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The Abundance of Wealth in Degrowth Communism*

In the ‘Paralipomena’ (or side notes) to *On the Concept of History*, Walter Benjamin (2003: 393) once criticized the Marxist conception of labour for its characteristic ‘exploitation of nature’. In an attempt to overcome the Promethean vision of revolution, Benjamin famously wrote:

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake. (Benjamin 2003: 402)

The metaphor of the ‘emergency brake’ is more important than ever today. In the face of ecological disasters, environmentalism starts to demand radical systemic change by ending limitless economic growth in order to terminate the ceaseless exploitation of humanity and the robbery of nature. In short, today’s emergency brake implies a call for degrowth.¹

Marxism has been, however, unable to adequately respond to this call for degrowth. Even those eco-Marxists who are critical of productivism are reluctant to accept the idea of degrowth, which they believe is politically unattractive and ineffective. Instead, they stick to the possibility of further sustainable growth under socialism, once the anarchy of market competition under capitalism is transcended (Vergara-Camus 2019). Thus, even after the idea of ecosocialism has softened the long-lasting antagonism between

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Green and Red, there remains a significant tension between ecosocialism and degrowth. The situation is changing, however. One of the most important advocates of degrowth, Serge Latouche (2019: 65), has accepted the idea of ecosocialism as a basis for degrowth, advocating the need ‘to propose forms of politics in a way that is coherent with the objectives of the ecosocialist project for the next era’. Considering the fact that degrowth is often conceived as the third path alternative to both capitalism and socialism,² there has been a remarkable shift in recent years among the proponents of degrowth in a clearly *anti-capitalist* direction. This opens up a space for new dialogues with Marxists, who have been critical of degrowth’s ambiguity in terms of its compatibility with the market economy. It is worth investigating further whether ‘socialism without growth’ (Kallis 2017) and ‘ecosocialist degrowth’ (Löwy et al. 2022) are compatible with Marx’s own vision of post-capitalism.

Based on Marx’s last idea of ‘degrowth communism’ as discovered in the previous chapter, this chapter attempts to fully sublimate the long-lasting antagonism between Red and Green and create a new space for reviving Marx’s theoretical legacy in the Anthropocene. Since Marx was not able to elaborate on degrowth communism, it is necessary to revisit the unfinished project of *Capital retrospectively*, from the perspective of degrowth communism, to update its contents. This is an attempt to go beyond *Capital* in order to concretize his final vision of post-capitalism. The key for such a reconstruction is the ‘negation of the negation’, discussed in one of the most famous passages in volume I of *Capital*. This is a passage to which Marx paid careful attention, demonstrated by the fact that he modified the passage between the second and the third edition of *Capital*.

This chapter starts with Marx’s theory of ‘primitive accumulation’ as the first negation of a radical transformation of human metabolic interaction with nature. While previous literature on primitive accumulation tends to focus on its destructive impact on human life, Marx’s theory of metabolism deals with its negative effects on nature too. By fully appreciating the theoretical scope of Marx’s discussion of primitive accumulation of capital, one can more concretely envision from an ecological perspective the second negation as the re-establishment of the original unity of humans and nature on a higher scale (I). Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation also shows that capitalism is ultimately a social system that constantly increases *scarcity* rather than creating an abundance of wealth through its incessant increase of productive forces. In order to understand this paradoxical point, one needs to revisit his concept of ‘wealth’ in the opening passage of volume I of *Capital*. The very beginning of Marx’s critique of political economy reveals the problems of the narrow conception of wealth in capitalist categories that reduce various dimensions of reality to a simple logic of value and thus destroys the richness of society and nature (II). Marx argued that this narrow capitalist conception of wealth inevitably turns out to be incompatible with the material

conditions for a sustainable development of human metabolism with nature. Through this critique of the category of capitalist wealth, the Marxian understanding of ‘abundance’ will be reconfigured in a non-consumerist and non-productivist way. This reconceptualization and reinvention of wealth allows us to reconsider various passages related to abundance and wealth in an utterly new and more consistent manner. This includes Marx’s discussion of the abundance of ‘common wealth’ (*genossenschaftlicher Reichtum*) in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Although it is elaborated in the most famous description of communism in Marx’s writings, ecosocialists often suppressed this well-known passage precisely because the passage looks Promethean. However, by correctly understanding the ‘paradox of wealth’, it is possible to interpret the passage in a non-productivist manner (III). Such a new interpretation ultimately solves the fundamental problem that Marx did not answer in *Capital*, namely, how to repair the ‘irreparable rift’ in humanity’s metabolic interaction with their environment in a post-capitalist society. Degrowth communism as a post-scarcity future without economic growth aims to reduce the ‘realm of necessity’ and expand the ‘realm of freedom’ without necessarily increasing productive forces (IV).

I

PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AS THE CAUSE OF ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL DISASTER

Marx maintained that the typical example of the historical process of ‘primitive accumulation’ of capital as the precondition for capitalist development can be found in the ‘enclosure’ movement in England. In contrast to Adam Smith’s narrative about the formation of the capitalist economy having been initiated by industrious capitalists who saved money and carefully invested it to increase it, Marx argued that primitive accumulation of capital was a violent and bloody process of separation forcefully ‘divorcing the producer from the means of production’ (*Capital I*: 875). As David Harvey (2005: 149) succinctly summarizes, primitive accumulation ‘entailed taking land, say, enclosing it, and expelling a resident population to create a landless proletariat, and then releasing the land into the privatised mainstream of capital accumulation’. After losing means of production and subsistence under the monopoly of lands by the few, peasants were turned into precarious wage-labourers for whom selling their own labour power was their only means to acquire money necessary for living. This process of primitive expropriation continues even today as it ‘not only maintains this separation, but reproduces it on a constantly extending scale’ (*Capital I*: 874), increasing the misery of the working class.

While it is important to highlight the destructive impact of this violent process upon direct producers and how it worsened their living conditions, one needs to recall that Marx defined 'labour' as a conscious mediating activity of the incessant metabolism between humans and nature.³ From this perspective, primitive accumulation as the separation of the original unity of the producers from their objective conditions of production encompasses great transformations in the life of workers *and* in their relationship with nature.⁴ In fact, Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, highlighted the formation of a historically peculiar chasm between humans and nature due to primitive accumulation of capital. He wrote:

It is not the *unity* of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange [*Stoffwechsel*] with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a *separation* which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labor and capital. (*Grundrisse*: 489)

In pre-capitalist societies, as Marx noted, humans retained their 'unity' with nature. Certainly, slaves and serfs were dominated and exploited by the master and the lord. They were unfree and even treated like things. In other words, they were reduced to a part in the objective conditions of production and reproduction next to cattle. However, this way of existence, in spite of an apparent lack of freedom, also prevented the formation of a chasm in their metabolism with nature. As the master does not let cattle starve to death, the satisfaction of the basic needs of slaves and serfs was more or less guaranteed in precapitalist societies. In short, the reduction of their existence to a part of inorganic nature like cattle ironically realized what Marx called 'original unity between the worker and the condition of labourer' (*MECW* 33: 340).

