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The traumatic limit to realizing Nature

Informing Žižekian ecology through a consideration of eco-Marxist theory and the conception of the metabolic rift as the traumatic limit to understanding ecology.

Greg Dash, Aberystwyth University, Wales.

In Astra Taylor's film *Examined Life*, Žižek stands by piles of accumulated rubbish – the place that he suggests we should feel at home. This is the site of the excess of our consumption and the place that represents the true ecological state of the planet. The solution to ecological crisis for Žižek's lies in a confrontation with our ideological perceptions of nature and the environment, and the re-politicization of environmental activism. Nature, as it resides within the Real for Žižek, will always remain inaccessible, unknowable and uncontrollable. The solution to a true ecology thus lies in recognizing the indeterminacy of 'Nature' allowing for ecological solutions to be developed that accommodate this Lack. However through the introduction of eco-Marxist theory and the concept of the 'metabolic rift' I wish to offer a political and traumatic limit to understanding that functions posteriori to Symbolic castration but nevertheless presents itself as a more immanent threat in times of ecological crisis and provides the ecological project with explicit political agency. This work will begin

with a review of Žižekian thought on ecology before presenting some of the key ideas I wish to introduce.

i. Nature Doesn't Exist

“Part of our daily perception of reality is that this disappears from our world. When you go to the toilet, shit disappears. You flush it. Of course rationally you know it's there in canalization and so on, but at a certain level of your most elementary experience, it disappears from your world. But the problem is that trash doesn't disappear”

The solution to ecological crisis for Žižek's lies in a confrontation with our ideological perceptions of nature and the environment. As a terror of violating nature and self imposed austerity practices becoming increasingly commonplace, Žižek's argues ecology has the potential to function as a new opium of the people: “[R]eplacing the declining religion, it takes over the old religion's fundamental function of having an unquestionable authority that can impose limits.” (2008). Here Nature appears as a symbolic tapestry of meaning, held together with quilting points (or *point de caption*) such as ‘climate change’, ‘bio diversity’ and ‘CO2’, where the meaning of nature is inherently slippery and constantly shifting (this analysis has been followed by Norton in his work *Ecology without nature*). This argument resonates with Žižek's assertion that ‘Nature doesn't exist’, as it emerges as the central ‘empty element’ to serve as the underlying organizing principle between of a series of ordinary signifiers (Žižek, 2001), as a plurality of fantasies and desires (the dream of a balanced climate, the ideal of sustainable development and the fear of the revenge of Nature should we interfere too much with it's balanced ‘naturalness’) and thus becomes the Lacanian objet petit a around which we shape our drives to mask the lack upon which our own subjectivity is based (Žižek, 1999).

In the longing for Nature to function as the big Other offer the promise of security, this fantasy appears in a call to restore a lost harmony with Nature, attempting to fixate a stable meaning on what Nature ‘is’ and presenting it as a fetishized Other that functions as a symptom through which desire is expressed. Despite this, as Nature resides within the Real it remains constantly out of reach, and the fantasy is required to be continually renewed and updated to accommodate the ever-present Lack.

Thus, for Žižek the solution to exposing the limits of ideological conceptions of Nature lies within the piles of rubbish surrounding him in Taylor's film. As the objectification of the lack within Nature (literally representing the remainder, the left

over pieces that do not fit within ideological conceptions of Nature as harmonious, beautiful and organic), he suggests that only by traversing this fantasy and recognizing the lack in our idealized concepts can we start to create a true ecology. The possibility is then opened up for Nature itself to be recognized as unknowable, and the rejection of the 'big Other' allows for the recognition that the concept of Nature as it can be known is an ideological construct of the subject – and thus the possibility is opened up for an authentic ecology that is without a conception of Nature bound by mysticism, conservatism and fear. Only by incorporating the excesses of human consumption into our conceptions of ecology, and rejecting Nature itself can we build a sustainable system that both permits the development of scientific advances without fear of persecution (such as GM crops, biotechnology, etc.) and resist the opportunities Capital presents to satisfy our moral desire to act through environmentally 'ethical' consumption (in which acts of charity rather than being beneficial only allowing for a continuation of a situation which perpetrates poverty and prevents true action). Nature is thus presented as something (or better expressed, noThing) that forever fails to be understood in its complete form, residing within the Real and thus remaining unknowable, unexpected and uncontrollable. His statement that 'Nature doesn't exist' may be better written as 'Nature (as we think we know and understand it) doesn't exist.'

