

On the Possibilities for Future Communisms: Rethinking Communism as Biocommunism¹

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Introduction

Biocommunity, while not a new concept,² has yet to be the subject of considerable academic research. Wróbel has most recently taken it up.³ Beginning with Dyer-Witthford's suggestion of a return to Marx's concept of species-being, or *Gattungswesen*,⁴ this essay will elaborate on the influence of this term in the early Marx and the role which the notion of species held in the Kyoto School. The essay concludes with an allusion to Agamben and Butler that aims to provide a much-needed discussion about the feasibility of the term biocommunity as an improved notion of communism more suitable for the current reality.

Dyer-Witthford originally proposed that the early Marx already took such a standpoint. Hence, Dyer-Witthford's original argument construed biocommunity as a return to a neglected concern with "life itself."⁵ A concern that is already present in Marx's early writings, particularly in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.⁶ Thus, biocommunity is in no way the same kind of Communism often connected with what Foucault called biopolitics: a term that delineates the usage of "diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies

2 N. Dyer-Witthford, "Species-Beings: For Biocommunity," presented at the *Historical Materialism Conference "Many Marxisms"* (2008, November 7-9).

3 S. Wróbel, "Biocommunity or Beyond the Biopolitical Paradigm," *Philosophy Study* (2020), 293-308; S. Wróbel, "Biocommunity and its Role as it Overcomes Biopolitics," *Polish Sociological Review* (2020), 301-321.

4 Dyer-Witthford, "Species-Beings."

5 *Ibid.*, 1.

6 K. Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Marx's Concept of Man*, edited by Erich Fromm, translated by Thomas B. Bottomore, New York: Continuum, 2004 [1844], 93-109.

and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of 'biopower.'⁷ Instead, biocommunism rejects such a political agenda.⁸ Biocommunism is instead an orientation towards a life without direct state control. Suppose the human species is, as Dyer-Witheford states, capable of "transforming itself, directing its own evolution."⁹ The state then becomes, at best, a dynamic construct (and at its worst, it becomes a somewhat monstrous creation à la Hobbes' Leviathan.¹⁰

Marx's Alienation

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx described four kinds of alienation that workers are subjected to: 1. *alienation from the product of their labour*; 2. *from the work process itself*; 3. *from their species-being*; and 4. *from themselves*. The relationship between the four kinds of alienation can be described as follows: the subject of Marx's inquiry (the worker) progressively becomes alienated from the world and themselves through each type of alienation they find themselves subjected to.

In the first kind of alienation, each worker is alienated from the object of their production by being waged instead of selling the fruit of their labour. This makes them a commodity that can be bought or rented on the market. The owner of the machines of production hires the skilled or the cheapest

7 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978 [1976], 140.

8 Wróbel, "Biocommunism or Beyond"; Wróbel, "Biocommunism and its Role."

9 Dyer-Witheford, "Species-Being," 1.

10 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London: The Clarendon Press, 1965 [1651].

labour to perform increasingly simple tasks. With each step towards an increased simplification (by, e.g., introducing a new piece of automatic equipment), workers find themselves in a relationship with the means of production, which increasingly sees them as cogs in the industrial process. Workers under these conditions rent their time and skill to the highest bidder – thus, they become employed. Workers can sell themselves short (if workers are abundant, wages are low, and it is often better to have a low wage than none), or they can negotiate for higher wages (if workers are scarce, wages tend to rise). Marx described this as an auction, where the owner's goal is to pay as little as possible. Without any checks or controls, Marx stipulated that “[t]he needs of the worker are thus reduced to the need to maintain him during *his work*, so that the race of workers does not die out.”¹¹