The dissolution of this original unity is a precondition for the commodification of labour power in order to realize full-scale commodity production. Only when the overwhelming majority of means of subsistence become commodities are they forced to sell their labour as commodities.⁵ What underlies this historical process is the 'separation' in the metabolism between humans and nature that is unique to modern capitalist society.⁶ As a result of this alienation from nature, labour as the mediation of human interactions with nature came to be carried out in a totally differently manner – now the entire production process is thoroughly reorganized for the purpose of maximal capital valorization – so that the expenditure of human labour and human metabolic exchanges with nature also begin to take on an utterly different form. This transformation exerts a powerful influence not only on the economic but also on the ecological sphere. Due to the mediation

of labour, different organizations of social labour and the corresponding reorganization of the metabolism between humans and nature in capitalism do harm to *all* kinds of wealth. Samir Amin (2018: 85) puts it thus: 'Marx concludes his radical critique in *Capital* with the affirmation that capitalist accumulation is founded on the destruction of the bases of all wealth: human beings and their natural environment.' Stefania Barca also points to the close interrelationship between the degradation of living conditions and that of the natural environment through primitive accumulation: 'From a historical-materialist perspective, the working class, or proletariat, and metabolic rift originate from a unique, global process of violent separation of people from their means of subsistence, which also disrupts the biosphere. The ecological crisis is thus a direct consequence of class making' (Barca 2020: 42).

In arguing for re-establishing the 'original unity' in the future society beyond this alienating separation from nature under capitalism, Marx was consistent with his theory of metabolism: 'The original unity can be re-established only on the material foundation which capital creates and by means of the revolutions which, in the process of this creation, the working class and the whole society undergo' (*MECW* 33: 340). In addition, his remark on the 'negation of the negation' in volume I of *Capital* logically corresponds to this reconstitution of the 'original unity' as a process of overcoming the antagonistic separation in the metabolic exchange between humans and nature. However, to clarify what needs to be re-established in communism, it is first necessary to grasp more carefully what had to be destroyed in the formation of capitalism through the dissolution of the 'original unity' between humans and nature. To put it bluntly, it is the 'wealth' of society and nature that is severely impoverished under capitalism. It may sound paradoxical to claim that capitalism destroys wealth despite the magnificent increase in productive forces it generates. Indeed, our society is filled with an excess of commodities. However, this poverty in plenty constitutes the 'paradox of wealth' (Foster and Clark 2020: 152).

II

MARX'S CONCEPT OF 'WEALTH' AND THE TRUE BEGINNING OF *CAPITAL*

To understand this paradox, it is first necessary to adequately comprehend the Marxian category of 'wealth'. Here, the beginning of *Capital*, volume I, functions as a useful reference point. Although written in a logical manner that starts with the analysis of the 'commodity', the description at the beginning of *Capital* presupposes the historical process of primitive accumulation of capital.

With this historical presupposition in mind, one notices that the opening passage already hints at the fundamental contradiction of capitalism created by the historical chasm in the metabolic exchange between humans and nature.

Marx began his discussion of the commodity by writing:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. (*Capital* I: 125)

It is certainly true that *Capital* starts with the ‘analysis of the commodity’, but John Holloway demands that we pay attention to its true beginning. The subject of the first sentence, which is not the ‘commodity’ but the ‘wealth’ (*Reichtum*) of societies (Holloway 2015: 5). The verb is also important: the wealth of societies ‘appears’ (*erscheint*) as an ‘immense collection of commodities’ in capitalism. The verb ‘appear’ implies that wealth and commodities ‘are’ (being = *Wesen*) actually not identical, and in fact, the majority of wealth in non-capitalist societies does not ‘appear’ as commodities as long as non-capitalist wealth is produced, distributed and consumed without the mediation of market exchange. Only under certain social relations does the wealth of societies ‘appear’ as the commodity, or in Marxian terminology, the product of labour receives a ‘commodity form’. Distinguishing *Wesen* and *Erscheinung*, Marx proceeded in a manner that is true to his own method of analytical dualism of *Stoff* and *Form* from the very beginning of *Capital*. According to this view, ‘wealth’ is the material aspect of the product of labour, while ‘commodity’ appears as its economic form determination.

The non-identity between wealth and commodity contains a fundamental tension, although they appear identical in capitalism. Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2001) once warned that ‘land’, ‘labour’ and ‘money’ are ‘fictitious commodities’ that must not be completely commodified and subjected to the dictates of the market. Otherwise, says Polanyi, social reproduction will be seriously threatened because they do not properly function under the logic of commodity exchange. These three categories can be considered typical forms of ‘wealth’ that are incompatible with full commodification under capitalism. Yet Marx’s concept of ‘wealth’ is even broader than Polanyi’s and includes other kinds of products of labour. His intention might be difficult to grasp at first because the contemporary image of ‘wealth’ is often reduced to its capitalist form so that being wealthy (*reich*) usually signifies having a lot of money and real estate. However, wealth does not have to be understood this way. As Holloway (2015: 5) argues, the German term *Reichtum* can be translated to mean ‘richness’ because *reich* means ‘rich’. Of course, ‘being rich’ can mean the possession of a large sum of monetary wealth. Yet it also has broader connotations, such

as richness in taste and smell, experience of life and nature. Thus, its noun *Reichtum* can be understood as a broader category of richness than monetary wealth, once it is possible to remove the capitalist constraint imposed upon it.

This is not an arbitrary claim. Marx wrote in the *Grundrisse* about the vast possibilities of non-capitalist wealth, saying:

In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature? The absolute working out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a predetermined yardstick? ... In bourgeois economics – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end. (*Grundrisse*: 488)

Marx considered the richness of culture, skills, free time and knowledge as the wealth of societies. In other words, the wealth or richness of societies cannot be measured by an ever-greater quantity of commodities produced and their monetary expressions, but rather by the full and constant development and realization of the potentialities of human beings. The full and all-round development of human capacities and creative potentialities is, however, heavily constrained under capitalism because they are always measured on a 'predetermined yardstick', namely, how much use they can be for profit-making. Capitalist production sacrifices social wealth under 'total alienation' and the 'complete emptying-out' of human activities by imposing 'an entirely external end' upon producers solely for the sake of capital valorization. Marx problematized this tendency of capital as the *impoverishment of social wealth* under the accumulation of an 'immense collection of commodities'. Against this tendency, he maintained that the full realization of human creative potentialities requires stripping away the 'bourgeois form' of wealth as commodity.

The wealth of society is not limited to social wealth. Marx also used the expression 'natural wealth' (*natürlicher Reichtum*) to designate the natural and material conditions of production and reproduction. For example, he wrote in volume I of *Capital*:

External natural conditions can be divided from the economic point of view into two great classes, namely (1) natural wealth in the means of subsistence, i.e. a fruitful soil, waters teeming with fish, etc., and (2) natural wealth in the instruments of labour, such as waterfalls, navigable rivers, wood, metal, coal, etc. (*Capital* I: 535)

The richness of nature in the form of land, water, and forests is obviously indispensable for human flourishing as means of subsistence and production as well as for a healthy life. The abundance and quality of natural wealth provided by the earth surely counts as the fundamental 'wealth' of all societies: 'The earth is the reservoir, from whose bowels the use-values are to be torn' (*MECW* 31: 465). This statement is consistent with Marx's recognition of the essential contribution of nature to the production process: 'Labour is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labour' (*MECW* 24: 81).

