

Marxist Commodity Fetishization Encoded in Illusory Environmental Policy: Exacerbating the Global North-South Divide

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Background: The Global North-South Divide and Climate Change

This geographic age of the Anthropocene is defined by advancement of human industry in molding the era within which we exist. Marx (1847) critiques this capitalist system when he states in *The Communist Manifesto* that “there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity — the epidemic of overproduction” (p.7). This phenomenon is obvious in the contemporary age of global inequality: wherein there is an overproduction of food while world hunger remains an issue. We live in a time where 1% of people own 82% of global wealth (Oxfam, 2018). This inequality is based in modern practices of consumption and is fundamentally linked to the most recent manifestation of capitalism’s shortcomings: the looming shroud of global climate change. Currently, an estimated 60-80% of climate impacts come from the household consumption of goods and services (Jacobs, 2016). Earth is hurtling towards climate catastrophe as a direct result of the epidemic of overproduction; an epidemic that has evolved into modern neoliberalism. This crisis, Marx would believe, is the inevitable result of the perverse pleasures that households receive from consumption. The capitalist structures embedded in unchecked neoliberalism have permitted this extreme level of consumption. This consumption must be harvested from *somewhere*, and so it has occurred as the despoliation, or plundering, of nature (Mittal & Gupta, 2017).

Instrumentalizing the environment for the sake of unimpeded economic growth goes hand in hand with the exploitation of human labour (Stewart, 2017). Marx dictates in *The Communist Manifesto* that

the history of society has progressed as revolutionary class conflicts, which assumed different forms in different epochs (1847). This class antagonism can be extrapolated to the relationship between the bourgeois that comprise the Global North and the proletariat that comprise the Global South. In the context of this paper, the Global North is understood to mean the developed nations of North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia while the Global South encompasses the developing nations in South America, Africa, and Asia. The ecological crisis, foreshadowed by Marx in his critique of overproduction, is founded on the impoverishment of the global South while the planet’s resources are consumed by its more affluent inhabitants in the North. The Global South predominantly exports primary resources while the Global North exports manufactured products (Parikh, 1994), and it is this very dynamic that Marx (1847) warns the reader about when he says “it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of Bourgeois” (p.6). While literature has surpassed the derisive manner with which he refers to the Global South as barbarians, this dependence is an important relationship to note. In *Capital*, Marx (1867) strengthens this claim by stating that “personal dependence characterizes the social relations of production” (p.4). The transnational corporations based in the Global North are able to fetter the Global South through commodity chains that provide to the Global North’s consumers. The coffee that we drink, the valuable minerals and metals in our technology, and the labour that creates the clothes on our backs are all representative of the manner in which the North is able to exploit both the Southern

natural resources and labour. It does so by setting prices that do not reflect the material costs of production, but instead the social costs of production (Foster, 2019). Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism", loosely understood to be the false view that relationships between people in a capitalist society are boiled down to social relationships between objects, is crucial to note in this context. The Global North is capable of ignoring exploitative labour because the fetishization of consumed commodities shifts the attention to the value of the object being consumed. In addition, it is pertinent to be mindful of the fact that climate change has more significant impacts on the livelihood of those in the Global South. Southern Nations at risk of increased hurricanes, droughts, and flooding are prone to longer-lasting aftereffects as the weak infrastructure and agriculture-sustenance systems fall apart (Parikh, 1994). Clearly, those who are most exploited are also those most at risk of the consequences of this exploitation.

Subsequently, as the world looks towards resolution, Lynn White's (1967) stipulation comes to mind: what we *do* with our environmental resources reflects the way that we *conceptualize* those resources. The methods through which we choose to tackle this convoluted issue are entirely dependent on the social character of these resources. Environmental policy today, exemplified recently by the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit, is a hot topic of discussion. Popular media has naturalized the idea that current environmental policy is working, that *someone* is acting to mitigate climate change as a result of climate protests, activist organizations, and international policy discussions. Marx (1847) stresses that to change society, "the proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie" (p.12). This goal must be applied to combat the environmental degradation rooted in North-South relations, to counteract the fact that our understanding and prioritization of class struggle in individual nations has waned. Instead, Marx must be transcribed to infer that resolving class conflict relies solely on the action of the South towards the North. Ecological collapse is an externality that international environmental agreements ineffectively address, because they fail to capture the integral class antagonisms. For one, ensuring that institutions and development groups are held accountable for environmental damage is a difficult and nuanced prob-

lem. Furthermore, there is a delicate balance between enforcing environmental protection and progressing with economic development. This essay will aim to refute the paradigm of environmental policy practices being innately progressive through the process of demystification. I have chosen to end this preamble with the thought-provoking words of John Bellamy Foster (1999) in "The Vulnerable Planet: A Short Economic History of the Environment":

"As long as prevailing social relations remain unquestioned, those who are concerned about what is happening are left with few visible avenues for environmental action other than purely personal commitments to recycling and green shopping, socially untenable choices between jobs and the environment, or broad appeals to corporations, political policy-makers, and the scientific establishment—the very interests most responsible for the current ecological mess" (p.12).

