



## Has (even Marxist) political ecology really transcended the metabolic rift?

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### ABSTRACT

Marx's concept of metabolic rift has emerged as an important category in ecological Marxism, but has received relatively little attention in political ecology. This appears to reflect a combination of confusion regarding the conceptual basis of metabolic rift and theoretical antagonisms between its materialist dialectic and dominant post-humanist approaches in hybridist political ecology. In this essay, we argue that stronger engagement with metabolic-rift scholarship in political ecology could strengthen work in both areas. We briefly outline the possibilities for such engagement by first clarifying some of the conceptual confusion regarding the metabolic rift and its material-dialectical approach to human alienation and the socio-ecological contradictions and crises of capital accumulation and human development within capitalism. We then briefly discuss some of the key points of contention between this approach and dominant hybridist paradigms in political ecology. We conclude that, despite these conflicts, the concept of metabolic rift could provide essential critical contributions to political ecology's explanatory and emancipatory efforts.

### 1. Introduction

The convergence of profound ecological, political and economic crises in the twenty-first century has prompted reevaluation of the nature-society relationship in both mainstream and radical circles. In this context, [Burkett \(1999\)](#), [Foster \(2000\)](#) and [Saito \(2017\)](#) have demonstrated that what we commonly consider ecological concerns were not merely ancillary to Marx and Engels's work, but a fundamental component of their critique of capital. From this work emerged the concept of metabolic rift, which plays an important role in articulating and responding to the aforementioned convergent crises as organic to the capital system ([Foster et al., 2010](#)).

Engagement with the concept of metabolic rift in political ecology, however, appears minimal at best ([Barca and Bridge, 2015](#)). Despite the commitment of metabolic-rift research to overturning “the false dichotomization of Man [sic] versus Nature” ([Kovats-Bernat, 2001, p. 73](#)), this work has been criticized for perpetuating a nature-society binary ([Moore, 2011](#); [Schneider and McMichael, 2010](#)), and in urban political ecology for translating this binary onto a rural-urban one ([Wachsmuth, 2012](#)). Contrasting the concept to “relational

Marxism”—particularly the production of nature thesis ([Smith, 2008](#))—and hybridist approaches in “left” geography, [Castree \(2015\)](#) argues that metabolic rift's dualism encourages “nature-washing” and ignores signs of “a new capitalist regime whereby the task of producing a usable nature begins to pass from so-called external to social nature” ([Smith, 2007, p. 26](#)). Political ecology, in contrast, is claimed to have transcended such binaries through hybridization of Marxist concepts with actor-network theory (ANT) and other paradigms (i.e., post-humanism) premised on the transcendence of humanism through biotechnological mixing and rejection of anthropocentrism, distinctions between human and non-human nature and other “Cartesian dualisms” ([Heynen, 2014](#); [Sloterdijk, 2016](#); [White et al., 2017](#)).

In response to these criticisms, [Foster \(2016\)](#) explains that metabolic rift is rooted in a non-dualistic, materialist dialectic, and critiques a widespread social monism in post-humanist political ecology. Some critics have responded by suggesting that metabolic-rift scholars are engaged in academic sectarianism and should instead pursue hybridization of their concepts with dominant post-humanist paradigms (e.g., [White et al., 2017](#)).

Although we support further engagement with metabolic-rift

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scholarship in political ecology and environmental geography, inherent antagonisms exist between the materialist dialectic of metabolic rift and the post-humanism of various hybridist approaches. Here we consider the prospects for engagement by first clarifying some key aspects of the metabolic rift, and then briefly discuss some of its fundamental conflicts with dominant hybridist paradigms.<sup>1</sup> Despite these antagonisms, we maintain that political ecology could benefit from deeper engagement with metabolic-rift scholarship and vice-versa.

## 2. Metabolic rift and analytical rifts

Metabolic rift is rooted in the open-ended, materialist dialectic of classical Marxism, best described by Creaven (2015) as a realist science that sublates both humanism and structuralism. This entails an open dialectic, in which an objective, external reality comprised of multiple totalities exists beyond the range of human knowledge, and of which human thought is itself a constituent process incapable of encompassing reality in its entirety (Mészáros, 2005; Rees, 1998). This does not, however, translate into a nature/external-society/internal binary, but conceptualizes nature as both internal and external to the humans objectifying it (Creaven, 2002). Conversely, although society operates within this material reality of nature, it cannot be reduced to naturalistic determinations, as human thought and consciousness cannot be reduced to other parts of nature. This complex relationship is best described as an internally differentiated totality, or unity of opposites, in which humans are a form of nature differentiated to, but united with, itself (Mészáros, 2005; Rees, 1998), such that neither moment within the unity can be regarded as wholly separate from nor identical to the other, and thus neither wholly internal nor wholly external to the other.

