It is hard to think of more pressing questions for communists to consider.

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10 David Webster, in The Fall of the Ancient Maya (Thames & Hudson, London, 2002), stated that the “failure of the ancient agricultural system” has remained a convincing explanation of the collapse since Mayan archaeology began; he considers that the “worsening relationship of Maya populations to their agricultural and other resources” was exacerbated by “the destabilising effects of warfare and competition” and the “rejection of the ideology and institution of kingship” (pp. 327-328). Jared Diamond, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive (Penguin, 2005), surveys cases in which anthropologists and historians consider that the people/nature relationship broke down, leading to extinction or break-up of society locally. I found this useful despite his environmental determinism and reactionary acceptance of capitalist social relations.


12 Fred Pearce, Peoplequake (Eden Project, 2010), especially pp. 147-151 and 229-236.
4. Sustainability

A communist view of the people/nature relationship must include a concept of sustainability, i.e. the recognition that human activity, including economic activity, is carried out within certain natural limits. The problem with perceiving those natural limits, and knowing where they are, is that for a long time – at least since the beginning of settled agriculture 8-9000 years ago – people have carried out their economic activity predominantly in the framework of alienated social relations. All that history tells us is the points at which groups of humans living in those sets of social relations, and at specific levels of technological development, have come up against the natural limits. The way in which free humans, freely-associating producers, would cope with these limits is something that we can only imagine.

An overview of where the absolute natural limits are has been sketched by researchers at the Stockholm Environment Institute. They aimed to “define planetary boundaries within which we expect that humanity can operate safely”, and to estimate whether, and to what extent, such boundaries are being breached. They proposed nine boundaries: (a) seven for which they proposed limits: climate change; ocean acidification; stratospheric ozone; nitrogen cycle and phosphorus cycle; freshwater use; and biodiversity loss rate, and (b) two for which they did not determine limits: chemical pollution and aerosol loading. The researchers concluded: “We estimate that humanity has already transgressed three planetary boundaries: for climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, and changes to the global nitrogen cycle. Planetary boundaries are interdependent.”13 (There are of course numerous subjective judgements, e.g. about what it means to “operate safely”, made in keeping with scientific research practices.)

Previous ruptures of the people/nature relationship led e.g. to species of edible animal being driven from regions, freshwater resources and/or land being overexploited to the point where they could not be used, or urban environments being polluted to the extent that life and health was endangered. The Stockholm researchers have argued that economic activities are already, on a global scale, unsustainably (i) threatening long-term and uncontrollable changes in the ecology, and in particular, excessive warming of the atmosphere (mainly due to fossil fuel consumption) leading to sea level rise and unmanageable change in farming conditions; (ii) disrupting the nitrogen cycle (i.e. large-scale use of fixation and use of nitrogen for fertilisers, and other industrial processes, resulting in e.g. soil acidification, eutrophication of water systems, etc), with long-term consequences for ecosystems and for agriculture; and (iii) accelerating biodiversity loss, with many complex consequences. Apart from these global effects, it is well documented that some natural resources, e.g. fresh water, are being consumed, in a sufficiently unequal manner and on a sufficient scale, as to create shortages internationally. In recognition of the impact of human activity on earth systems (i.e. the atmosphere, hydrosphere and pedosphere (soil), etc), geologists have argued for the classification of the present as the “anthropocene” epoch, as distinct from the holocene.14

Of course ruling capitalist elites are aware of the unsustainability of the economy. In the past they have used regulation to phase out processes by which the economy damaged itself, such as air pollution. They even had some success on an international scale, with the reduction in the 1990s in the emission of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) that damaged the ozone layer of the atmosphere. The danger of global warming, resulting from excessive hydrocarbon fuel use, is

a much more difficult problem, as it concerns the oil and coal industries that are so central to capitalist economy. The more far-sighted in the elite are arguing for the use of market mechanisms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (carbon taxes, etc), but this needs to be undertaken internationally to be successful, and the failure of the Copenhagen climate summit shows how difficult that is. There, narrow national interests prevailed.

