

[DE] Eike Kopf

Contact Information

Address: Central Translation and Compilation Bureau, Xixie Street 36, Xidan, (100032)
Beijing/China;

Heyderstraße 4599099 Erfurt/Germany

Telephone:

Fax:

Mobile:

Email Address: EikeKopf@web.de; eikekopf@marx.org.cn

Homepage

Eike Kopf, born on Nov. 17, 1940 in Bollstedt, district Mühlhausen/Thuringia, is a foreign expert for the 2th Chinese Selected Writings from Marx and Engels (10 Volumes) in Central Compilation & Translations Bureau. His main research field includes: History of the effect of Marx's Capital.

He has published more than 350 articles and contributions in newsletters, journals, booklets, books.

Marx, Engels about the Relationship between Mankind and Nature

[DE] Eike Kopf

In April 1843 wrote Karl Marx in “Debates on Freedom of the Press” that “every particular mode of life is the mode of life of a particular nature.” (Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works. Moscow 1975 f. [following: MECW], vol. 1, p. 173) That is, he was from the beginning at the point of view that too the life of man is a form of movement and development of the nature!

This position we find too in the preparatory materials for the book “A Critique of Politics and of Political Economy” (MECW, v. 3, p. 598), the so-called “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, where he at the same time pointed out to the estrangement between man and nature under the existence of private property. He wrote f. i.: “The separation of capital, rent, and labour is thus fatal for the worker.

The lowest and the only necessary wage rate is that providing for the subsistence of the worker for the duration of his work and as much more as is necessary for him to support a family and for the race of labourers not to die out.

[...]

The demand for men necessarily governs the production of men, as of every other commodity. Should supply greatly exceed demand, a section of the workers sinks into beggary or starvation.” (id., p. 235)

“The domination of the land as an alien power over men is already inherent in feudal landed property. The serf is the adjunct of the land. Likewise, the lord of an entailed estate, the first-born son, belongs to the land. It inherits him. Indeed, the domination of private property begins with property in land—that is its basis. [...]

The estate is individualised with his lord: it has his rank, is baronial or ducal with him, has his privileges, his jurisdiction, his political position, etc. It appears as the inorganic body of its lord. Hence the proverb *nulle terre sans maître*, which expresses the fusion of nobility and landed property.” (Id., p. 266)

“Let us now look more closely at the *objectification*, at the production of the worker; and in it at the *estrangement*, the *loss* of the object, of his product.

The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which and by means of which it produces.

But just as nature provides labour with [the] *means of life* in the sense that labour cannot *live* without objects on which to operate, on the other hand, it also provides the *means of life* in the more restricted sense, i. e., the means for the physical subsistence of the *worker* himself.

Thus the more the worker by his labour *appropriates* the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of *means of life* in two respects: first, in that the sensuous external world more and more ceases to be an object belonging to his labour – to be his labour's *means of life*; and secondly, in that it more ceases to be *means of life* in the immediate sense, means for the physical subsistence of the worker. [...]

(According to the economic laws the estrangement of the worker in his object is expressed thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes”.

(Id., p. 273)

“Man is a species-being [...]

The life of the species, both in man and in animals, consists physically in the fact that man (like the animal) lives on inorganic nature; and the more universal man (or the animal) is, the more universal is the sphere of inorganic nature on which he lives. Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc., constitute theoretically a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art-his spiritual inorganic nature, spiritual nourishment which he must first prepare to make palatable and digestible-so also in the realm of practice they constitute a part of human life and human activity. Physically man lives only on these products of nature, whether they appear in the form of food, heating, clothes, a dwelling, etc. The universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his *inorganic* body-both inasmuch as nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, the object, and the instrument of his life activity. Nature is man's *inorganic body*-nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. 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.

In estranging from man (1) nature [the product – E. K.] , and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, estranged labour estranges the *species* from man. It changes for him the *life of the species* into a means of individual life. [...]

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. [...]

In creating a *world of objects* by his practical activity, in his *work upon* inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species-being, i. e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or that treats itself as a species-being. Admittedly animals also produce. They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc. But an animal only

produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the domination of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man produces the whole of nature. An animal's product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms objects only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.

It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man really proves himself to be a *species-being*. This production is his active species-life. Through this production, nature appears as *his objectification of man's species/life*: [...]

Estranged labour turns [under private property of means of production – E. K.] thus:

(3) *Man's species-being*, both nature and his spiritual species-property, into a being *alien* to him, into a *means* for his *individual existence*. It estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his *human* aspect.

(4) An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life activity, from his species-being is the *estrangement of man from man*."

(Id., p. 275-277)

"*Communism* as the *positive* transcendence of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i. e., human) being—a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development. This 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 [i. e. productive forces – E. K.] and between man and man [i. e. relations of production - E. K.]". (Id., p. 296)

Engels wrote earlier, in the beginning of the year 1844 in "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy(?)", which he sended to Marx for the publication in the journal "Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher [German-French Yearbooks]" (Paris): "But the economist does not know [...] that with all his egoistical reasoning he nevertheless forms but a link in the chain of mankind's universal progress. He does not know that by his dissolution of all sectional interests he merely paves the way for the great transformation to which the century is moving - the reconciliation of mankind with nature and with itself." (MECW, v. 3, p. 424)

"We have, then, two elements of production in operation—nature and man, with man again active physically and mentally". (Id., p. 428)

“The immediate consequence of private property was the split of production into two opposing sides—the natural and the human sides, the soil which without fertilisation by man is dead and sterile, and human activity, the first condition of which is that very soil.” (Id., p. 432)