Analysis: Commodity Fetishism and Marxist Rhetoric in Environmental Policy

Through the lens of Marxist rhetoric, I aim to show that climate change policy strategies are shrouded by their unapologetic emphasis of commodity fetishism. Through this, they inhibit their ability to mitigate climate change, and will instead serve only to broaden the absolute class conflict of our time: the Global North-South divide.

Limitless growth is one of the foundations capitalist structures are built on. Current international environmental policy fails to oppose the capitalist ideal of infinite growth. This is exemplified best in the most recent global climate change policy event: the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit. Political leaders and climate change advocates pat each other on the back for their progressive action when in reality, the international policy decisions reached during this conference do not bode well for the fate of humanity. The U.S., apex of consumer culture, did not speak (Beuret, 2019). China, one of the most significant contributors to climate change, did not change any goals from the Paris Accord of 2016 (Beuret, 2019). India, a nation on the verge of possession by consumerist culture (Beuret, 2019), decided on un-

restrained coal use in the name of economic growth (Beuret, 2019). However, the transition from coal or oil to renewables is not of paramount concern to my argument. Instead, it is the fact that nowhere in the agreements is it considered to be of dire importance to change the behaviours and views that result in the global usage of this amount of energy and resources.

Marxist theory challenges reactionary approaches to global problems, which can provide analysis of these global institutions' decisions. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx (1847) asserts that the "lower middle class... fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class... They are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history" (p.11). This "lower middle class", shifted to a global scale, should be interpreted to mean everyone from working classes to upper-middle classes of the Global North. They are in fact still Bourgeoisie in a global context, and came out in droves for the climate protests. This subset of the Bourgeoisie, which Marx (1847) refers to as the petite or socialist Bourgeoisie, is characterized as "fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and ever renewing itself a supplementary part of bourgeois society" (p.23). We, the denizens of the Global North, remain fearful of being demoted to the proletariat that constitutes the South, and so we become lawyers and activists and advocates against the symptoms of the financial crisis of climate change: environmental degradation. Hence, the majority of the North petite bourgeoisie look towards action that is reactionary in nature to enforce their existence as bourgeoisie and reassert existing economic structures of power. This is visible in the results of the aforementioned international summit surrounding climate change. The Global North's petite Bourgeoisie attack the true bourgeoisie that comprise the global top 1% with climate change policy that imposes moderate restrictions on these owners of transnational organizations, all the while ensuring their own place in the North. The petite bourgeoisie generate climate action that requires minimal motion on their behalf to change the behaviours and culture that has ensued in this sordid state of affairs. Therefore, despite society's tendencies to infer that environmental policy is progressive on the political spectrum, it is entirely reactionary in nature.

The shrouded content of the 2019 UN Climate Change Summit can be further uncloaked through

John Bellamy Foster's (2019) statement in "Absolute Capitalism", that "in absolute capitalism, absolute, abstract value dominates. In a system that focuses above all on financial wealth, exchange value is removed from any direct connection to use value. The inevitable result is a fundamental and rapidly growing rift between capitalist commodity society and the planet." This returns us to inquire into how we *conceptualize* the environment, as the summit discussions unfolded with a distinct perspective. The exchange value of environmental resources is at the forefront of negotiations. As a result, nations like India are spurred towards harmful coal use in pursuit of a capitalist commodity nation reminiscent of the North (Beuret, 2019). This conceptualization of the environment can be further analyzed by rerouting Marx's definition of the *lumpenproletariat*. The *lumpenproletariat* is the lowest strata of the proletariat; a class that does not contribute to the economy while still experiencing the bourgeoisie's exploitation (Marx, 1847). Through this lens, we can understand the objective commodification of nature in Marxist dialectic. Nature does not contribute to an economy in the form of labour, but is exploited nonetheless as a resource, and so, the natural environment can be understood as the *lumpenproletariat*. This assertion can be linked with the Marxist (1967) provision in *Capital* on commodity fetishism: that relations connecting the labour of individuals are "material relations between persons and social relations between things" (p.2) to conclude the alienation of man from nature. The consumer of the Global North does not see either the Global South or nature as deserving of the dignity in social relations, but instead perceives them as simply the producers of material goods. Retrofitting the term *lumpenproletariat* to indicate "environment" elucidates that there is no social relation between the individual producer and the environment. This means that the relationship between producers of the Global South have been degraded by capitalist economic structures such that the environment wanes in social value and exists only for material use. The material relation is grounded within the physical interaction between the producer who extracts resources and the *lumpenproletariat* being exploited, while any intrinsic value comes from the North's manufacturing of goods with these raw resources. Therefore, labour value can be equated to the natural resources of the environment under this