In some discussions on the left, reference to the natural limits mentioned elicits accusations of “Malthusianism”. In my view this betrays a misunderstanding of Malthusianism. In brief summary, Thomas Malthus argued (i) that population increased geometrically while agricultural production increased only in a linear fashion (which turned out to be wrong; he had underestimated the potential of farming technology); (ii) that population growth, rather than capitalist social relations, was the cause of poverty; and (iii) that the state should not take measures to keep alive those impoverished by changes in the capitalist economy – which was the essential political point. Marx’s argument against Malthus was centred, first, on the idea that “surplus population” had to be understood within the specific historical context, i.e. this population was surplus to the capitalist economy, not surplus in any other sense, and, second, on an assault on his reactionary politics.

The argument that population growth is the cause of famine is just as reactionary now as it was in Malthus’s time. Modern day Malthusians take the social relations of capitalism as an unchangeable given, and attribute the pressure on natural resources to population growth alone. They are wrong, firstly, for the reason that Malthus was wrong: population grows not in a vacuum, but in a given set of social relations. They are also wrong, as he was, about the ability of agriculture to feed the population. UN agencies say that “the volume of food produced can not explain the persistence of hunger and undernourishment. [...] the volume of food produced is more than one and a half times what is needed to provide every person on earth with a nutritious diet”\(^1\). As for the growing population in the next 30-40 years, the Institution of Mechanical Engineers recently stated that the problems of feeding people “can often be solved using technologies that are either available today or are relatively close to being proven. [...] It is evident that the barriers to deploying solutions are not technological. The issue is often one of implementation.”\(^2\) The Institute calls on “society and political leaders” to act – that is, it recognises that the barriers to feeding people have to do with politics, economics and institutions, not with the natural limits.

And yet, while there is enough food, the numbers living with severe food shortages have grown, surpassing 1 billion in 2009 and estimated at 925 million in 2010.\(^3\) The phenomenon observed with horror by socialists in 19th-century Ireland, and analysed by Amartya Sen with respect to mid-20th-century Asian and African famines, persists: people die because of the

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\(^{15}\) There is a political context, i.e. Malthusian arguments are made not only by environmentalists, but also in support of a possible “green New Deal” or “green austerity measures”, that are among the solutions to the financial-economic crisis being proposed by ruling-class politicians. The author takes it for granted that among socialists and radicals such arguments are rejected. My concern here is to discuss our ideas, rather than being limited to knee-jerk reactions to our enemies’ ideas.

\(^{16}\) In *Capital* (vol. 1, chapter 25), Marx argues that “every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits alone”, and that under capitalism there operated a law of “relative surplus population”, i.e. the “industrial reserve army” of excess labour. (*Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 591-592 and 595).

\(^{17}\) Weis, *The Global Food Economy*, p.11.


\(^{19}\) “Global Hunger Declining, But Still Unacceptably High”, UN FAO press release, September 2010.
way wealth is distributed, even when there is sufficient food supply. “The people starve from sheer abundance” (Engels).\textsuperscript{20} And starvation exists side by side with over-eating in the rich countries. The 900-1000 million undernourished people are substantially outnumbered by 1600 million overweight people, of which 400 million suffer from obesity. The World Health Organisation projects that by 2015 there will be 2300 million overweight people, including 700 million who suffer from obesity. A recent OECD report described obesity in the rich countries as “one of the largest epidemics in the history of mankind”.\textsuperscript{21} The impoverished lives of obesity sufferers can in no way be compared to the horrible torture of undernourishment and starvation, but these first-world consumers must also be regarded as victims of the insanity of food distribution by the capitalist market. It simultaneously deprives hundreds of millions of the food they need to survive, while profiting from ramming down the throats of others unbalanced, unhealthy diets.