ii. The traumatic limit to an effective ecology

In Žižek's account what is referred to as Nature resides within the Real and thus is inaccessible to the Subject due to symbolic castration. I wish to present an alternative approach that locates the limit to understanding not within the symbolic register, but rather within the political, locating the site of alienation within the arrangements of socio-metabolic organization (or 'something called capitalism' [Swyngedouw, 2011]) by drawing upon eco-Marxist thought and Marx's writing on Ecology as developed by some who consider that Marx was the originator of the ecological world-view (Foster, 2000; Burkett, 1997). However, indeed this approach does not reject the very limit of understanding Nature as residing within the symbolic register, but rather relocates the more immediate limit of understanding to the political.

Four major views of Marxist ecology dominate the literature: anti-ecological and indistinguishable from soviet ecology (Clark 1989; Ferkiss 1993); pro-technological, believing that the problems of ecology would be addressed through the 'abundance' of post-capitalist society (Giddens 1981; Nove 1987; Redcliff 1984;

Benton 1989; McLaughlin 1990; Eckersley 1992; Dele'age, 1994; Goldblatt 1996); that Marx provided an analysis of nature that functioned separate from his core analysis (O'Connor 1998); and those that have argued that Marx provided an analysis of nature that is bound within and intrinsically to the rest of his thought (Parsons 1977; Perelman 1993; Mayumi 1991; Lebowitz 1992; Altvater 1993; Foster 1997; Burkett 1997). This work seeks to follow from Foster's work on ecology through an analysis of later works in which Marx provides a systemic treatment of soil ecology, organic recycling and sustainability – and in which a conceptual framework emerges that offers a 'metabolic rift' between production and natural conditions of human existence (Foster, 1999). These ideas can be linked back to Marx's writings on soil fertility.

By the 1860s, when writing *Capital*, Marx became increasingly aware of the unstable nature of capitalist agriculture due to the widening crisis on soil fertility depletion. Rather than alleviating the crisis, enhanced agricultural technique was beginning worsen conditions; and scientific developments allowed for both an increase in synthetic fertilizers whilst highlighting the decline in the natural fertility of the soil. During this second agricultural revolution, Marx became deeply interested in the work of German chemist Justin Von Liebig who identified issues that linked pollution in cities to the declining conditions in soil fertility. In his *influential Letters on the Subject of the Utilization of the Municipal Sewage* (1865) Liebig argued that organic recycling to return the nutrients contained in sewage to the soil was an indispensable part of a rational urban-agricultural system. Indeed Marx notes in *Capital*, "to have developed from the point of view of natural science the negative, i.e., destructive side of modern agriculture, is one of Liebig's immortal merits" ([1867] 1976, p. 638). Marx would again refer to Liebig's findings in Volume 3 of *Capital*, in his discussion on agriculture and the role capitalism plays in both impoverishing the soil and worker:

Large landed property reduces the agricultural population to an ever decreasing minimum and confronts it with an ever growing industrial population crammed together in large towns; in this way it produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of the social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself. The result of this is a squandering of the vitality of the soil, which is carried by trade far beyond the bounds of a single country. Large-scale industry and industrially pursued large-scale agriculture have the same effect. If they are originally distinguished by the fact that the former lays waste and ruins the labour-power and thus the natural power of man, whereas the latter does the same to the natural power of the soil, they link up in the later course of development, since the industrial system applied to agriculture also enervates

the workers there, while industry and trade for their part provide agriculture with the means of exhausting the soil. (Marx, 1981, p. 949–50)

In this passage Marx identifies a 'rift' in the 'metabolism' between society and the earth associated with the simultaneous growth of both large-scale industry and large-scale agriculture under capitalism. Following Liebig, he argues that long distance trade in food and products result in the alienation that occurs during this metabolic rifting to become that much more 'irreparable' (Foster, 1999).