new age of neoliberalism, and this conceptualization of the environment is crucial moving forwards.

With regards to decreasing carbon emissions, the president of the World Resources Institute, Andrew Steer, has exclaimed that “most of the major economies fell woefully short of increasing their targets. Those who promise to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 are unsure how to do it” (World Resources Institute, 2019). This calls for further inquisition into the social character of the strategies being used to meet these targets. There exist two prevalent strategies through which nations aim to meet these carbon targets. Namely, these are the implementation of a carbon tax or the introduction of a “cap and trade” program. The carbon tax is paid by businesses and industries that produce carbon dioxide through their operations (Van Beuren, 2014). The tax is designed to reduce the output of greenhouse gases and carbon dioxide with the goal of environmental stewardship as firms opt out of producing carbon dioxide in their transactions (Van Beuren, 2014). In juxtaposition, the “cap and trade” is an initiative wherein the government issues a limited number of annual permits that allow companies to emit a certain amount of carbon dioxide (Van Beuren, 2014). The allotted level of emissions is what is referred to as the “cap”. Companies are taxed when they exceed the limits of their emissions, but companies that reduce their emissions can “trade” these unused permits to other companies (Van Beuren, 2014). One must admit, there is an astounding absurdity in the two established solutions to capitalist-induced climate change being *further* commodification — this time, of pollution. John Bellamy Foster (2019) describes this peculiar direction of policy when he writes in “Absolute Capitalism” that “the principal strategic aim of which is to embed the state in capitalist market relations.” Given these strategies, it is apparent that institutions aim to maneuver the mitigation of climate change, so it operates within the neoliberal state, but this feat is ineffective in achieving the original goal.

Marx (1847) substantiates the problematic nature of “cap and trade” when he asserts that free trade is a veiled political illusion for brutal exploitation. This affirms the notion that the existence of “cap and trade” is merely an attempt, veiled under the guise of progressive climate action, for further exploitation between those who can afford the emissions and those who cannot. The commodification

of carbon dioxide attaches a social relation between the carbon dioxide emitted by industrial producers, because commodity fetishization turns the social relations between people into social relations between material goods. The social relations between manufacturers is no longer an interaction between people but can be boiled down to an exchange of carbon credits. Marx (1867) enforces this notion by proclaiming that “the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself, takes the form of a social relation between the products” (p.1). “Cap and trade” policies have undergone exactly what Marx described. Producers, in an environmental context, are unable to correctly value the labour of the Global South because “cap and trade” allows them to view this labour in the context of social relations between carbon credit exchange. Essentially, the “cap and trade” policies intend to assign material value between humanity and the exploited environment, and, in doing so, demolish the social relationship with the environment that is crucial to stewardship. Instead, the social character of the *lumpenproletariat*, or nature, is reduced to social value in the form of the carbon credit products that nature “labours” to create. The social relation between carbon emissions and capital becomes the defining relationship between man and nature through commodity fetishism.

Ascribing monetary sums to carbon emissions in the form of taxation is, as Marx (1867) states in *Capital*, a “value that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic” (p.3). Members of society are now coerced into discerning carbon dioxide emissions’ value based on the labour’s peculiar social character which produces these pollutants. The social character of labour is the conditions and perspective from which that labour is valued. The economic freedom to release carbon dioxide has been commodified, which is peculiar in that the labour which produces these pollutants is generally lucrative to the Bourgeoisie. As is, the carbon tax transforms carbon dioxide into a highly valued commodity that is inversely proportional to the well-being of the planet. This is indicative of this policy’s flawed conceptualization of the environment; however, it is valuable to note that assigning negative value to carbon emissions is the most effective method of coaxing a sustainable relationship with the environment while the world is locked in neoliberal economic structures. Unfortunately, both the

freedom to emit carbon dioxide and produce industrial goods are commodified in this system. Thus, it fetishizes nature and creates opportunity for exploitation.