Recognition of this oppositional unity as reference to a stratified reality is essential to understanding the conceptual basis of metabolic rift in the “alienated mediation” of society with nature through labor (Creaven, 2002; Marx, 1974). Productive activity, which for Marx takes the form of social labor, is a first-order mediation in humanity’s social metabolism with the rest of nature (Marx, 1990, p. 283), and fundamental to human existence (Marx, 1959). In capitalist society, this ontological necessity is transformed into alienated labor through a series of reified, second-order mediations in productive activity, entailing alienation of human beings from nature, themselves, their species, and other humans. Alienated labor presupposes these separations, reflects them, and compounds them (Mészáros, 2005). The metabolic rift refers to the subjugation of this alienated social metabolism to capital’s “ultimately uncontrollable mode of social metabolic control” (Mészáros, 1995, p. 41), which in turn produces metabolic rifts (plural), whereby ecological cycles and flows are disrupted or even ruptured, as capital attempts to bend material reality to the ceaseless accumulation of an immaterial substance (value). This alienation, which is predicated on the non-identity of nature and society, is elevated to the level of a Cartesian binary and reified through the capitalist conception of value, encouraging the dualism of bourgeois philosophy (Fraser, 2014).

Grasping this differentiated totality may seem to entail a degree of *methodological dualism* in the abstractions necessary to explain the underlying or structural factors that produce the surface appearances of reality but proscribes any *ontological dualism* or separation of analytical abstractions from their totality (Saito, 2017). The Marxian—and Hegelian—dialectic always posits the category of mediation as a third term and the most essential aspect of a changing reality, pointing to totality and consistently denying dualism.

In the Marxian view, the concrete unity of nature and society reflected in material use-values is in absolute contradiction to the supposed non-identity of nature and society represented in capitalism’s fetishized conception of the abstract value-calculus, in which all materiality (embodied in use-value) is conceptually absent. Marx did not

invent the labor theory of value, nor did he advocate it as a normative principle, but rather criticized it, including the way it allows capital to appropriate nature as a “free gift” (Burkett, 1999). Capital’s ability to posit socially necessary labor-time as the standard measure of value is predicated on its ability to conceptually separate the layers of human labor in a commodity from the “material substratum ... furnished by nature without human intervention” (Marx, 1990, p. 133), and this abstract “value” then becomes the universal standard of wealth in capitalist society (Burkett, 2009; Fraser, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Refusal to recognize this analytical distinction between natural and social with respect to capital’s value circuit and what it externalizes—which also includes non-wage labor necessary to social reproduction (Barca, 2017; Foster and Clark, 2018; Fraser, 2014)—produces efforts to transcend or supplant the labor theory of value that reinstitute the commodity fetishism that Marx’s explication and critique of capitalist value-theory resolves (e.g., Taşdemir Yaşın, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

This conceptual clarification is useful in contextualizing Marx’s analysis of problems regarding soil fertility and urban contamination associated with capitalist agriculture and urbanization as an instance of metabolic rift (see Marx, 1990, 1991). His discussion of these problems illustrates how his critique of capitalist political economy was informed by contemporary ecological concerns, and demonstrates the manner in which, through his materialist-dialectical approach, he recognized these problems as organically linked to the immiseration and exploitation of the working class (Foster, 2000; Saito, 2017). Thus, while Marx’s clearest articulation of metabolic rift was in the context of the rifts in capitalist agriculture and industrialization, the concept does not posit either of these as its “historical origins” (contra Schneider and McMichael, 2010), which instead lie in human alienation (Weston, 2014). Importantly, this implies that metabolic rifts (like alienation) are not unique to capitalism but are nonetheless quantitatively transformed by the industrial intensification and global integration of social metabolism (Barca and Bridge, 2015), and qualitatively transformed by the reification of capitalist second-order mediations (Mészáros, 2005).

Marx’s analysis of metabolic rift also illustrates the importance of distinguishing between capitalist crises of accumulation and those of human development. The former refers to instances where the depletion of particular resources or ecological conditions begins to undermine profitability or other conditions of capital accumulation, but do not generally pose a systemic threat, as capital typically adjusts—although at the cost of exacerbating the contradictions in the long-term—through combinations of technological and spatio-temporal shifts and fixes (Clark and York, 2012; Ekers and Prudham, 2017), and class coordination through the state (Harvey, 2006). Simultaneously, however, capitalism’s metabolic rifts produce intensifying crises in the conditions of human development, which are frequently exacerbated by the measures that capital employs (Burkett, 2009). Rather than a “millenarian and apocalyptic proclamation that ecocide is imminent” (Harvey, 1997, p. 194), metabolic-rift analysis suggests the sobering perspective that capital accumulation can continue in conditions where the possibilities for sustainable human development are undermined. This provides a basis on which to critique the socio-ecological contradictions of capital without suggesting that such contradictions will somehow bring about the abolition of capital in the absence of a conscious, revolutionary struggle (Burkett, 2003; Foster et al., 2010).

## 3. Points of contention

In positing nature’s simultaneous internality and externality to

<sup>2</sup> On capitalist valuations of nature, including a rebuttal of claims that Marx is somehow responsible for such valuations, see Burkett (1999).

<sup>3</sup> The primacy of class struggle in this respect is frequently criticized in liberal treatments of classical Marxism, but consistently defended by such Marxists, who nonetheless theorize the intersections of class and other forms of domination and resistance (Callinicos, 1992; Cliff et al., 2003).

<sup>1</sup> We treat the literature cited as representative rather than comprehensive.

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