Throughout *Capital*, Marx considers that alienation of people from their natural conditions of their existence emerges as a product of the capitalist system. The separation of town and country and an increase in the polarization of social class were inseparable from what he referred to as the 'differentia specifica' of capitalist private property – the fact that it was built on a systemic alienation from all forms of naturally based need. Rather than servicing natural needs, under capitalism the regime is tailored to the search for exchange value (profit) and this constitutes the motive for production. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* this alienation is described as one of four that emerges from capitalist society (an individuals estrangement from nature, from the products of her labor, from other people, and from herself). Nature is intrinsically linked to labour, as without the 'sensuous external world' nothing can be created; however as the products of an individuals' labour are expropriated, nature becomes reduced to a means of subsistence. This alienation, according to Marx, "estranges man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside of him, from his spiritual essence, his human essence. Every self-estrangement of man from himself and nature is manifested in the relationship he sets up between other men and himself and nature". Or, as Horkheimer later noted, "The history of man's efforts to subjugate nature is also the history of man's subjugation by man." (2004, p. 72). The natural world is thus removed further and further from society and returned only in a mediated, commodified form. As these mediated forms become products to be bought and sold and the only access the individual may have to nature, despite the individuals attempts to experience nature (and repair the rift) – in commodity, their alienation can only be increased: the less you are, the more you have; the less you express your own life, the greater is your externalized life – the greater is the store of your alienated being (Marx, 2012) - and thus nature appears as lost and confronts humanity as an alien, unknown entity.

Just as the symbolization of space of the tribes in Levi-Strauss's example demonstrated the unsymbolizable social relations of the village, the metabolic rift in the current work seeks to offer the first hurdle to be overcome in confronting ideological and depoliticized conceptions of Nature. The ideological fantasies that bind and generalize conceptions of Nature are found to be inherently linked to economic conditions, as the constructive role of the subject in formulating these conceptions become increasingly alienated and remerge as Other. The process of confronting the Lack within conceptions of Nature becomes one not of confronting and accommodating the excess of consumption, but rather becomes tied into the larger political project – just as counteracting the alienating effect of capitalism cannot be resolved within the constraints of the current economic system, but is rather confronted through ideological critique. Just as ideology masks the antagonism in the conditions for the alienated Subject, the rift that alienates the Subject from its natural existence is sutured through ideological conceptions of nature that offer solutions stripped of their political context as they emerge within the limits of the context of capitalism (eg. the need to recycle, the desire to holiday in 'unspoilt' lands [and possibly the need to reject Nature itself?]). By locating the site of critique at the metabolic rift (the traumatic limit to understanding Ecology) an analysis may be undertaken on the conditions that result in a Subject alienated from their role in the construction of Nature (both materially and as an abstract) and seeks to make explicit that the environmental problem is inherently political.

Conclusion

The current argument seeks to proffer a formulation for current conceptions of Nature that are bound to economic and social conditions. Indeed the unaccountability of the Real remains an ever-present threat and must still be accounted for – but the Gaze originates not from the Real of Nature, but from the Real itself. Nature (a word that functions as a stand in for something that is alien to us) as an extension of the subject confronts the alienated subject as Other and the role of the Subject in constructing and being constructed by this relationship is masked in this alienation. Ideology that seeks to account for and overcome this alienation seek to offer a solution in apolitical terms such as recycling, market dependent technologies or even through the proposition of the rejection of Nature as Real.

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