People interact with nature mainly through these obscenely distorted social relationships – inevitably, since most of the world population is now drawn into, and dependent upon, the capitalist market. Nevertheless, this interaction still takes place within the natural limits identified by the Stockholm researchers and other earth scientists. Rejecting Malthusianism, and recognising that the natural resources and the technology currently available could feed the world population comfortably, does not alter the natural limits within which humanity has to operate. Indeed it is the very same processes of production and consumption – under alienated capitalist social relations, via the relentless drive to expand energy-intensive industries and industrial agriculture, not to fulfil human needs but for profit – that give rise both to famine amid plenty, to starvation alongside obesity, and to the transgression of natural limits.

The challenge is to develop an understanding of how these processes work, both under capitalism and in the societies that preceded it. The difficulty in doing so is that, in the 8-9000 year period since the introduction of sedentary agriculture, the forces of production have combined in the production process predominantly through social relations of production that were alienated, and became more alienated over time. (By “forces of production”, I mean human labour, the natural subjects of labour and the instruments of labour (i.e. tools, machines etc) with which humans work on natural subjects.)

We can not artificially disentangle the history of productive processes, or technology, or population growth, from the social relations under which they developed; we can not plot in the abstract how people would have interacted with nature had they done it humanly, as opposed to through alienated social relations. We can strain our imaginations and try to guess how it might have been – how would agriculture have developed without the division between town and country? how would engineering have developed without war? how would the global south have developed without colonisation? etc – but that will probably not get us very far. Much more practical is to try to understand better how the succession of hierarchical societies, up to and including capitalism, deformed and distorted people’s relationship with nature and with each other. Such a study might better inform us about the movement towards communism, i.e. a movement that will overthrow the labour process, transform it into the


\textsuperscript{21} Franco Sassi, Obesity and the Economics of Prevention: Fit not Fat (OECD, 2010), p. 3.
creative activity of associations of free and equal producers for whom it will be only natural to engage with nature sustainably.

5. Overcoming alienation

In section 2 above, I argued that the only realistic way to address the rupture of the people/nature relationship is in the movement towards communism, i.e. the movement to overcome alienation. From the standpoint of Marx, Engels and other 19th century communists, this movement was the form taken by the movement from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. Are such ideas, learned by Marx from earlier enlightenment philosophers and integrated into his theory, any use in the 21st century? I believe they are.

To summarise, Marx and Engels saw the movement from the realm of necessity (i.e. the sphere of labour to meet material needs) to the realm of freedom (i.e. of activities above and beyond meeting those needs, including all types of cultural development, creativity and enjoyment) as the outcome of historical development. This is movement from merely eking out an existence to a more fulfilling way of living. Technology, which raised the productivity of labour and allowed necessities to be produced in fewer working hours, was seen as central. The big turning points in moving from necessity to freedom “so far”, Engels argued, were humans’ discovery of how to produce fire by friction, and the invention of the steam engine. With readers’ indulgence I now quote Marx at some length.

[T]he realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with the realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.

There are several things to note. First, Marx saw necessity as something determined historically, i.e. “physical necessity” expands. I take this to mean that what is considered “necessary” in the 21st century, e.g. types of clothing and habitation, or vaccinations against fatal diseases, was neither available nor thought necessary for much of human history.

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Second, Marx defines freedom as socialised people, i.e. people working together collectively, “rationally regulating their interchange with nature”. (To him this meant bringing nature “under their common control”. This sort of phrase that has long been quoted by some environmentalists to support claims that Marx was infatuated by the expansion of capitalist industry at the expense of humans’ ecological surroundings – although if one reads on in this and other passages of Capital it becomes clear that this is not the case.\footnote{See also footnote 7 above.}) Third, Marx did not see the realms of necessity and freedom as polar opposites, nor did he believe that necessity will die out one day and freedom start the next. He envisaged a transition: freedom can “blossom forth only with the realm of necessity as its basis”. Fourth, time free of necessary labour is essential; there can be no freedom without the shortening of the working day.

