Labour and Species-Being: Making Human Being(s)

Mike Sanders
(University of Manchester, UK)

Abstract: For some Marxist, despite playing a crucial role throughout the Paris Manuscripts Marx's notion of "species-being" has a claim to be considered as the concept of "pre-Marxist" and it is still suspicious, and then the notion of "species-being" have not been emphasized by Marxism. Through analyzing Marx himself how to use the terms of labour and species-being and exploring the division between the conception of need and want in Marx's context is not correct, this paper argues that labour and species-being are important factors for the existence of human being. This paper proposes that "species being" is a forgotten concept whose retrieval and development is necessary to the renewal of Marxism.

Despite playing a crucial role throughout the Paris Manuscripts Marx's notion of "species-being" has a claim to be considered as one of Marxism's forgotten insights. The term does not appear in Marx's subsequent writings, leading some Marxist theorists (most notably Louis Althusser) to argue that the concept is "pre-Marxist", representing the final flowering of Marx's "Left Hegelianism" before the emergence of Marxism proper. This article argues that "species-being" serves as a form of shorthand for a set of limited claims about human potentiality which Marxism abandons at its peril. In effect, it proposes that "species being" is a forgotten concept whose retrieval and development is necessary to the renewal of Marxism.

Within Marxism species-being has been regarded with suspicion because it is considered as the point of entry for idealist notions of "human nature" and all the
(frequently reactionary) metaphysics associated with this term. However, I want to argue that rather than serving as Marx's euphemism for "human nature", species-being represents Marx's attempt to formulate a coherent response to the complex of problems subsumed in the prior term. Moreover, even at the semantic level, the transition from "human nature" to "species-being" highlights the challenges with which Marx's thought presents us. In place of "human nature" (which is compounded of two nouns) Marx proposes a noun joined with a present participle (verb). Thus instead of the stasis suggested by the double noun, Marx uses a term which emphasises the fluidity, the developmental aspects of the conceptualised phenomenon. In addition, the use of "species" serves as a valuable reminder of our continuity with (rather than separation from) the totality of life-forms on the planet. In the face of looming ecological disaster, the importance of developing our environmental consciousness can hardly be overstated.

Following, Norman Geras, I propose treating species-being as both an explanatory and a normative concept. Indeed its explanatory power is, politically speaking, more necessary than ever given the emergence in Western Capitalism of reductive accounts of a genetically determined human nature in which the capitalist "virtues" of aggression, acquisitiveness and competition are considered to be innate and essential qualities of the "human being". Faced with these pseudo-Darwinian apologetics there is an urgent need for Marxism to develop an equally powerful narrative both of how we became and what it is to be "human". This can only be done by identifying what Geras describes as "the real basic needs and capacities inherent in our human nature". Similarly, the normative power of the concept of species-being remains necessary as a guide to action, a means of identifying both demands and strategies in the current moment.

If species-being is to play an important role in a revived Marxism, then it is necessary to begin with a full understanding of Marx's own use of the term. As always, the return to Marx must be undertaken in search of the original problems and questions, rather than seeing Marx as providing ready-made answers. In other words, Marx has the (essential) "first words" of the debate, not the "last word". At the centre of Marx's thinking on species-being is the notion of productive labour and in the

---

following paragraphs I want to consider the complexity of Marx's definition of productive labour, and to think about its relationship to aesthetic practice.

In the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx begins with a two-fold observation. He argues that species-being is constituted by conscious productive labour:

> For in the first place, labour, life-activity, productive life itself...is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life-activity.\(^1\)

Furthermore, Marx notes that in capitalist societies this "life-activity" is frequently experienced as alienated labour:

> [This] labour is external to the worker i. e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself...His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. (75)

Marx, therefore, identifies labour as a human as both necessity and need. Labour is necessary to produce the essential material requirements of life (food, clothing, shelter). However, Marx argues, as a result of this necessity, labour itself becomes a need.

At this juncture it is necessary to pause and remind ourselves just how (at least in terms of Western thought) audacious this revisioning of labour is. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, work is understood as a curse, as punishment for man's disobedience. This view of work also informs the powerful traditions of Utilitarianism and classical liberal political economy. In the former, work is understood as pain rather than pleasure and, as a result, the latter regards labour as something which must either be compelled or incentivised. The anti-capitalist/bohemian attitude which rejects work and celebrates idleness (which emerges in the late nineteenth century) also shares this fundamentally negative view of labour.

---

\(^1\) Robert C. Tucker ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd edition). New York; W. W. Norton & Co., 1978. All subsequent quotations from Marx are taken from this source and the page references will be given in parentheses in the body of the text itself.
In opposition to these intellectual traditions, Marx conceives of labour as a need. Ironically, it is the deformation of species-being wrought by alienated labour that enabled Marx to perceive its positive attributes; consider his account of the results of alienated labour:

[Alienated labour] is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker’s own physical and mental energy, his personal life...[is] an activity which is turned against him. (75)

[...]