Again, we must adjust Marxist rhetoric to unmask the preconceived notions that exist within the current economic climate. Marx (1867) asserts in *Capital* that “exchange value is a definite social manner of expressing the amount of labour bestowed upon an object, nature has no more to do with it” (p.6). Marx means to convey that the exchange of labour in producing a material good has socially constructed value that ignores the role in which nature plays as a supplier of natural resources. This assertion is clearly flawed given that nature plays the role of the *lumpenproletariat* in the current ecological crisis. As such, nature partakes in labour to produce natural resources, which warrants consideration of its exchange value. Through the carbon tax or “cap and trade” implementations, the environment is able to acquire social value. However, subsequently, nature is exploited under the guise of the environment being “paid back” for industrial damage in the form of taxes or imposed value in the form of carbon credits, which firms can transfer between each other. In reality, the social value placed on nature in the form of carbon taxes or “cap and trade” policies is an example of how commodity fetishization is utilized to further alienate mankind from the environment.

To truly decloak contemporary climate change policy, we must comprehend the economic role that such policy plays in stunting the Global South’s development, thereby deepening the despotic dynamic between North and South. This suppression is the systematic failure of seemingly progressive policies to promote climate change mitigation. These policies are manifestations of this very class antagonism, because they do little to address the inequalities encoded within. Perhaps one of the most apt statements Marx (1847) unwittingly made regarding the modern class conflict was that “the socialist bourgeois want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting therefrom” (p.27). The petite Bourgeois of the North crave endless variety in consumption — food, technology, fashion, etc. — while simultaneously dealing with the climate crisis through protests, metal straws, and poorly-adhered-to policy changes. Marx (1847) explains how the Bourgeois gets past

these crises as such: “on the one hand, by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones” (p.8). The Global North is already conducting a methodical razing of nature, but to progress through the crisis of climate change unscathed requires further exploitation of the South. The commodity fetishism encoded in carbon emission policies shifts the focus of climate change resolution towards the arbitrary effort to lower these emissions, because, as previously established, carbon dioxide has been assigned tangible social value. This fetishization remains implicit in the current proposed strategies for mitigation, which do not call for fair trade of natural resources or tangible decreases of consumption, and in doing so, serve only to further pauperize the South.

While current climate change strategies have focused on limiting further carbon emissions, there is little being done to address the fact that natural resources, most of which are imported from the Global South, are underpriced due to their assumption of infinite availability (Van Beuren, 2014). These natural resources are the very substances being used to manufacture the products that contribute between 60-80% to global climate change (Jacobs, 2016). This is what the ecologist Garrett Hardin, in 1968, coined as the “tragedy of the commons”. The North has no qualms with excessively extracting resources and maintaining minimal awareness for the suffering that occurs when this unprecedented consumption reaches its limit in the South. Underpricing resources to urge infinite consumption in the North has been achieved by utilizing the low costs of labour that occur within the very supply chains that fetter the Global South’s developing economies (Foster, 2019). These relations’ transfiguration is exemplified by Marx (1867) when he states that “the equalization of most different kinds of labour can be only the result of an abstraction from their inequalities” (p.2). The statement can be interpreted to mean that commodity fetishization of carbon emissions permits the different social character of labour between the natural environment and citizens of the Global South. The difference in social character is clearly reflected in the environmental policy which assigns significant capital value to carbon emissions while ignoring citizens of the Global South to be exploited. The commodity fetishism rooted in how firms perceive carbon dioxide provides the eco-

conomic structure to equate carbon output from the South to the vast emissions made by the North.

In this essay, the process of demystification occurred through a novel application of Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism" to convey the manner in which environmental policy fails to address the social relations of production. Initially, this paper retrofitted Marxist terminology for modern interpretation in the context of environmental issues. The concept of commodity fetishization was then applied

in tandem with contemporary Marxist terms to outline the rapidly changing social relationship between man and nature as a result of environmental policy. Afterwards, popular environmental policy was deconstructed by working through and with Marxist dialectic to provide a platform on which to condemn the manner that the capitalist structures embedded in these strategies intensify the divide between Global North and South.

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Sarun Balaranjan is going into his third year of McMaster's interdisciplinary Arts and Science program with a minor in Sustainability. He is interested in climate change adaptations as they pertain to human health and quality of life and is ecstatic to be able to share this paper for future academic discourse!

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