One further quotation from Marx is justified – from the Critique of the Gotha Programme, in which he describes the transition from necessity to freedom as something that will happen in communist society: “In a more advanced phase of communist society, when the enslaving subjugation of individuals to the division of labour and thereby the antithesis between intellectual and physical labour, have disappeared; when labour is no longer just a means of keeping alive but has itself become a vital need; when the all-round development of individuals has also increased their productive powers and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can society wholly cross the narrow horizon of bourgeois right and inscribe on its banner: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!”\footnote{Marx, The First International and After, p. 347. In one of the most profound pieces of Stalinist falsification, Marx’s slogan “to each according to his needs!”, was rewritten in the 1937 constitution of the Soviet Union as “to each according to his work”, turning its meaning completely upside down. This falsified version was also used in the constitution of Maoist China and in the propaganda of Castro’s Cuba.}

This vision of freedom was challenged by the anarchist Murray Bookchin, whose “social ecology” was one of the earliest attempts to integrate “environmental” questions into a communist view of social change. Bookchin argued that there is a self-created “first nature” and a human-influenced “second nature”; for Enlightenment thinkers up to and including Marx, “first nature is above all a ‘realm of necessity’, of inevitably scarce raw materials, that must be painfully extracted, reworked and finished into useful things by human labour”; this drama, “traced back to the biblical myth of ‘original sin’”, casts first nature in the role of a stingy, intractable and ungiving domain; 19th century political economy defined itself as the “study of scarce resources versus unlimited needs”; Marxism “radically secularised this myth and extended it to encompass the whole tableau of human history”; Marx saw the “domination of first nature” as the raison d’etre of social classes in history; this domination in turn required “the mobilisation of labour by a privileged, indeed supervisory, class of rulers and exploiters”; the exploitation of human beings in the process of production was thus for Marx “the earliest technical step towards bringing first nature into the service of humanity”.\footnote{Murray Bookchin, The Ecology of Freedom (AK Press, 2005), pp. 29-30, and also pp. 132-133.}

First, I think Bookchin misunderstood what Marx meant by “the realm of necessity”. It carries none of the sense imputed by Bookchin, that nature is stingy, ungriving, etc; “necessity” referred to the difficulties humans have had throughout their historical development in producing their own subsistence by their labour (i.e. interaction with nature). Clearly “necessity” implied material scarcity, and clearly Marx saw scarcity not only as something overcome by humans living in sets of hierarchical social relations, but also as
something that might be, and often was, exacerbated by those social relations. Second, it seems to me that by rejecting the notion that freedom involves overcoming necessity, Bookchin is removing the prospect of freedom from historical context and making it a matter of faith.

To my mind, the way that Marx imagined that society would cross the bridge from the “realm of necessity” to the “realm of freedom” remains compelling. Some of the things that have changed in the century and a half since these passages were written are discussed in section 3 above. I suggest some relevant conclusions as follows: (i) we have had repeated indications, through the (necessarily distorting) prism of history described, that once freed of the constraints of capitalist social relations, the productive forces (the natural resources available, the labour applied to them and the instruments used) are sufficient, not only to meet material needs, but to go beyond them into the “realm of freedom”; (ii) while there is clear evidence, discussed in section 4, that the capitalist economy is pressing dangerously up against absolute natural limits, this contradiction (between human activity and natural limits) is not absolute but relative, i.e. it arises under specific social relations and at a specific level of technological development, and can be resolved by social and technological change; (iii) the dramatic deformations of the people/nature relationship that began to accelerate in the late 20th century amount to obstructions to, and potential reversals of, the movement from necessity towards freedom.