However, out of the commodification of social and natural wealth, there arises an increasing tension between 'wealth' and 'commodity' because commodities focus one-sidedly on the value of the labour product and marginalize that which does not possess value because the 'predetermined yardstick' does not properly function for them. This tension is visible in terms of nature. On the one hand, natural forces are thoroughly exploited by capital as 'free gifts': 'Natural elements which go into production as agents without costing anything, whatever role they might play in production, do not go in as components of capital, but rather as a free natural power of capital' (*Capital* III: 879). Nature enters the labour process and aids in the production of commodities together with workers but does not enter the valorization process as it is not a product of labour. Nature is free, and capital seeks to utilize its power as much as possible. Capital's treatment of nature strengthens the destruction and squandering of the richness of nature in favour of capital's incessant valorization. Nevertheless, nature remains the material 'bearer' of wealth as well as value. Wealth is often something that capital does not create by itself (capital creates neither knowledge and culture nor land and water), and wealth has its own characteristics and dynamics that are independent of and incompatible with capital's aims. Consequently, as use-value is subordinated to exchange value under the logic of capital's valorization that is blind to its own material substance, the contradiction manifests as metabolic rift.

On the other hand, nature is increasingly commodified because wild nature is worthless when left as it is. Its commodification, however, occurs by dissolving the abundance of social and natural wealth. Enclosure dissolved the commons, commodifying lands and expelling the people living on them. Nature was devastated after the expulsion from the land of peasants who had taken care of it. Capitalist farmers sought only short-term profit without

taking good care of the soil. Quoting various reports, Marx in volume I of *Capital*, especially in the French edition, also pointed to the fact that the most fertile lands in Scotland were totally laid waste after the enclosure. These lands were actually intentionally left wasted for the sake of a more profitable usage:

Immense tracts of land, much of which is described in the statistical account of Scotland as having a pasturage in richness and extent of very superior description, are thus shut out from all cultivation and improvement, and are solely devoted to the sport of a few persons for a very brief period of the year. (*Capital* I: 894)

Apparently, this transformation of land usage had an immense impact on the daily life of people in the countryside, as seen in the general impoverishment of people's living conditions through the second enclosure in the 18th century. While the agricultural revolution based on the Norfolk four-course system significantly increased the production of wheat, peasants lost access to common lands and forests, where they used to raise pigs with acorns, collect mushrooms, woods and fruits, and catch birds. Living in the countryside, they also had access to the river to catch fish and for fresh water. Now driven into the city, they almost completely lost access to such natural wealth and could consume much less meat. Even if they remained in the countryside, their previous daily activities in the commons were now criminalized as acts of trespass and theft. Furthermore, enclosure concentrated lands in the hands of fewer capitalist farmers. As they hired peasants only during the busy season and fired them thereafter, the farming villages disappeared, and the small vegetable gardens maintained by the villagers ceased to provide fresh vegetables for their dinner tables. As it was no longer clear by whom and how the vegetables sold in the market were grown – they might, for example, be smeared with excreta of cattle and poultry – they became inedible without cooking, and fresh salads disappeared from the menu.

In addition, all family members had to work in the factories to make a living in the city. The loss of access to the commons significantly increased the financial burden on households because now they had to buy their means of subsistence from the market. They began working in factories from an early age, so children were not able to attend school. They could not acquire basic cooking skills at home or during the festivals and ceremonies of the farming villages, where they were served free and luxurious meals. Even if they acquired and maintained some cooking skills, working-class families in the city were no longer able to buy expensive meat and other ingredients but only the cheap potatoes that were sold on the street. Consequently, the traditional English recipes based on ingredients available to the rural villages became useless for working-class families living in the large cities.

Finally, English food culture was destroyed by adulteration. Marx documented this custom in volume I of *Capital*, explaining the adulteration of bread with alum, soap, pearl ash and chalk based on Arthur Hill Hassall's work *Adulterations Detected*. Adulteration was quite widespread as a way of reducing production costs and of providing cheap food for the poor working class: the worker 'had to eat daily in his bread a certain quantity of human perspiration mixed with the discharge of abscesses, cobwebs, dead cockroaches and putrid German yeast, not to mention alum, sand and other agreeable mineral ingredients' (*Capital* I: 359). The problem was not limited to bread. Hassall reported various adulterations in milk, butter, vegetables, and beer (Hassall 1861). These foods were apparently unhealthy and unsafe, but since they were cheap, the poor working class had to depend on them in order to fill their hungry stomachs.

In short, culture, skills and knowledge were impoverished, the financial burden for working-class families increased, and the quality of natural wealth was sacrificed as the world became increasingly commodified. From the perspective of capital, the same situation looks very different, however. Paradoxically, this is how capitalism took off, emancipating the full potentialities of productive forces, as workers became more and more dependent on commodities in the market.

This tension between wealth and the commodity is what underlies 'Lauderdale's paradox' (Daly 1998: 22). James Maitland, the eighth Earl of Lauderdale pointed to an inverse relationship between 'public wealth' and 'private riches'. Namely, if one increases, the other decreases. According to Lauderdale, this is a paradox that Adam Smith overlooked in believing that the 'wealth of nations' is an aggregate sum of 'private riches'. He demonstrated this point by introducing the third concept of 'public wealth'.

Lauderdale defined 'public wealth' as consisting 'of all that man desires, as useful or delightful to him'. In contrast, 'private riches' has an additional character, in that it comprises 'all that man desires as useful or delightful to him; which exists in a degree of scarcity' (Lauderdale 1819: 57–8). The difference between the two concepts is 'scarcity'. Expressed in Marxian terms, 'public wealth' possesses 'use-value', but not 'value' because it exists abundantly in nature and is available to everyone that wishes to use it in order to satisfy their needs. Public wealth includes the air, common lands, forests, and river water. 'Public wealth', however, can be turned into 'private riches' when it becomes scarce. Lauderdale argued that scarcity does not necessarily arise from the exhaustion of natural resources. It is often *intentionally created* by constructing gates and by forcefully expelling people from the land. In other words, land, water and food are artificially made scarce so that they can function to augment the 'private riches' of their owners expressed in monetary terms (as

well as the wealth of nation that comprises the sum total of individual riches). The obvious problem here is, as Lauderdale argued, that the increase in private riches is inevitably accompanied by the augmentation of scarcity in a society, that is, the decrease in the free and abundant common public wealth for the majority of the people. As seen in the primitive accumulation of capital, common lands and forests were gated and became inaccessible and scarce for peasants, which increased the misery of the masses and the devastation of the natural environment, while this process of creating artificial scarcity amplified private riches of the few.

While there obviously exists ‘natural’ scarcity of arable lands and available water independently of humans, scarcity under capitalism is different. It is a ‘social’ one. This social scarcity is also an ‘artificial’ one because the richness of social and natural wealth was originally abundant in the sense that they did not possess value and were accessible to members of the community. Scarcity must be *created* by thoroughly destroying the commons, even if this brings about a disastrous situation for the many in an economic and ecological sense. Lauderdale provided cases where edible products were intentionally thrown away and arable lands were deliberately wasted, so that market supply could be limited in order to keep commodity prices high. Herein manifests the fundamental tension between wealth and the commodity, and this is the ‘paradox of wealth’ that marks the historical peculiarity of the capitalist system (Foster and Clark 2009).

It is in this sense of the term that the opposition of ‘abundance’ and ‘scarcity’ needs to be discussed. No matter how much capitalism increases the productive forces, this paradox of wealth does not disappear but is rather intensified due to the constant creation of artificial scarcity. At the same time, it is not necessary to maximize productive forces in order to overcome this kind of scarcity. A post-scarcity society could be founded upon the reconstruction of the abundance of the commons found in pre-capitalist societies on a higher scale, through the transcendence of artificial scarcity. Marx’s degrowth communism aims to repair the ‘irreparable’ metabolic rift and to rehabilitate the non-consumerist ‘abundance’ of the social and natural wealth beyond the Lauderdale paradox through the ‘negation of the negation’.