The second kind of alienation, where the workers are alienated from the mode of production, is closely connected to the first kind. The specialization of production (as seen in Fordism and later gains in automatization of production processes) means that the individual worker loses sight of the whole process of production. Instead, each worker only knows how to produce a limited number of parts needed to assemble the final product. An effect of this is that each worker's skill becomes increasingly specialized and thus also easier to come by. Despite what common sense might suggest, it is impossible for an increase in specialization to lead to the individualization of the worker. Each worker is simply a cog in the machine, and the more specialized the task, the easier it is for the owner to train someone else to perform it. Reducing complicated production processes to repetitive tasks made it possible to produce complex products without needing workers who are masters of many trades. As an example of the producing class,

11 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical,” 92.

a shoemaker was a person who could make a whole shoe, from measurements to the finished product. In capitalism, the honed skills of a single shoemaker have been divided among many unskilled workers who only know how to make a single part of the shoe.

The third kind of alienation is the alienation that workers experience from themselves. This form of alienation comes about because workers must compete against one another. Workers no longer see each other as having a connection to their common struggle for a better life and society; instead, each worker lives simply for themselves. In a sense, they are divided from each other and have lost their class cohesion. Under this regime, the workers increasingly view each other as competitors rather than equals (following this, one might also argue this follows not from the fourth but rather from the first kind of alienation). The undermining of class cohesion in capitalism is vital for production lines to run smoothly and profit margins as high as possible. Collective bargaining, a unified working class, is perhaps one of the biggest threats to the capitalist *ratio*.

Additionally, the need for surplus value in capitalism effectively means that this system depends on a certain level of unemployment (a redundant population) to keep wages low. The fragmentation of the workers, and to a large extent, the majority of the population, intensifies as jobs become fewer and wages drop. This often leads to nationalist sentiments as political parties blame the lack of employment on foreigners, migrants or refugees. Thus, capitalism's successful fracturing of class cohesion can be considered an explanation for the surge in nationalist tendencies before and after the world wars.¹²

12 E.g., T. Adorno, et al. *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York: The Norton Library, 1969 [1950]; or M. Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment*, London, New York: Verso Books, 2019.

The fourth kind of alienation directly relates to Marx's concept of species-being. In this form of alienation, the workers are alienated from the processes and products of production or from each other and their biological needs. This alienation focuses on the fact that the workers are no longer treated "as a *universal* and consequently a free being."¹³ Since capitalism treats workers' humanity as less than universal and free, it warps each individual's life into a parody. Under capitalism, the needs humans share with animals become the *telos* of work: each worker works to afford; eating, drinking and procreating, while the work itself becomes a means for securing the satisfaction of these needs by fracturing humans' connection with their nature, which capitalism does by imposing a strict mind-body dualism that gives preferential treatment to contemplation (a position that is criticized in the 11th thesis on Feuerbach.¹⁴ By making the human body a simple means to an end, as if it were an object like food, shelter or clothing, capitalism makes basic needs into the highest. The term species-being is the specific category that makes it possible to delineate humans and their alienation from their bodies or nature. This alienation follows from a particular understanding of (human) nature that equates nature with something humanity can conquer by making it useful. The workers treat their bodies as tools that can be sold or rented out. Such a situation facilitates understanding the body as a possible site for profit generation, making old age and bodily degeneration a natural enemy of capitalism. Alienation from one's species-being means that humans have come to regard work as a means to fulfil their basic needs. This starkly opposes Marx's understanding of labour as a life-affirming activity in itself – labour for the sake of life is the most

13 Marx, "Economic and Philosophical," 83.

14 K. Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Marx/Engels Selected Works Vol. 1*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976 [1845], 15.

human activity. However, in capitalism, labour has become a means pressed into the service of survival. By making the body a vessel containing the mind and making work a necessary activity for securing life, the capitalist mind-body dualism reasserts itself as a natural state of affairs. However, as Marx writes, “[p]roductive life is, however, species-life,”¹⁵ which means that labour is not only having something to do with our bodies. Instead, and more importantly, according to Marx, labour is also an integral part of what it means to be human – it is the life of the human species; it is their species-being.