How might we begin to imagine, in more detail, what the transition to communism might look like? Given the unprecedented technological leaps forward during the 20th century (on top of the transformation of energy provision and agriculture, there are antibiotics, modern medicine, computers, the internet, etc), it might be tempting to say simply that humanity’s productive forces have developed to the point where necessity can easily be left behind; all that remains is to put right the social relations of production; once capitalism has been vanquished, everything will be fine. In my experience, such assumptions were widespread in 20th century communist movements and organisations. The alienation that had to be overcome was seen as the alienation of the products of workers’ labour, rather than alienation in the deeper-going sense discussed above. The method was politically to break capitalist state power and replace it with workers’ state power; the Russian revolution of 1917 was the model. The knockout blow would be the expropriation of the means of production from their capitalist owners.

To the extent that such a view envisaged overcoming the deep deformations of the people/nature relationship, and of the relationship between people – most obviously, between men and women – this was often postponed until “after the revolution”. Such ideas may now be seen to have underestimated what was, is and will be involved in the movement towards communism. The Russian revolution and other 20th century revolutions showed that establishing “workers’ states” and expropriating capitalist property hardly began to approach the problem of overcoming alienation and remaking relationships between people, and between people and nature.

These issues will be solved, if at all, by great movements involving millions of people. What can usefully be said about them in notes such as these? It seems banal to write, e.g., that overcoming alienation will not happen overnight and will not be easy; or that the potential human creativity unlocked by this transformation will make possible not only the provision of material subsistence, but also the development of common wealth beyond the limits of our current imagination. Beyond such generalities, it seems useful to consider specific aspects of
the transition. In the next two sections, I consider (section 6) the character of material abundance, surely an integral part of the “realm of freedom”, and (section 7) at the communist programme.

6. Abundance

The transition to communism, from necessity to freedom, implies a transition from the scarcity that persists in the 21st century capitalist economy, to abundance. To my mind, communists mean by abundance, roughly, conditions under which people can develop their creativity, their culture, their personalities, their ways of enjoying life; preconditions for it are the production of the material necessities of life and, as Marx argued, the constant reduction of the working day, i.e. the time needed to produce necessaries. This abundance is not the same as “economic growth” and can not be equated crudely with the increase in material living standards measured in monetary terms.

With regard to abundance in production: a communist society will, presumably, first endeavour to take care of material necessity and then seek to, and be able to, develop production as creativity, rather than as work. This means something infinitely richer and better for people than “economic growth”. Technology will be redirected e.g. away from weapons construction, computerised finance, etc, towards satisfying human needs and underpinning human fulfilment. This abundance in production will be achieved within the natural limits – since clearly no sane group of human beings would consciously use up non-renewable resources (e.g. the atmosphere’s tolerance to carbon dioxide emissions, the soil’s tolerance to distortion of the nitrogen cycle, etc) in the course of production. Such forms of alienation in the people/nature relationship will be surpassed by the movement towards communism; future historians will recognise that such insane behaviour was made possible only by alienated social relationships under which production is for profit and not for use.

With regard to abundance in consumption, it is worth recalling a meeting at the Climate Camp, held in London in 2009. At a session on capitalism and global warming, David Harvie of Turbulence magazine, responding to environmental “minimalists” who advocate restraining consumption, said: “I am not going to go and say to a billion Chinese people, ‘you have to make do with less’. I am going to tell them: ‘you should have more’. [Shocked outrage from a quarter of the audience.] The question is: more of what?”

My answer to “more of what?”, which I think is close to Harvie’s own answer, would be along these lines: 1. The basic means of subsistence (far from guaranteed to all Chinese.