III

THE NEGATION OF THE NEGATION AND THE ABUNDANCE IN COMMUNISM

Primitive accumulation of capital, as the first negation, dismantles individual property as founded on the labour of its proprietor. In contrast, communism

aims at the ‘negation of the negation’, through which the ‘expropriators are expropriated’ and the original unity of humanity and nature is re-established. Marx wrote in the famous passage that appeared in volume I of *Capital*:

But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not re-establish private property, but it does indeed establish individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era: namely co-operation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labor itself. (*Capital* I: 929)

Interestingly, this passage was modified in the third edition based on Marx’s comments in his own copy of the second edition of *Capital*. He modified this passage in the 1880s shortly before his death. In the second edition, he still wrote:

It is the negation of negation. This re-establishes individual property, but on the basis of the acquisitions of the capitalist era, i.e., on co-operation of free workers and their possession in common of the land and of the means of production produced by labour. (*MEGA* II/6: 683)

Marx modified this passage in the third edition in order to more explicitly distinguish between ‘private property’ and ‘individual property’. What does this change imply?

In the *Civil War in France* published in 1871, Marx came back to this problem of individual property in communism with the same logic in his mind, as is seen clearly in the expression ‘the expropriation of the expropriators’:

... the Commune intended to abolish that class-property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour. ... If co-operative production [*genossenschaftliche Produktion*] is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the Capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of Capitalist production – what else, gentlemen, would it be but Communism, ‘possible’ Communism? (*MECW* 22: 335)

The Paris Commune was an attempt to ‘make individual property a truth’ through the negation of the negation. As explained in the second half of the quoted passage, ‘co-operative production’ aims to regulate social production

through common planning and communal control of the means of production. In this way, it allocates individual shares among members through democratic and communal management. This is how ‘individual property’ is rehabilitated. In a sense, individual property is equivalent to ‘co-operative’ (*genossenschaftlich*) property. For Marx, this is ‘possible Communism’. Here he seems to have established the concept of ‘individual property’ as clearly distinguished from ‘private property’, which led to the modification of the relevant expression in the third edition of *Capital*.⁷

Yet the Paris Commune was not the only reason for this modification. Considering the fact that he modified the relevant passage on post-capitalist society in the 1880s for the third edition of *Capital*, it needs to be examined in relation to his view on the rural communes elaborated in his letter to Zasulich. Marx wrote as follows in his letter to Zasulich when he returned to this topic:

The peoples among which it reached its highest peak in Europe and [the United States of] America seek only to break its chains by replacing capitalist with co-operative production [*la production coopérative*], and capitalist property with a higher form of the archaic type of property, that is, communist property. (Shanin 1984: 102)

Here again, Marx argues that developed capitalist societies need to return to a ‘higher form of the archaic type’ after transcending the system of private property in capitalism. In a sense, he went further here than in the *Civil War in France*. What Marx demanded in the *Civil War in France* as the ‘united co-operative societies’ is now specified in that they should be realized through the principles of a steady-state economy imminent to the archaic commune. ‘Communist property’ is not just based on ‘co-operative’ (*genossenschaftliche*) production, but also seeks to revive a communal form of property in Mauer’s sense of ‘mark cooperative’ (*Markgenossenschaft*). As discussed in the previous chapter, the archaic commune was characterized by the ‘dualism’ of collectivism and individualism. This dualism needs to be rehabilitated in Western Europe not by going back to isolated small-scale production in rural communes but by transforming the large-scale production developed under capitalism into co-operative production. Private property is turned into individual property, but its content can be better expressed as ‘co-operative’ (*genossenschaftliche*) property as the higher form of the archaic type. Indeed, this understanding will prove decisive in interpreting the term ‘communal wealth’ (*genossenschaftlicher Reichtum*), which appears in Marx’s famous description of communism in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

There is another important term worth paying attention to in the passage on the ‘negation of the negation’ in *Capital*. The term ‘land’ used in the quote above is *Erde* in German. It also means ‘earth’. In fact, Marx used this expression to designate natural resources other than land too. Marx argued that the earth

(natural resources) must be controlled ‘in common’, meaning that it must be used cautiously, so as to care for the interests of future generations. Marx wrote in volume III of *Capital*, in which the term *Erde* is translated as ‘earth’, saying:

From the standpoint of a higher socioeconomic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias*. (*Capital* III: 911)

The earth is what the current generation succeeded from the previous one, and they are obliged to pass it on to the next generation without destroying it. This, however, is what capitalism cannot fulfil due to its one-sided focus on the endless augmentation of private riches. By contrast, the perspective of sustainability is essential for enriching social and natural wealth, especially because capitalism is a system of profit-making, private property and anarchic competition. Against the logic of commodification by capital, communism seeks the *commonification* of wealth. However, this statement must not be understood as the full realization of human desire to enjoy the world’s riches without any constraint. Marx was well aware that the availability of natural wealth is inevitably limited and cannot be arbitrarily utilized for satisfying unlimited human desires. This is why the ‘negation of the negation’ transcends artificial scarcity, but not scarcity as such.

This ecosocialist insight must be contrasted with the popularized vision of socialist society where material abundance is supposed to become almost infinite, so that the working class can enjoy the same luxurious life without natural limits. In *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*, G. A. Cohen describes abundance under communism in this manner. According to Cohen’s left-wing libertarian interpretation, Marx’s vision of an equal society is still trapped in ‘certain radical bourgeois values’ (Cohen 1995: 116). He held ‘a conviction that industrial progress brings society to a condition of such fluent abundance that it is possible to supply what everyone needs for a richly fulfilling life’ (Cohen 1995: 10). Infinite material abundance is the condition of material equality for all, but such a productivist negation of natural limits in the future society is absolutely incompatible with the planetary boundaries that exist independently of human will. Thus, Cohen concludes that it is no longer possible to ‘sustain Marx’s extravagant, pre-green, materialist optimism’, and it is necessary to ‘abandon the vision of abundance’ (Cohen 1995: 10).

Cohen is surely right in emphasizing the need to reject the extravagant and productivist vision of social and economic equality in socialism. Yet this rejection does not require abandoning the ‘vision of abundance’ in Marx’s

critique of capitalism. In fact, Marx's critique of political economy would be inconsistent and mediocre if he so naively endorsed 'bourgeois values'. In order to avoid this confusion, one needs to understand the category of 'scarcity' as an inherently socio-historical category. According to Marx, scarcity has two aspects, social and natural. Natural scarcity cannot be entirely overcome, no matter how much technology may advance. By contrast, social scarcity increases in capitalism in the face of unlimited capital expansion. Everything is by definition scarce in capitalism: '*capital always is – and, this cannot be stressed strongly enough, it always must remain, as a matter of inner systemic determination – insuperably scarce, even when under certain conditions it is contradictorily overproduced*' (Mészáros 2012: 304; emphasis in original). The more capital develops for the sake of overcoming self-imposed scarcity, the more destructive the entire system becomes, but the abundance it generates can never eliminate the artificial scarcity created by capital itself. This is the fundamental paradox of wealth in capitalism.

