Nick Dyer-Witheford

1844/2004/2044: The Return of Species-Being

Introduction

After a long period of neglect, the question of ‘species-being’ has resurfaced in Marxist theory, forming an important topic of discussion in recent works by David Harvey and Gayatri Spivak on capitalist globalisation, and in Jason Read’s re-examination of the mode of production.¹ This outbreak is conjunctural, not coincidental. The problem Marx addressed in 1844 under the rubric of species-being was the appropriation by a nascent industrial capitalism of humanity’s capacity to co-operatively change the conditions of its collective existence—indeed, to transform its own very nature. In 2004, this issue is hurled back onto the table by a nascent informational capitalism—the capitalism of the Human Genome Project and the World Wide Web—with redoubled force, a force which, nonetheless, promises to be only a faint, anticipatory tremor of the convulsions to come by, say, 2044. This paper therefore continues the renewed discussion of species-being, proposing that the young Marx’s concept, remodulated by encounters with contemporary

theory, clearly names the stakes in the emergence of high-technology capital and of global movements opposing it.

The major site of Marx’s account of species-being is the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (henceforward *1844 Manuscripts*) and, in particular, his famous discussion of alienation.² Here, Marx analyses how private ownership of the means of production subjects humans to a fourfold deprivation: estrangement from the products of their own labour; from co-operative relations with fellow beings; from the nature that is transformed through their activity; and, from their own historical possibilities of self-development, or ‘species-being [Gattungswesen]’³.

Subsequently, species-being has had a chequered career within Marxism: prolonged invisibility, then brief popularity, followed by heavy criticism. Having adopted the concept from Feuerbach as a keystone in the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx shortly thereafter abandoned it, bar a fleeting return in the *Grundrisse*. Because the *1844 Manuscripts* were unpublished until 1932, species-being did not enter the lexicon of Leninism. For this very reason, Western Marxisms, including the Frankfort school and various Freudo-Marxisms, embraced it after the Second World War, departing from Soviet orthodoxy via a critique of human ‘alienation’ from innate capacities.⁴

This path was, however, no sooner opened than it was challenged by Louis Althusser’s claim that the works of 1844 lay on the wrong side of a fatal break, tainted with an idealism that the mature Marx rejected.⁵ From this point of view, the concept of species-being was connected to an essentialist concept of human nature unfolding in a teleological fore-ordained manner. Such a notion was anathema to an anti-humanism that believed the mature Marx had incinerated all philosophical notions of ‘man’ in his analysis of modes of production that generated subjects purely out of the multilevelled machinations of their own apparatus. The concept of species-being has thus been for some time caught in stand-off between humanist Marxists – who love it for its emancipatory élan – and structuralist Marxists – who scorn it for residual Hegelianism.

There is, however, a more recent third position – a diagonal move out of this impasse. This might be very approximately characterised as an affirmative,