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28 “Economic growth” is measured by economists in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), an indicator that includes all output, regardless of whether it is destructive weaponry, useless financial instruments, luxuries of dubious value, or goods to satisfy people’s basic needs. For capitalism there is no fundamental distinction between these types of output, since what matters is not the satisfaction of needs or the development of people, but the expansion of the economy for its own sake and the sake of those who profit from it. Unfortunately some writers, including some who call themselves socialists, oppose to “degrowth” arguments popular among environmentalists the imperative for “economic growth” as though this has meaning independently of the capitalist social relations under which it takes place. See for example the Spiked web site. Some of its writers have embraced a one-sided concept of “prosperity”, dependent on “economic growth” and neatly summed up in the title of a recent book: Daniel Ben-Ami, Ferraris For All: In Defence of Economic Progress. Ben-Ami has seriously singled out the Ferrari, rather than transformative technologies that improve people’s lives (e.g. the internet, or penicillin manufacture) or enhance enjoyment (e.g. digital music recording) as “a potent symbol of economic progress”. This seems to me a horribly barren and depressing view of prosperity. (Quote from http://www.squaremile.com/blogs/25/Love-it-or-hate-it-the-Ferrari-is-a-symbol-of-economic-prosperity.html.)
families in 2011) must be secured for people in China and everywhere else, which can be done more than adequately with the existing level of technology. 2. People will become truly wealthy – i.e. they will lead full, fruitful and creative lives – as consumption is freed from the constraints of necessity and from the deformities of commodification. Abundance will come to be considered as the ability both to produce and consume through unalienated social relationships. Once embarking on a movement towards such an end, people in China and elsewhere will think very differently about what abundance is – in ways that it is hard for us, living under capitalism, to visualise.

Consumption, as well as production, has been drastically distorted by alienated social relationships. In the 20th century, under capitalism, technology has been developed that could ensure subsistence for the whole human population; instead, as discussed above, undernourishment and epidemic obesity exist side by side. The distorted development of consumerism – e.g. the sale of hamburgers, sweets, etc, to better-off workers in the global north, and to their children, in quantities that are damaging to their health and have produced the obesity epidemic – is as integral to 20th century capitalism as starvation, rural impoverishment in developing countries, etc. The development of mass car ownership is another example: in the USA from the 1930s onwards, the motor manufacturers, with the support of the state, very deliberately cultivated a one-car-plus-per-family culture, leading to working class families leading lives that on one level may have been more comfortable, but on other levels were more isolated. Capitalism needed them not only as wage slaves but also as consumers of products. The commodification of housing in the rich world – leading to a culture in which millions of people work long hours in dreary jobs, simply in order to meet mortgage payments – is surely another example.

I am not attributing the world’s ills to consumerism. I am not saying workers shouldn’t have cars, houses or hamburgers, nor belittling the real meaning of such possessions to working class people, and I hope I am not underestimating the alienated ideas of status and pride in possessions that dominate in capitalist society. But the crude idea, still embraced by some on the left, that abundance can be understood one-dimensionally – i.e. in terms of workers’ living standards measured in dollars, cents, cars, houses and hamburgers – is not good enough. Abundance is something that will be achieved only by transcending the starvation-and-obesity economy, by crossing the bridge from necessity, i.e. by transforming human relationships and overcoming alienation. It is therefore about enriching people’s lives – which, while it must be underpinned by the means of subsistence being available to all, will be about the flowering of human creativity. I am confident that this communist future will leave behind the impoverished ideas of “happiness” and “abundance” cultivated among workers in rich countries under capitalism. People certainly won’t need me to tell them either that life is about much more than cars, houses and hamburgers, or to work out how to live such a life.

7. The communist programme

There is no widespread agreement in labour and social movements about what the communist programme is or whether it is needed. Since the reversal of the Russian revolution deeply divided workers’ movements about what communism was, and how it might be achieved, this issue has been unresolved in practice. The need to develop a programme is not accepted by all communists: for example, the idea of “communication” proposed by some left communist

groups rejects the idea of a transition period and, by implication, the need for a programme. One writer on “communisation” envisages a movement by means of which society will be reconstituted as a “nebula of local initiatives”, with “absolute priority given to the relationship between individuals and to the activity rather than its results”. “The communisation of society unfolds as a seizing of capitalist property and using it for the needs of the struggle with no accounting, as production without productivity, like consumption without necessity.”