Cohen assumes that Marx envisioned the abundance of a post-capitalist society based on that of capitalist society, that is, the abundance of 'private riches' for all beyond natural scarcity. If this were the case, Marx's claim would be inconsistent with his demand in the *Grundrisse* for the 'stripping away' of the bourgeois form of wealth. It is much more consistent to assume that what needs to be overcome in a post-capitalist society is not scarcity as such but the 'objective conditions of socially specific *capital-accumulating scarcity*' (Mészáros 2012: 269; emphasis in original). Nevertheless, there is a certain ambivalence in the *Grundrisse* too, where Marx explicitly stated that the 'full development of human *mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature*' (*Grundrisse*: 488; emphasis added). Such a statement can be easily presented as strong proof of Marx's naïve endorsement of bourgeois values, especially because he also praised the 'great civilising influence of capital' (*Grundrisse*: 409).⁸

However, as discussed in previous chapters, Marx's treatment of nature became more nuanced in the 1860s. With this ecosocialist understanding of *Capital* in mind, it is worth revisiting Cohen's critique of Marx's concept of abundance. As evidence of Marx's productivist vision of abundance, Cohen refers to the famous passage in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, where he wrote about the future communist society:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and *all the springs of common/co-operative/communal*

wealth [genossenschaftlicher Reichtum] flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs! (MECW 24: 87; emphasis added)

Cohen is not alone here. Herman Daly (1991: 196) similarly argued that for Marx, the ‘materialistic determinist, economic growth is crucial in order to provide the overwhelming material abundance that is the objective condition for the emergence of the new socialist man. Environmental limits on growth would contradict “historical necessity”’. In fact, this passage from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* appears to be identical with Marx’s naïve endorsement of infinite wealth thanks to the development of productive forces and the continuation of the absolute domination over nature in the *Grundrisse*. It is no coincidence that ecosocialists such as Foster and Burkett do not refer to this famous passage, although this is one of the rare cases where Marx directly discussed the future society.

However, considering the ecosocialist background to Marx’s *Capital*, it would be inconsistent to read this passage as a celebration of productivist domination over nature to achieve an abundance of wealth in the future society. In addition, Cohen’s attribution of left-wing libertarianism and its principle of self-ownership to Marx fails to explain why the latter thought this abundance of wealth in communism could overcome ‘the narrow horizon of bourgeois right’.⁹ When Marx demanded that the metabolic exchange between humans and nature should be regulated more rationally by freely associated producers free from the pressure of capital accumulation, he did so precisely because he was aware of the fact that the universal metabolism of nature consists of various biophysical processes that cannot be socially transcended even in socialism. The persistent existence of natural scarcity demands a more conscious regulation of social and natural wealth, even in a post-capitalist society.

Thus, it is not compelling to argue that Marx’s conception of ‘abundance’ demanded the satisfaction of all unlimited desires.¹⁰ It is also possible to imagine a different kind of abundance of wealth, that is, one founded upon the abundance of *common wealth*. Here one needs to recall the ‘Lauderdale paradox’; the capitalist process of creating artificial scarcity. Transcendence of the artificial scarcity of private riches as the negation of the negation requires the re-establishment of the abundance of common wealth, which is available to everyone without the mediation of monetary exchange. The point is that this rehabilitation of communal abundance does not have to negate natural scarcity.

It is noteworthy that Marx in this passage referred to the *genossenschaftlicher Reichtum* as the form of post-capitalist abundance flowing

from its springs. He used this expression only once, but its significance cannot be overestimated. This expression needs to be contrasted with the opening sentence of his *Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Like *Capital*, the *Critique of Political Economy* starts with an analysis of the commodity, where Marx wrote: 'The bourgeois wealth [*der bürgerliche Reichtum*], at first sight, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities, its unit being a single commodity' (*MECW* 29: 269). Here Marx designated the commodity as the 'bourgeois wealth' that can be contrasted with the post-capitalist wealth, i.e., 'common wealth' (*der genossenschaftliche Reichtum*) that does not appear as commodity. Common wealth is democratically managed by the associated producers and produced according to their abilities as well as distributed according to their needs. This is exactly how 'individual property' is rehabilitated based on 'co-operative [*genossenschaftliche*] production' as discussed in the *Civil War in France*. Although Marx did not believe that it would be possible to produce infinite amounts of wealth without any natural limit, he was convinced that once capitalism is overcome there would be sufficient to feed everyone. In other words, abundance is not a technological threshold, but a social relationship. This insight is fundamental to the abundance of common wealth to be re-established beyond the artificial scarcity of 'bourgeois wealth'.

Kristin Ross calls this kind of abundance of common wealth as 'communal luxury' by demanding the 'end of the scarcity capitalism produces through waste, hoarding, and privatization' (Ross 2015: 127). Similarly, Jason Hickel (2019) names it 'radical abundance' because this form of abundance inherent to common wealth is *radically* different from the bourgeois form of material wealth that is inevitably based on ever-increasing productivity and endless mass consumption of commodities. 'Communal luxury' and 'radical abundance' are not equivalent to the unlimited access to abundant private properties in a consumerist fashion; otherwise communist society would simply preserve the bourgeois form of private riches, contributing to the further degradation of the natural environment. Since primitive accumulation created 'artificial scarcity', the 'negation of the negation' reverses the order of the Lauderdale paradox with the aim of recovering the 'radical abundance' of common wealth, making it equally accessible to everyone at the cost of private riches. In other words, the abundance of common wealth is about sharing and cooperating by distributing both wealth and burdens more equally and justly among members of the society. Only by recognizing this point can 'the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety'.

The point is that unlike the left accelerationists discussed in Chapter 5 who place their hope for a post-scarcity society in unprecedented technological breakthroughs, Marx and other theorists of post-scarcity such as Thomas More,

Étienne Cabet and Peter Kropotkin did not advocate the full-automation of production for the sake of the abolition of labour or emancipation from labour (Benanav 2020: 83). In this sense, Marx's remark about the development of productive forces in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is not equivalent to the 'mere' increase of productivity because productive forces are both quantitative and qualitative. For example, in a higher phase of communism, the productive forces of capital based on 'the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour' as well as 'the antithesis between mental and physical labour' – the separation of 'conception' and 'execution' – vanishes, so that labour becomes 'life's prime want' as it becomes more attractive as an opportunity for 'all-round development of the individual'. This reorganization of the labour process may decrease productivity by abolishing the excessive division of labour and making labour more democratic and attractive, but it nonetheless counts as the 'development' of productive forces of social labour because it ensures the free and autonomous activity of individual workers.

Based upon this understanding, the famous declaration 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!' can be interpreted in a non-productivist manner too. Marx envisioned a society in which natural and social differences of abilities and talents among individuals do not appear as social and economic inequality but as individual uniqueness because they can be compensated and supplemented by each other. What one person cannot do well – something that will always remain despite all-round development – can be done by others, and you can help others with what you are good at. What everyone is not willing to do – unpleasant and boring work cannot be fully eradicated – can be shared by everyone more fairly. In this sense, communism does not impose conformity and uniformity upon everyone for the sake of equality, but it is about social organization and institutionalization that aims to demolish the capitalist tie between differences in abilities and skill and economic inequality, as well as the imposition of unpleasant work on a particular social group.

This alternative interpretation of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* from the perspective of degrowth communism makes the meaning of the 'negation of the negation' clear: de-enclosing and expanding the commons for the sake of the many. Marx used the term 'genossenschaftlich' in order to signify the future associated mode of production – in this case one can simply translate it as 'co-operative', but its meaning gradually shifts into the archaic type of *Markgenossenschaften* – thus the term *genossenschaftlich* also signifies 'communal'. It is the rehabilitation of communal wealth in a higher form without going back to the isolated small-scale production of precapitalist communes. Rather, it presupposes socialized production under capitalism, but with social planning and regulation to hinder infinite economic growth and

to decrease output in those branches that drive extravagant consumption. Instead, the expansion of communal wealth through basic services and public spending will enable people to satisfy their basic needs without constantly seeking after a higher level of income by working longer hours and being promoted. In contrast, it lessens the pressure for endless competition and expands the possibility of free choice outside the market.