Biocommunism understands the species-being of humans to be a particular sensitivity towards humanity’s connect-edness, both with nature and with each other. Species-being constitutes humanity’s ability to “identify and assemble itself as a species and alter itself.”¹⁶ Biocommunism construed in this sense aligns with recent scholarship within the tendency of post-humanism; we will return to this later. Hence, Dyer-With-eford’s conception of biocommunism and its return to Marx’s species-being suggests a critique of how the capitalist ratio renders particulars into the same.

Society and Individuals in the Kyoto School

The following sections offers the reader a concrete example of a specific discussion of species in relation to society and individuality. I offer this example for two reasons. On the one hand, Miki’s critique of Tanabe’s notion of species informs the conclusion of this essay. On the other hand, this example offers a warning related to applying the idea of species as the

15 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical,” 84.

16 Dyer-Witheford, “Species-Being,” 2.

foundation for nation-states. Tanabe's logic of species and Mi-ki's critique of Tanabe offer precisely this.

Tanabe's intervention in the philosophy of the Kyoto School was a reorientation of the founder Nishida's logic of (absolute) nothingness, a reorientation that saw the term species take centre stage. Tanabe diverged from Nishida's logic by shifting its focus from individuals to society by focusing on the notion of species. This reorientation is directly related to Tanabe's exposure to historical materialism, which Tanabe sought to combine with the logic of nothingness.¹⁷ In eurocentric terms, Tanabe's reorientation refuted Hobbes' claim that the individual precedes the state. Instead, Tanabe proposed that "society is not a relationship that simply proceeds from individuals. Rather ... [it] exist[s] as something preceding them."¹⁸ This directly links Tanabe's philosophy with the Japanese Empire's conduct during the second Sino-Japanese war and the second world war. Tanabe argued that the rise of ethnocentric state ideologies in Asia during the early 20th century proved this. Some commentators have interpreted this claim as fuelling Japanism and effectively turning imperial citizens into tools the state could use and abuse as it saw fit. Leaving a detailed account of this aside, let us look at the intersections between Tanabe and Marx's writings.

Stating that society proceeds from individuals, Tanabe echoes Marx's claim that part of what it means to be a human is to be a biological or material being. However, Tanabe fails to emphasize Marx's realization that each human being is also an individual whom neither precedes nor comes after society. Instead, Marx's individual, which differs from Tanabe's, is both

17 Nakaoka in F. Masakatsu, et al., *The Philosophy of the Kyoto School*, edited by Fujita Masakatsu and John Krummel, translated by Robert Chapeskie, Singapore: Springer. 2018, 43.

18 Tanabe in Masakatsu, *Philosophy*, 25.

the condition for and conditioned by society – this is a dynamic process that is also historically situated in the present state of affairs. However, Tanabe and Marx share the conception that humans are *universal* and *free beings*. Tanabe promotes precisely such a vision by stating that “the rational individual has no reason to blindly follow any state ideology because ‘external coercion [does not] possess a morally binding force.’”¹⁹ Instead, “the coercion of state society must be converted to autonomy through reason,”²⁰ which surprisingly enough means for Tanabe that the autonomous individual is reasonable enough only to follow a morally righteous state and not an immoral one (the Japanese Empire, the Third Reich and Stalin seem to offer examples that contradict Tanabe’s argument). It would appear that Tanabe’s using the term species-being comes with a promise and a curse.

On the one hand, it promises a communal life and a renewed focus on society,²¹ while also rejecting what Bloch, in opposition to Marx’s branch of humanism, called “general and abstract [humanitarianism].”²² On the other hand, it is cursed by being all too easily misappropriated by totalitarian ideologies. However, the danger was that Tanabe’s philosophy was susceptible to propagating ethnic supremacy and encouraging state coercion.