The “communisation” idea has developed, out of a critique of ideas of working-class self organisation, and in opposition to the ideas of Trotskyists and others that the political overthrow of capitalism will give rise to a “workers’ state” that will administer and oversee the transition towards communism. I think the “workers’ state” concept has been found wanting, along with the vanguardist ideas about the “revolutionary party” with which it is often allied. But I can not conceive of the overcoming of alienation as an overnight transformation, or something automatic, and therefore I think a programme is needed.

People, working together collectively (and not marshalled by a “workers’ state” or “led” by a party), will undertake the transformation consciously. They will take matters into their own hands and overthrow the illusion that some external authority is required to tell them what to do. Not only will this process involve accounting of resources, human and natural, but this will be done for the first time in ways that modern technology (the internet, etc) clearly allows, but is impossible under capitalist social relations. A communist programme is, to my mind, not a political programme to be implemented by governments or parties, but the possible/proposed outlines of such a future conscious mass communist movement. Some elements that might be included in such a programme are:

- An audit of natural and human resources. I have argued above that there is no inherent reason why processes of production and consumption need transgress natural limits, but this tension will constantly be resolved in practice. The transition to communism implies that production and consumption will dissolve into each other. The highly complex global division of labour that marshalls the lives of billions and distorts their relationship with each other and with nature will give way to new types of creative activity. If this is to be a collective undertaking, carried out over time, then an accurate audit of the natural resources available will be needed to inform decisions about the best means of ensuring subsistence, the possibilities for new forms of productive/ consumptive activity, etc. Information is power (and anti-power); an audit is good information to guide collective action.

- On the basis of such an audit, collective coordination of what needs coordinating (including management of natural resources that are currently impacted by the capitalist world economy) and decentralisation of everything that can be done locally. If such an audit shows, as it probably would, that excessive carbon emissions, global warming and the consequent sea level rise and threat to farming is the most damaging consequence of the distortion of people’s relationship with nature, then people would be able collectively to adjust their productive and consumptive activity accordingly. People need not an authority to tell them how to do this, but the belief that they can do this without any authority.

- Collective discussion and decision about effective deployment of the gigantic human and natural resources that would be released by the demise of wasteful, pointless and harmful.

30 Bruno Astarian, “Crisis Activity and Communisation” (www.troplain.fr). “Communisation” is discussed in several texts of the End Notes collective (http://endnotes.org.uk/).
branches of the capitalist economy (finance, advertising and marketing, security, arms manufacture, you can make your own list).

- The breaking-down of the division between town and country. This point, included in the Communist Manifesto as its authors witnessed the driving of the agricultural producers off the land and the forced proletarianisation in 19th century Europe, has added force today. It is a key not only to undoing the alienated relationships implied by (town-based) wage labour, but also to undoing the other forms of alienation produced in the course of the industrialisation and commodification of agriculture, including the threat to the nitrogen cycle posed by the urban/rural divide, the large-scale use of chemical fertilisers etc. None of this implies an anti-technological “return to the land” or a reduction of productivity in subsistence foods production. People are collectively clever enough to work out how to maintain and increase that productivity while simultaneously addressing the crisis of the nitrogen cycle and undoing the alienating damage of late-capitalist urban life.

Future research and discussion

I have tried to outline what I see as a communist approach to the people/nature relationship, but left many issues unanswered. I have suggested that the changing character of that relationship needs to be integrated into our understanding of the history of the 20th century; and that other issues need to be researched, e.g. the transformation of the working class and peasantry and the possibility that the division between them has been superceded; the role of cheap food in the dynamics of class relations in the past three decades, in the present and in future. I have argued that an understanding of alienation, as alienation of people from nature and from each other, and not just as the alienation of workers from the products of their labour, needs to be developed as one of the bases of a communist programme. The importance of such issues hardly needs to be underlined, and obviously working on them is a collective task.

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