

Value and animals: A reply to "Towards a Marxist animalism"

by Frank Jäger

This text is a comment upon a proposed re-working of Marx's value theory to include non-humans. Since essays about value theory are usually written in a dense style that proves hard to decipher for laypersons, I've tried my best to word my arguments in an accessible way, and I apologize beforehand to all Marxist readers for any simplistic representations that I nonetheless deem necessary. The essay is basically split into two arguments: (1) Why is Marx's theory of value 'anthropocentric'? (2) How can value theory be utilized from an environmentalist perspective? As such, this article is both a criticism of what I perceive as a misconception of value theory, and how a better understanding of it can enhance environmentalist critiques of capitalism at the same time. Special thanks go to Khawaga for his insightful contributions to the piece.

When Marx wrote *Capital*, his principal aim was to clarify what sets capitalism apart from other forms of human society. In doing so, he frames exploitation outside of moral categories. For him exploitation was not simply a question of right or wrong, but an issue of our subjugation to the social relations of production; its essence being capital. Importantly this social relation is reproduced in our everyday lives and perpetuated by our behaviors because all activity must necessarily occur and confirm to these social relations. We do so both consciously AND unconsciously: we know that we can buy anything with money (and we do, and have to do so, on a daily basis), but we don't know why it works that way. In explaining the unconscious side of our social relations, Marx points to processes that vanish behind their results, hiding in plain sight the reasons, for example, why our bosses get richer while we struggle to make ends meet, hate the daily grind of our soul-sucking jobs, and feel like we just want to call in sick again.

At the heart of these processes is value. Marx characterizes the substance of value as labor; all commodities are exchangeable precisely because they are products of labor. Of course we can't simply go to a store and trade our old shoes for a new shirt: we need money as an intermediary. We can sell some stuff, and buy something else in return. It goes without saying that this is not enough to get by, and since money doesn't grow on trees, we have to work for a living. At the same time, we work solely for our employers for a sizable part of our working day: our wages mask this fact as a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, and we are told to get a second job or try harder if we don't earn enough. Marx called this the commodification of labor power, the necessity to work for someone else because we have nothing else to sell.

At first, exploitation may appear to be about your working conditions, how much you get paid, the denial of rights, or a general sense of powerlessness in the face of daily drudgery. For Marx, however, exploitation has a specific meaning that is directly tied

to the separation of the working day into a necessary and surplus part. The necessary part is the time of the working day that we work for ourselves, and the surplus part belongs to the capitalist in the form of surplus value. Exploitation, then, rests not on the defrauding of the workers since their labor power is compensated by a wage, the height of which correlates to the value which is necessary to reproduce their labor power. No matter how high the wage, exploitation rests solely on the length of the surplus part of your working day, a fact that remains beyond superficial observation.

This is where Jon Hochschartner's argument comes in: Marx's theory does not acknowledge the exploitation of animals. For Marx, animals merely transfer their value to the product, but they cannot create value as humans do. However, according to Jon, animals do create value and are thus also exploited in capitalism. They contribute to the value of commodities but are not compensated for their use of labor power; instead, they are treated like slaves whose labor power is sold once and for all, with their bodies as a necessary appendage. He therefore deems it necessary to amend Marx's theory to take this into account.

Jon's argument fails to recognize that Marx did not arbitrarily attribute the ability to create value to humans alone out of an outdated worldview. In fact, one may boldly question the validity of labor-based value to begin with. Aren't we paying for things because we, as individuals with our own needs and tastes, cherish them? Is value not simply a measure of how much we are ready to pay for it? Just look at how eBay works. Don't animals also produce tools? So, does value exist for them?

If we dig deeper into Marx's theory, we will find an often overlooked key part to the role of labor which had proponents and detractors go off on tangents ever since. We will find that value is not simply a theory of price or the mechanisms of exploitation. It plays a central role in Marx's theory of a specific self-regulating social system, and how it distinguishes itself from other forms of human society.

Before we can tackle the question of whether animals can create value, we need to look at the distinction of human and animal social relations because that's where the decisive reason for Marx's alleged anthropocentrism lies.

In most arguments surrounding the human/animal distinction, you'll find the views that self-awareness, rationality, or the development of language is what sets both apart. For Marx, however, the difference lies in their social activity. While both animals and humans may produce the things they need to live, humans, by "producing their means of subsistence[,] are indirectly producing their actual material life." But this production (and consequently, reproduction) of material life is not only present in a purely physical way, like keeping your tools up to shape, your buildings intact and the Internet running. We also reproduce our social relations, preserving the social preconditions of production as its results. In *Capital*, Marx used this example: Because

we are free laborers who do not possess property of our own, we are compelled to sell our labor-power to the capitalists. But at the end of the workday, when the wage is paid, we are still but property-less laborers, and the capitalist still owns the means of production. Ending up in the same situation both found themselves in at the start, this cycle potentially repeats itself ad infinitum. (From this example alone it is apparent that Marx's human/animal distinction does not actually serve to place humans above animals, contrary to many other proposed arguments. It is a purely objective criterion, without an inherent moral judgment. You could even use this argument the other way around to say that a pack of wolves lives a better life than an urban family because they don't need to work a 9 to 5 job, get bullied in school or suffer from domestic violence.)