In “The condition of England. Thomas Carlyle’s ,Past and Present“” in the same journal Engels demanded the “unity of man and nature, and the independent creation—voluntarily and by its own effort – of a new world based on purely human and moral social relationship”. (Id., p. 464)

Since September 1845 they started their work to write “The German Ideology”. In the fragment “I. Feuerbach” they wrote: “We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of man. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist.” (MECW, v. 5, p. 28)

“The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, oro-hydrographical, climatic and so on. All historical writing must set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.” (Id., p. 31)

In the “Introduction” for the “Outlines of the critique of Political Economy” Marx wrote in 1857: “Individuals producing in a society – hence the socially determined production by individuals is of course the point of departure.” (MECW, v. 28, p. 17)

In the preface for “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” in 1859 Marx wrote in a similar sense: “In the social production of their [natural – E. K.] existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.” (MECW, v. 29, p. 263)

In 1867 Marx wrote in the preface to the First German Edition of the first volume of “Capital” in the same sense that he “the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history [i. e. a natural and simultaneously a social process – E. K.]” (MECW, v. 35, p. 10) In the same book Marx wrote: “So far therefore as labour is a creator of use value, is useful labour, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life.” (Id., p. 53)

“Labour is, in the first place, 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. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion

arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. [...]

The elementary factors of the labour process are 1, the personal activity of man, i. e., work itself, 2, the subject of that work, and 3, its instruments. [...] All those things which labour merely separates from immediate connection with their environment, are subjects of labour spontaneously provided by Nature. Such are fish which we catch and take from their element, water, timber which we fell in the virgin forest, and ores which we extract from their veins. If, on the other hand, the subject of labour has, so to say, been filtered through previous labour, we call it raw material; such is ore already extracted and ready for washing. [...]

An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the labourer interposes between himself and the subject of his labour, and which serves as the conductor of his activity. He makes use of the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of some substances in order to make other substances subservient to his aims.”

(Id., p. 187, 188, 189)

“A machine which does not serve the purposes of labour. Is useless. In addition, it falls a prey to the destructive influence of natural forces. Iron rusts and wood rots. Yarn with which we neither weave nor knit, is cotton wasted. Living labour must seize upon these things and rouse them from their death-sleep, change them from mere possible use values into real and effective ones. Bathed in the fire of labour, appropriated as part and parcel of labour's organism, and, as it were, made alive for the performance of their functions in the process, they are in truth consumed, but consumed with a purpose, as elementary constituents of new use values, of new products, ever ready as means of subsistence for individual consumption, or as means of production for some new labour process. [...]

The labour process, resolved as above into its simple elementary factors, is human action with a view to the production of use values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; it is the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase.

(Id., p. 193, 194)

In chapter 48 of the III. volume of “Capital” Marx wrote: “Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilised 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”.

(MECW, v. 37, p. 807)

At the end of chapter 51 Marx wrote: “To the extent that the labour process is solely a process between man and Nature, its simple elements remain common to all social forms of development. But each specific historical form of this process further develops its material foundations and social forms. Whenever a certain stage of maturity has been reached, the specific historical form is discarded and makes way for a higher one. The moment of arrival of such a crisis is disclosed by the depth and breadth attained by the contradictions and antagonisms between the distribution relations, and thus the specific historical form of their corresponding production relations, on the one hand, and the productive forces, the production powers and the development of their agencies, on the other hand. A conflict then ensues between the material development of production and its social form.” (Id., p. 870)

In the chapter 46 Marx wrote: “From the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite as absurd as private ownership of one man by another. Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries, and, like *boni patres familias* [good fathers of families - E. K.], they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition.” (Id., p. 763)

In his manuscript “Part Played by Labour in Transition from Ape to Man” Engels wrote in 1876: “In short, the animal merely *uses* its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, *masters* it. This the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction. [Marginal note: Ennoblement. - E. K.]

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries. [...] Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature – but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.

And in fact, with every day that passes we are acquiring a better understanding of these laws and getting to perceive both the more immediate and the more remote consequences of

our interference with the traditional course of nature. In particular, after the mighty advances made by the natural sciences in the present century, we are more than ever in a position to realise, and hence to control, also the more remote natural consequences of at least our day-to-day production activities. But the more this progress the more will men not only feel but also know their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body, such as arose after the debby his changes makes it serve his ends, *masters* it. This the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction. [Marginal note: Ennoblement. - E. K.]

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Summary and Conclusions:

1. Matter (including nature, earth) has existed and developed himself long before the man and will “do” so after the end of man. People only are “guests” and users of the earth.
2. Matter (incl. nature, earth) doesn’t need for his existence and development the man. In the relationship between nature and man the nature is primary.

3. Man cannot subjugate and dominate the nature. Man is reasonable acting if he investigate the laws of nature more and more deeper and extensive and himself subjugate them laws.

4. In the social reproduction of their [natural – E. K.] existence, men inevitably enter into dialectic relations to men (production relations) and nature (productive forces), that is a process of natural history, i. e. a natural and simultaneously a social process.

5. Every economic process, like production, circulation, distribution, and consumption, has a natural substance and a social form; this form depends from the level of division of labour and from the level of ownership of means of production.

6. A reasonable relationship between man and nature is impossible so long the private property of means of production, and following the creation of profit, is the basis of the whole other forms of the social life.

7. A reasonable relationship between man and nature, a relationship which spares and protects the nature and in which are societies with reasonable and many/sided cooperating people, is possible if national-owned enterprises dominate the mode of production in socialist societies.

8. Until this time the international enterprises and their political administrations, under the danger of losses of profits as consequence of natural catastrophes (disasters), climate change, etc., through protests of the people and international dialogues, diplomacy, agreements, etc., must be forced to use a justice part of the profits for the protection of nature, of environment.