It is true that labour produces for the rich wonderful things—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity. (73)

The contradictory results of capitalist production—captured through those binary oppositions of riches/privations and palaces/hovels—continues to play an important role in Marxist theory. Less attention has been paid to the terms of that final binary—beauty/deformity. Yet the idea of beauty as an attribute of labour is one to which Marx returns in the Paris Manuscripts;

An animal forms things 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 things in accordance with the laws of beauty. (76)

Thus for Marx the creation of beauty is an immanent aspect of human productive activity. Indeed, one might go so far as to claim that in order to be a fully human activity, production must involve the creation of beauty.

Again, it is necessary to reflect on the radical challenge to conventional thought (including much Marxist thought) which this (expanded) definition of productive labour offers. There is a tendency within Marxism to conceptualise production in hierarchical terms. First, there is production undertaken to meet the most fundamental human needs (such as food, clothing and shelter). Thereafter, supposedly “higher” forms of production (such as art) emerge as a social order regularly produces sufficient
surplus value to enable it to break away from bare subsistence. This is often theorized in terms of a move from "needs" to "wants".

However, I wish to argue that the needs/wants distinction is problematic (if not erroneous) for a variety of reasons. Firstly, those basic "human" needs (particularly food and shelter) are more properly understood as belonging to what the Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts* calls "animal functions". This is to say that these are matters of biology rather than culture (and this has implications which will be considered later in this article). In addition, the needs/wants dichotomy is a false distinction. At its best it is a confused attempt to find a moral foundation for an economic critique. In this naïve formulation, needs-based production is a moral necessity, whilst wants-based production tends to luxury/decadence and is morally suspect. At best this trend lends itself to asceticism (and in Anglophone countries this tendency is reinforced by Puritanism with all its attendant problems), whilst at worst it underpins a brutalising, dehumanising attitude to humanity captured, so acutely, in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

O! reason not the need; our basest beggars
Are in the poorest things superfluous;
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's. (ll. iv)

However, its main weakness is that it is analytically useless for the purposes of understanding capitalist commodity production. For, as Marx notes so perceptively at the beginning of *Capital*, commodity production simply confounds the needs/wants distinction:

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort, or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. (303)

As Marx recognised so acutely the fundamental amorality of the market, precludes the possibility of generating an immanent, moral critique of market relations. This is
not to say that a moral critique is impossible, simply that such criticism depends on the importation of moral values from another sphere.

Marx’s fundamental critique of capitalism rests on an analysis of how, not what, it produces. As the Paris Manuśripts make clear, labour is species-being; the goal of productive labour is nothing less than the production of human beings themselves. The shocking paradox of alienated labour is that it represents the active unmaking of human beings:

As a result [of alienated labour], therefore, man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal. (74)

This aspect of Marx’s thought has been richly developed by Lukács, amongst others, and ideas of “alienation” and “reification” have come to play an important role in the development of what is often called “Western Marxism”. However, the importance of species-being in the formulation of these concepts has all too often been occluded which in turn has diminished the critical yield of these concepts.

The crucial role played by the conception of need is all too often neglected in discussions of Marx’s account of labour as species-being. In part, this is because the understanding of need is frequently contaminated by the needs/wants dichotomy (discussed earlier in this article). This dichotomy has all too often prevented us from recognising the sophisticated understanding of need developed in the Paris Manuscripts. Indeed, it could be argued that in the Paris Manuscripts, Marx rejects the self-sufficient, autonomous monad of classical liberal thought and instead identifies need as the essential quality of human-being and human beings alike.

Initially, Marx contemplates need at the level of the individual human being and argues that in a socialist society need will become the synthesis of those contradictions which exist under capitalism (where need is predominantly experienced as a negative phenomenon, as the antithesis of wealth);

It will be seen how in place of the wealth and poverty of political economy come...
the rich human being and rich human need. The rich human being is simultaneously
the human being in need of a totality of human life-activities—the man in whom his
own realization exists as an inner necessity, as need. (91)

However, it is clear from the discussion that follows shortly after this passage that
Marx understands this particular "rich human being" not as an isolated monad but as a
representative of a fully socialised humanity. As the following passage makes clear,
these changes cannot be achieved in isolation but depend on the transformation of the
mode of production:

We have seen what significance, given socialism, the wealth of human needs
has, and what significance, therefore, both a new mode of production and a new
object of production have; a new manifestation of the forces of human nature and a
new enrichment of human nature. (91—93)

For Marx the development of the human sensorium constitutes both the means and
the end of the desired enrichment of "human nature". As with his discussion of
"need", it is necessary to recognise his radical re-definition of the "senses" as the
product of an ongoing historical development:

...the senses of the social man are other senses than those of the non-social
man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the
richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in
short, senses capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as
essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five
senses but also the so-called mental senses—the practical senses (will, love,
etc.)—in a word, human sense—the humanness of the senses—comes to be by
virtue of its object, by virtue of humanized nature. The forming of the five senses is a
labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. (88/9)

Two aspects of this account deserve attention. Firstly, Marx clearly posits both the
multiplicity and the potentiality of the senses as a stark contrast to capitalism's tendency
to reduce all human senses to that of "the sense of possessing, of having" (87).
Secondly, Marx's insistence on integrating the "physical" and the "mental" senses,
not only avoids the mind/body dualism but also provides another reason for rejecting
the higher/lower needs hierarchy as a pernicious dis-integration of the reality of human
being.

Intriguingly, Marx's insights were anticipated by the English Romantic poet,
William Blake who at a very early stage of capitalism's development grasped that the
increasing dominance of capitalist relations of production in tandem with Enlightenment
philosophy (itself both product of and contributor to these economic developments) was
producing an increasingly atomised society which was already threatening the full
development of our species being:

They told me that night & day were all that I could see;
They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up,
And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle,
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red, round globe, hot burning,
Till all from life I was obliterated and erased.
(William Blake, The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, lines 61–65)

Blake expresses in symbolic form one of the central contradictions of capitalist
society, namely that its theoretical suppression of its (practical) knowledge of the
inherent sociality of human beings, paradoxically deprives human beings of their full
individuality whilst simultaneously proclaiming its commitment to the maximisation of
human freedom in the abstract.

Indeed in the Paris Manuscripts, Marx (unknowingly) repeats Blake's view of
alienated labour as a form of negative kenosis in which the worker yields his/her inner
wealth to the outer world. Marx notes:

In place of all these physical and mental senses there has therefore come the
sheer estrangement of all these senses—the sense of having. The human being had
to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to
the outer world. (87)

In many spiritual philosophies kenosis, or the emptying of the self, is regarded as
the necessary prelude to experiencing the full richness and vitality of the world. Under
劳动与类存在：构造人类

迈克·桑德斯
（英国曼彻斯特大学）

【内容摘要】本文认为在某些马克思主义者看来，“类存在”这个概念尽管在《巴黎手稿》中起到了重要的作用，但这个概念是属于“前马克思”的，后来被马克思本人所抛弃，因此，这个概念是值得怀疑的。关于“类存在”的思想也就没有得到马克思主义的重视。本文通过分析马克思本人是如何使用劳动与类存在这两个概念的，以及批评了把“需要”与“需求”这两个概念对立起来的观点，从而认为，劳动和类存在是人类之所以成为人类的重要特征。本文认为类存在是一个被遗忘概念，对它的回复和发展是马克思主义复兴所必需的。

【作者简介】迈克·桑德斯（Mike Sanders）是英国曼彻斯特大学艺术、语言与文学院本科招生部主任，英国文学研究高级讲师。他主要研究英国宪章派诗歌，2004年完成《英国宪章诗歌》一书。
conditions of alienated labour, the reciprocal moment of enrichment is experienced not by the labourer but by the owner of that labour-power. Moreover, even the latter experiences this moment in a degraded form. For having denied the full individuality of the labourer, "enrichment" can only occur at the crude material level. In effect, the qualitative dimension of enrichment is non-realisable and in its place its quantitative aspects come to dominate. This phenomenon manifests itself in two ways within capitalist society; it is there in the oft-remarked greed of its elites, but is also present in the consumerism which is encouraged in both the middle and working classes. In both cases, the experience of "having a lot [of things]" is intended to compensate for or to obscure the impoverished nature of that initial "having"—because capitalism cannot foster a multiplicity (or richness) of ways of "being" it must ruthlessly encourage and enforce the cult of "having".

Yet, as Marx recognised, even alienated labour contains a mystified, social truth, namely, that human production is necessarily production for the other. Indeed, we might say that whereas alienated labour is production for an other, non-alienated production will be production for the other. This is a significant insight because it avoids the erroneous conflation of the process of objectification with that of alienation. (This conflation is particularly prevalent in brands of post-modern theory where it functions to deny the very possibility of authentic being and thus provides the basis for postmodernism's disenchanted acquiescence with the status quo). Instead the Paris Manuscripts hold out the possibility of the relationship to objects/things serving to realise the relationship with the other. (Again, the fetishism of commodities—in which the relationship with the thing disguises the relationship with the other—provides a socially mystified version of this truth). Thus, for Marx:

...the sensuous appropriation for and by man of the human essence and of human life, of objective man, of human achievements—is not to be conceived merely in the sense of possessing, of having...Each of his human relations to the world...are in their orientation to the object, the appropriation of that object, the appropriation of the human world; (87/88)