In this way, it is possible to revisit Marx's famous discussion in volume III of *Capital* with regard to the distinction between the realms of 'freedom' and 'necessity':

This realm of natural necessity expands with his development, because his needs do too; but the productive forces to satisfy these expand at the same time. Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite. (*Capital* III: 959)

Like the passage in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, this has often been celebrated as an endorsement by Marx of the unlimited growth of productive forces through full-automation and a provocation for absolute domination over nature so that the realm of freedom can expand by reducing the working day.

Again, such an interpretation is incompatible with the ecosocialist character of Marx's *Capital*. From the perspective of radical abundance and degrowth communism, the expansion of the 'realm of freedom' need not solely depend on ever-increasing productive forces. Rather, once the artificial scarcity of capitalism is overcome, people, now free from the constant pressure to earn money thanks to the expanding common wealth, would have an attractive choice to work less without worrying about the degradation of their quality of life. Jason Hickel (2019: 66) nails down this point: 'Liberated from the pressures of artificial scarcity, the compulsion for people to compete for ever-increasing productivity would wither away. We would not have to feed our time and energy into the juggernaut of ever-increasing production, consumption and ecological destruction.' Without the market competition and endless pressure for capital accumulation, freely associated labour and cooperative production could possibly reduce the working day to just three–six hours. Only then will people have sufficient time for non-consumerist

activities such as leisure, exercise, study and love. In other words, it is possible to reduce the realm of necessity not by increasing the productive forces, but by rehabilitating communal luxury, which allows people to live more stably without the pressure of being subjugated to the wage-labour system.

Degrowth communism produces less not only to increase free time but also to simultaneously lessen the burden on the natural environment. Certainly, the shortening of the working day is a precondition for the expansion of the realm of freedom, but the fairer (re)distribution of income and resources can also shorten the working day without the increase of productive forces. In addition, by cutting down unnecessary production in branches such as advertisement, marketing, consulting and finance, it would also be possible to eliminate unnecessary labour and reduce excessive production as well as consumption. Emancipated from the constant exposure to advertisement, planned obsolescence and ceaseless market competition, there would emerge more room to autonomously 'self-limit' production and consumption (Kallis 2020). When Marx argued that humans can organize their metabolic interaction with the environment in a conscious manner, it means that they can consciously reflect upon their social needs and limit them if necessary. This act of self-limitation contributes to a conscious downscaling of the current 'realm of necessity' which is actually full of *unnecessary* things and activities from the perspective of well-being and sustainability. They are only 'necessary' for capital accumulation and economic growth and not for the 'all-round development of the individual'. Since capital drives us towards endless consumption, especially in the face of 'the *total absence* of identifiable *self-limiting* targets of productive pursuit admissible from the standpoint of capital's mode of social metabolic reproduction' (Mészáros 2012: 257; emphasis in original), self-limitation has a truly revolutionary potential.

At the same time, as Kate Soper (2020) argues, even if the current way of life became fully sustainable thanks to unprecedented technological development, it would nonetheless not be a desirable world that could fully realize human potentialities and a good life. This is because of its constant pressure to engage in competitive work and consumption and its tendency to impoverish other opportunities for satisfying experiences and a more meaningful life outside the market. Post-capitalism needs to invent wholly different value-standards and social behaviours, and a new sense of sufficiency and well-being needs to replace the widespread aspiration to become upper-middle class. Soper's call for 'alternative hedonism' in a post-growth society, however, does not mean austerity and poverty because it simultaneously aims to enrich various non-commercial activities that are not necessarily reflected in the gross domestic product (GDP). People will have different wants. Instead of wanting destructive, extravagant and wasteful products, people

will desire healthier, more solidaristic and democratic ways of living. In this way, *degrowth communism expands the 'realm of freedom' without depending on an increase in productivity and even by downscaling production*. This is how the 'negation of the negation' reconstructs the radical abundance of 'common wealth' and increases the chances for free and sustainable human development without repeating the failures of really existing socialism in the 20th century.

IV COMMON LABOUR AS A WAY OF REPAIRING THE METABOLIC RIFT

Marx's idea of degrowth communism is founded upon the radical abundance of communal wealth (*genossenschaftlicher Reichtum*). It does not require unlimited growth because the abundance of common wealth can be multiplied by abolishing the artificial scarcity of the commodity and money and by sharing social and natural wealth with others. This offers an important insight for reconstructing how Marx after 1868 strove to find a way of repairing the metabolic rift, which he characterized as 'irreparable' in volume III of *Capital*. Carl-Erich Vollgraf judges that Marx's language here is haunted by an 'apocalyptic metaphor' that leaves no space for the future optimism and that he would not have used the same expression in the final manuscript if he were able to complete volume III (Vollgraf 2016: 130). Vollgraf's concern arises from the fact that, when reading *Capital*, volume III, one cannot find Marx's explanation about how 'the freely associated producers' would be able to 'govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power'. Marx's silence here signifies the incomplete character of *Capital*.

Under a productivist reading, the subsequent remark about 'accomplishing [the regulation of human metabolism with nature] with the least expenditure of energy' 'instead of being dominated by it as a blind power' is understood as the manipulation of natural phenomena through intensive and extensive usage of technologies. Of course, the rational regulation of natural law is essential for the sake of successfully carrying out labour. However, one should also recall that human metabolism with nature came to be dominated by a 'blind power' not only due to a lack of natural scientific knowledge but due to the reified social relations that exist under capitalism. For Marx, this is the main reason labour in capitalism cannot be carried out 'in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature' even given today's level of technology. Alien

social power of capital is so strong that the recognition of natural law alone does not allow humans to regulate their metabolism with the environment in a 'rational' (that is, sustainable) manner and leads to the waste of so much energy and resources for the sake of infinite capital accumulation. Seen from this perspective, the human metabolism with nature under capitalism turns out to be irrational because it is far from satisfying social needs 'with the least expenditure of energy'. This is why as long as the dominance of this blind power of reified things persists, the metabolic rift will be 'irreparable'.

However, the question remains as to why the conscious regulation of means of production and subsistence under socialism would realize a more rational metabolic exchange with nature. This point is not necessarily clear in *Capital*, and the sustainability of socialism cannot be taken for granted. In fact, if a socialist society continues to raise its productive forces in order to satisfy all kinds of human needs, it would be a catastrophe for the environment. A more equal society is not automatically more sustainable. While the earth has biophysical constraints, social demands are potentially limitless. Marx thus came to admit that the principles of a steady-state economy need to be rehabilitated in Western society. In this context, it is worth revisiting *Capital* retrospectively from the standpoint of degrowth communism in order to envision a more sustainable future.¹¹ There are at least five reasons that communism increases the chance of repairing the metabolic rift compared with capitalist production.

First, the aim of social production shifts from profit to use-values. Capitalist production continues to expand, endlessly seeking after the maximization of profits. Capital is concerned about use-values only insofar as they are required for selling products. Due to this marginalization of use-values, products that are not essential for social reproduction or that are destructive of humans and the environment – for example, SUVs, fast fashion and industrial meat – are mass produced, as long as they sell well. At the same time, goods and services that do not make a profit are under-produced, no matter how essential they are. Marx's point is that by abolishing the law of value, it becomes possible to shift the focus of social production to the production of higher use-values and their quality would be freed from the constant pressure of infinite economic growth. It is true that in some sectors production must *improve* (not *grow*) because some essential sectors are currently *underdeveloped* in capitalism. This improvement requires reallocating money and resources to provide better education, care work, art, sports and public transportation. These sectors, however, do not aim for unlimited growth, and in this sense they are already realizing a stationary economy today – a university that grows at the rate of 3 per cent per year would be absurd. The qualitative improvement of education, for example, cannot be measured using GDP.