In such a constellation, human social relations exist as something outside of them. But "for the animal, its relation to others does not exist as a relation". They do not have divisions among their species, no property, no states, no money, and no religion. While animals form packs, play together, hunt in groups, etc., they do not form complex social systems of interdependent processes that give rise to irrationalities and mystifications as humans do in capitalism. What makes value, the root of these phenomena, so peculiar is that it characterizes itself as a social relation between things - and to uncover what this means, one has to look at what distinguishes capitalism from earlier forms of human society, and how this distinction is socially reproduced.

So, as a short answer to (1) we can say the following. Why animals are treated as property in capitalism is directly related to the question of what property is and what role it plays in capitalism. But we cannot look to the role of animals because they do not perpetuate their relations beyond their own individual existence. Thus we cannot situate them in an analysis of a human social system that, at the deepest level, is all about how different properties and contradictions of this system emerge from a specific interrelation of social action and structure that is reproduced on all increasingly more concrete levels.

Since all the surface phenomena of capitalist society, like overproduction, the state, the 'commodification of everything', economic crises, social isolation, technological progress and its impacts on our environment and nature (what economists like to call 'externalities') are indirectly linked to the configuration of social and individual labor from which value emerges, and since this configuration is a social relation which happens exclusively between humans, animals do not appear in the foundations of what is often mistakenly called 'labor theory of value'.

The historically specific configuration of social and individual labor is established (and reproduced) by exchanging commodities. Each commodity is the product of a specific, useful kind of labor, like sewing, woodwork, etc. (This also includes, contrary to

common misconception, 'immaterial' labor such as care work, child-rearing, paperwork, education, and so on.) Each of us needs what another offers for exchange because of the division of labor - we cannot produce all the stuff we need ourselves, or at least, it's not an option for most people. These products, what Marx called use-values, are produced individually, that means at a quantity of expected, and not *de facto*, social need for a given commodity, under pressure of competition. These commodities-to-be need to prove themselves as values in the act of exchange which is an ex post social cohesion; the point is that things act as the bearer of social relations because these relations are now mediated by objects. It is at the moment of exchange that concrete labor acquires the status of abstract or social labor, or, to put it differently, we as humans only come into contact with one another in the sphere of exchange. But this whole thing only comes into being when the immediate producers are separated from their means of production and subsistence.

This is not immediately apparent to us. The process vanishes behind its results, and it appears as if markets, the pursuit of wealth, social stratification, and the Hobbesian war all against all, are part of human nature. At the same time, the objects and relations we produce present themselves to us as an external force. The machine appears as a devourer of life, the workplace as a temporary prison, the homeless woman down the street as someone who didn't want to go anywhere in life. This is what Marx called fetishism: Social relations that appear as if they were not of our own doing.

To include animals in this would mean that they also suffer from these delusions, from alienation and illusions of grandeur in their search of the good life. It would also mean that they subjugate *themselves* just as humans do (a point no anti-speciesist or animal rights activist would ever make), as value is a product not of a parasite capitalist, but of everyday life, our own actions within a structure we cannot individually overcome. It would also pose the question: Do animals have revolutionary agency? Only subjects that can break up the constituting elements of social systems can change it.

Now that animals are outside the scope of *Capital*, how can it serve as a foundation for environmentalist concerns? In my very humble opinion, the lasting destruction of nature is one of the stronger arguments against capitalism. The rise of the welfare state and parliamentary democracy have perfected the impersonal domination already inherent in the market, where titles of nobility account for nothing, and money rules all. Higher living standards and the illusion of democratic participation make the old points of criticism, the oppression and impoverishment of an ever-growing number of people, appear baseless. The illusion of 'we are all middle class now' reigns supreme.

So, what does value have to do with environmentalism? Since value is directly linked to labor time, and technological progress reduces the time necessary to produce

something, more and more can be produced during the same time frame. At the same time, the value of the individual product drops, making commodities cheaper on the market. The capitalist has thus found a way to undercut competition. But the competition will try the same and invest too, setting in motion an investment spiral - called accumulation of capital in Marx's terminology - until the moment that capital can no longer make a profit big enough to keep this spiral going. The time of economic crisis has come.

Unless one believes in the inevitable self-implosion of capitalism forced upon it by a lack of profits (as put forward by Grossman and much of the Second International), capitalism as a system only knows crises as an inner boundary. But this boundary, the surfacing contradiction of use-value and value, only serves to temporarily reign in the excesses of the system. It is a self-regulatory mechanism that has devastating effects on the working class and on nature but nonetheless serves the chief purpose of keeping capitalism alive, starting the next cycle of accumulation.

Until capitalism itself is abolished, environmental destruction is hard-wired into its structure. Constant overproduction and over-accumulation of capital - an overproduction of commodities and machinery that can no longer soak up enough surplus labor - are processes that happen behind our backs. It is easy to imagine the wastefulness and depletion of resources that result from this, as much of what we produce either goes straight into the trash can (for example, food that could not be sold) or remains useless because no one actually needs it. But try as we may, we cannot change this as long as competition, exchange, and the commodification of labor power, in short, value, persist.

It's not far-fetched to see the end of the line for these self-perpetuating and destructive processes if they are allowed to keep going: The irreversible exhaustion of natural resources, the extinction of entire species, and the destruction of much of our material base of life in nature. Green capitalism is an illusion. But only we humans can change this.

"Man lives on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature." - Karl Marx, 1844 manuscripts