Looked at from a different angle, these sectors are not fit to increase productivity.¹² Much essential work cannot be fully automated but remains labour intensive. Consequently, it is often treated as ‘unproductive’ compared with other industrial sectors that become more and more capital intensive through mechanization. Unlike the industrial sectors whose production can double and triple with the introduction of new machines, the productivity of care work such as nursing and teaching cannot increase in the same manner. In many cases, these caring sectors cannot increase productivity without sacrificing use-value and increasing the risk of incidents and maltreatment. There are thus innate limits to the increase of productive forces imposed by the nature of care work, this creates the problem known as ‘Baumol’s cost disease’. The more society shifts towards essential work that produces basic use-value, the slower the entire economy is likely to become.

Second, Marx stated in *Capital* that the ‘reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite’ for the realm of freedom. However, no matter how much capitalism develops productive forces, work hours did not decline during the 20th and 21st centuries. On the contrary, the increasing number of precarious and low-paid jobs compels people to work longer hours. Mass production for the sake of capital valorization also increases non-essential jobs such as advertising, marketing, finance and consulting. Marx wrote about such unnecessary jobs that inevitably increase with capitalist development:

The capitalist mode of production, while it enforces economy in each individual business, also begets, by its anarchic system of competition, the most outrageous squandering of labour-power and of the social means of production, not to mention the creation of a vast number of functions at present indispensable, but in themselves superfluous.
(*Capital* I: 667)

By reducing the production of non-essential goods that are produced simply for the sake of profit-making, it is possible to significantly reduce unnecessary labour. In other words, this reduction of ‘the realm of necessity’ and the corresponding expansion of the ‘realm of freedom’ can occur by eliminating unnecessary labour and sharing the remaining work among everyone.

The paradox of capitalist production is that ‘necessary labour time’ that corresponds to the reproduction of the labour power of individual workers is actually spent on producing an enormous collection of unnecessary products. In other words, from the social and ecological standpoint, a large part of necessary labour is already *unnecessary* labour. This manifests in the widespread phenomena of ‘bullshit jobs’ (Graeber 2018), that is, jobs that even workers themselves know are meaningless for society. Even if these meaningless jobs are eliminated in socialism, this does not negatively affect the prosperity

of society and the well-being of its members because they were meaningless and unproductive of use-values from the beginning. Well-being can even improve because spending a large part of one's life upon meaningless jobs is harmful for mental health and these jobs also create meaningless products such as excessive advertisements, intimidation lawsuits, and high-frequency trading. Furthermore, this kind of meaningless labour consumes a lot of energy and resources as well as the support of care workers. The elimination of bullshit jobs would not only reduce social labour time but also immediately reduce environmental impacts without waiting for unrealistic technological advancements in the future.

Certainly, surplus labour and surplus products will remain necessary to some extent to safeguard against unexpected natural disasters, wars and famines.¹³ However, once the aim of social production is emancipated from the pressure of infinite capital accumulation, there is no need to produce an enormous and even wasteful amount of surplus products. The elimination of excessive surplus products is fully compatible with Marx's insight into the steady-state economy. This counts as 'the basic prerequisite' for the realm of freedom to truly bloom in a post-scarcity economy. In fact, utopians of the post-scarcity economy typically assume 15–25 hours work per week, but this does not necessarily require full-automation of the labour process (Benanav 2020). On the contrary, it is possible to realise such a post-work society by sharing essential work among all the members of society. However, this way of reducing work hours is incompatible with the principle of profit-making and economic growth.

Third, degrowth communism transforms the remaining realm of necessity in order to increase workers' autonomy and make the content of work more attractive. This transformation of work is essential because the realm of necessity inevitably remains in a post-revolutionary society. One need not be pessimistic about the transhistorical necessity of labour. As seen above, Marx argued for abolishing 'the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour', placing a high value on 'the all-round development of the individual through labour.'¹⁴ Labour becomes 'life's prime want' (*MECW* 24: 87). Here Marx adopted a 'more optimistic view' of emancipatory labour (Klagge 1986: 776).

Through the real subsumption of labour under capital, cooperation and the division of labour reinforce domination and discipline over workers. The increase of productive forces under capitalism accelerates due to market competition only to establish the 'despotism of capital' (*Capital* I: 793). In this context, the first step for degrowth communism is to abolish the excessive division of labour that turns workers into a partial existence not capable of

autonomously collaborating with others to produce an entire product. Marx's strategy for modifying work, when understood in a non-productivist manner, differs decisively from the emancipation of humans from labour through full automation.¹⁵ In his opinion, the problem of capitalist production is that labour lost its content due to the boring repetition of simple tasks without any skill or autonomy, while full automation can strengthen this tendency without making labour 'life's prime want'. In order to end this alienation of work, Marx argued for abolishing 'the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour'. De-division of labour and the expulsion of those machines that deprive workers of their autonomy and independence in the labour process slows down the economy and creates more attractive work as the basis of individual self-realization.¹⁶

Although Marx focused on the need to secure 'attractive work, the individual's self-realization' (*Grundrisse*: 611), this does not mean that labour becomes 'play' even in a post-capitalist society, as Charles Fourier once advocated. Indeed, Marx cautioned that this 'in no way means that it becomes mere fun, mere amusement, as Fourier, with *grisette*-like naivete, conceives it'. He continued to argue that

... really free working, e.g. composing, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion. The work of material production can achieve this character only (1) when its social character is posited, (2) when it is of a scientific and at the same time general character. (*Grundrisse*: 611–12)

Marx acknowledged that certain kinds of labour continue to exist in post-capitalism and cause suffering and pain as they are boring and tiresome. These kinds of work need to be reduced with the aid of new technologies. Alternatively, a just society needs to fairly allocate dirty or unpleasant tasks through work rotations instead of imposing them on those with less power.¹⁷ If excessive division of labour is replaced by fairer rotation of work and equal distribution of collaborative work, this protection of the 'general character' of labour is likely to slow the production process, but this is welcome in degrowth communism.

Fourth, the abolition of market competition for profits in degrowth communism also deaccelerates the economy:

in the absence of market compulsions, it is more likely that the realm of necessity would change slowly, by adapting innovations from the realm of freedom. The practical implementation of those innovations might take a long time, since the rush to implement changes in process would no longer be enforced by market competition, but instead would need to

be decided through coordination among various committees. (Benanav 2020: 92)

In this vein, Aaron Benanav also recognizes that there will be ‘no built-in growth trajectory’ in such a post-capitalist system.¹⁸

Finally, what Marx demanded as the abolition of the ‘antithesis between mental and physical labour’ in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is of great significance. This transcendence of the antithesis should not be confused with the de-division between material labour and immaterial labour. Marx’s usage of mental and physical labour rather corresponds to Harry Braverman’s concepts of ‘conception’ and ‘execution’ respectively (Braverman 1998). The problem of the despotism of capital lies in the total deprivation of workers’ subjective power of ‘conception’, so that they are subordinated to the command of capital that decides what, how and how much they produce independently of their will and desires. As a result of the real subsumption, workers simply execute according to the imperative and command of capital. By contrast, the reunification of conception and execution requires establishing substantive equality in the production process among producers beyond their formal equality within market exchange. Marx wrote about communal production from this perspective:

The communal character of production would make the product into a communal, general product from the outset. The exchange which originally takes place in production – which *would not be an exchange of exchange values but of activities*, – determined by *communal needs and communal purposes* – would from the outset include the participation of the individuals in the communal world of products. (*Grundrisse*: 171; emphasis in original)

The key here is the active participation of workers in deciding what, how and how much they produce. This democratic production is the direct antithesis of the ‘despotic’ character of capitalist production. Associated producers more actively participate in the decision-making process without the imposition of the will of the few. Hierarchical control is incompatible with Marx’s vision of providing more autonomy to the associated producers, but without hierarchy, it takes more time to mediate between different opinions and reach a consensus. Since the increase of productive forces under capitalism relies upon the undemocratic and top-down character of the production process with the concentration of power in the hands of the few, democratic decision-making in the workplace inevitably slows down the entire process of production. The USSR was not able to accept this and imposed bureaucratic control upon social production. Through collective decision-making processes, workers have more room to reflect upon the necessity of their products, egalitarian

relations of class, gender and race, and environmental impacts. Thus, Giorgos Kallis (2017: 12) concludes: ‘Genuine democratic socialism cannot grow at the pace of capitalism, which sidelines and destroys what slows it down.’

Taking into account these five transformations that Marx demanded as conditions of socialism, one may wonder how they could be achieved without degrowth. They also help explain why degrowth communism is more likely to repair the metabolic rift than capitalism. Furthermore, economic growth does not become green simply because it occurs in socialism. As long as economic growth is founded upon the biophysical process of production and consumption, growth is not sustainable after a certain point *in any society*. In other words, Marx’s ecosocialism needs to be specified as a degrowth one, and this is the conclusion that Marx arrived at after seriously studying natural sciences and pre-capitalist societies after 1868.

It should be clear by now that socialism promotes a social transition to a degrowth economy. The regulation of capital’s reckless attempt to valorize itself creates a greater chance of reducing the working day and thus the environmental impact. More autonomy for workers who are free from the market competition also gives them opportunities to reflect on the meaning of work and consumption. Social planning is indispensable to banning excessive and dirty production and to staying within planetary boundaries while satisfying basic social needs. These transformations reinforce the possibility of slowing down and scaling down the economy in order to create a more sustainable and egalitarian economy. Although it was never recognized during the 20th century, Marx’s idea of degrowth communism is more important than ever today because it increases the chance of human survival in the Anthropocene.

NOTES

- 1 The COVID-19 pandemic has also demonstrated the possibility of pulling an emergency brake on economic activities for the sake of protecting human lives. The obvious problem was that it created serious disturbances under an economic system that presupposes constant economic growth.
- 2 Latouche (2006) used to characterize degrowth in this way. In addition, Herman E. Daly (1992) is far from endorsing Marx’s socialism as discussed below. The shift in tone can be also found in Tim Jackson (2021), although he is far from endorsing socialism or communism.
- 3 Harvey (2004) expands Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation to an analysis of neoliberalism as ‘accumulation by dispossession’. While Harvey focuses on the political project of taking wealth from the working class for the capitalist class, the problem of nature remains largely absent (see Chapter 4).

- 4 This is Marx's consistent standpoint since the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 (see Saito 2017).
- 5 The 'unprotected' (*vogelfrei*) proletariat did not automatically become diligent workers. It took a long time to subjugate them to the command of capital with punishment and discipline. In this sense, primitive accumulation is not a one-time process but must be repeated. Yet, once the regime of capital is firmly established, the situation looks quite favourable for it. Since their objective existence was basically secured, slaves and serfs worked only out of fear under direct personal domination, while workers in capitalist society work 'freely', which make them more productive in spite of the absence of such an external threat of physical violence:

In comparison with that of the slave, this work is more productive, because more intensive and more continuous, for the slave only works under the impulse of external fear, but not for his own existence, which does not belong to him; the free worker, in contrast, is driven on by his own WANTS. The consciousness of free self-determination – of freedom – makes the latter a much better worker than the former, and similarly the feeling of RESPONSIBILITY. (*MECW* 34: 98–9; emphasis in original)

- 6 The contrast of wage labour with slavery should not eliminate the similarity between them. Marx used the expression 'wage slavery' to highlight this point. In one passage, he even argues that the system of wage-labour is nothing but 'veiled slavery':

While the cotton industry introduced child-slavery into England, in the United States it gave the impulse for the transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery into a system of commercial exploitation. In fact the veiled slavery of the wage labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal. (*Capital* I: 925)

- 7 Marx did not fully distinguish between private property and individual property in the second edition of *Capital* as individual property appears in chapter 25 in an utterly different sense (*MEGA* II/6: 685). In the French edition of 1875, Marx thus corrected that to 'private property' (*MEGA* II/7: 682). Engels did not reflect this modification in the third German edition. This implies that Engels was not as sensitive as Marx about the difference between these concepts.
- 8 Whereas John Bellamy Foster (2008: 96) highlighted the existence of Marx's ecological critique of capitalism in the *Grundrisse*, it is not necessarily clear in my opinion whether Marx was fully ecologically conscious at that time. It is relatively easy to find productivist statements in the *Grundrisse*.
- 9 The characterization of 'left-wing libertarianism' is also incompatible with Marx's intensive engagement with precapitalist communes after 1868.
- 10 It is helpful to recall that Ernest Mandel (1992: 206) defined 'abundance' as 'saturation of demand'. He continues to argue that 'a large number of goods already fall into this category in the richer countries – not only for millionaires but for the mass of the population'. Abundance already exists, but it cannot be felt as such under capitalism.

- 11 The abolition of the reified power of capital alone does not guarantee the realization of sustainable production because production is a material process, and burning fossil fuel means the same for the climate whether that happens in capitalism or socialism. The point is that non-capitalist society expands the room for more conscious control of production and consumption once freed from the endless competition and endless accumulation of capital.
- 12 This is the main reason why these sectors inevitably remain underdeveloped in capitalism and are characterized by low wages and long working hours.
- 13 Thus, Marx highlighted that surplus labour and surplus products always existed in any society. However, only under capitalism are they extended almost infinitely.
- 14 'Labour' needs to include reproductive labour. It should not be reduced to the capitalist category of wage labour.
- 15 The position put forward here is different from the abolition of abstract labour (Postone 1996). Considering its material character, abstract labour is not peculiar to the capitalist mode of production, and it cannot be abolished, although value can be transcended with private labour. Both concrete labour and abstract labour remain in the post-capitalist society, but the persistence of abstract labour does not result in domination by real abstraction because value is no longer the organizing principle of social reproduction.
- 16 Thus, the slowing down of the economy in favour of the autonomy of everyone in the production process poses a limitation to shortening of work hours. This makes it all the more important to transform the content of labour into an attractive one. At the same time, it does not exclude the possibility of introducing new technologies that will allow everyone to work more freely and autonomously.
- 17 Another way of allocating work is a different way of remuneration. In capitalism, high-skilled labour is often characterized by high income, which creates economic inequality. In degrowth communism these jobs will be remunerated with shorter working hours, and not with a higher salary.
- 18 One should add that this course of trajectory is not inevitable in a degrowth economy. One can imagine that freely associated producers can come up with more innovative and original ideas once freed from the constant pressure of profit-making. For example, researchers in academic institutions are not driven by profit-making, but their motivation comes from intellectual curiosity and joy, leading to some epoch-making discoveries.