Another figure associated with the Kyoto School, Miki, opposed the nationalistic use of Tanabe’s philosophy. Miki’s critique is essential for biocommunism because it addresses the conservative tendency to put society before individu-

19 Ibid., 26.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 27.

22 E. Bloch, “Karl Marx and Humanity: The Material of Hope,” in *On Karl Marx*, translated by John Maxwell, London; New York: Verso. 2018 [1968], 21.

als. Miki's critique involves shifting focus from species (which Tanabe understood as specific to each culture or society) to each individual's creative force. Thus, Miki instead suggested a "logic of imagination."²³ With this logic, Miki stipulated that art and technology are near-perfect examples of each individual's creative force and that the individual's creativity has the power to change society. This critique is essential for biocommunism because Miki's focus on the creative force of each member of humanity suggests the possibility of conceiving biocommunism as an imaginative project of individuals attempting to change their common conditions.

Zoe, Bios, and Grievability

In the preface to *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben states that the book is concerned with "life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use."²⁴ As an example of communal life, Agamben alludes to the monastic life while, at the same time, proclaiming that it is "surprising that the monastic ideal [the contemplative life]... should have given origin to a model of total communitarian life."²⁵ The reason behind Agamben's surprise is rooted in the fact that while the monastic life is communal, it is also secluded from the other parts of society. It is, moreover, a life utterly devoted to contemplation and seclusion. However, the monastic life is a template rather than a mould for a communitarian future. In an attempt to juxtapose Agamben with biocommunism, the following section

23 Miki in Masakatsu, *Philosophy*, 59.

24 G. Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, translated by Adam Kotsko, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013 [2011], xiii.

25 *Ibid.*, 9.

elaborates on Agamben's concern with biopolitics and communal life and supplements this with Butler's conception of grievability and precarious lives and insights gained from Miki's critique of Tanabe's logic. In the end, the goal of juxtaposing these thinkers is to present biocommunism as a concept concerned with critiquing biopolitics for turning its gaze solely on life itself.

Similar to Agamben, Butler's book *Precarious Life* and her Adorno Prize Lecture "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?" share Agamben's concern with issues related to how one understands life. In both texts, Butler defines a precarious life as a life in danger of being lost. Thus, a precarious life is, first and foremost, constituted by its vulnerability. Such an understanding of life can be gleaned from Butler's portrayal of humans as "socially constituted bodies, [which are] attached ... [and] exposed to others."²⁶ The tension expressed here between one's own life and the other is of cause Hegelian at its core.²⁷ I am, of course, referring to the master-slave dialectic where Hegel uses the allegory of the master and slave battling for recognition as a metaphor for the tension between, e.g., individuals and society (a tension which plays a predominant role in Marx's philosophy). Like Hegel, Butler recognizes the relativity of knowledge and its situatedness in the world. Still, in moving beyond Hegel, Butler follows in the footsteps of Levinas, whose notion of 'the face' to Butler suggests that a "body implies mortality ... the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others."²⁸ Hence, Butler and Marx's material dimension of human life, their actual lived lives, becomes the point

26 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, London, New York: Verso. 2004, 20.

27 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, edited and translated by Terry Pinkard, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018 [1807], 112-3.

28 Butler, *Precarious*, 24.

of departure for any philosophical inquiry into inter-human relationships.

The notion of bare life (*zoé*) is by Agamben opposed to the political life (*bios*). Agamben makes a similar argument in *Homo Sacer* by distinguishing bare life from political life. The former is a vulnerable life without political influence, while the latter is a political life – it is the citizen’s life. Thus, not unlike Foucault, for whom biopolitics began as “a form of power that subjugates and makes”²⁹ subjects into citizens, Agamben locates the beginning of biopolitics with the human body becoming politicized; the human body becomes political when “birth immediately becomes nation.”³⁰ Under such conditions, life is subject to a calculable ratio that only sees citizens or foreigners (non-citizens). There are no longer human beings, only citizens subjected to various nation-states.

A grievable life is a life whose disappearance warrants grief. Butler describes the notion of grievability as a condition for a life being understood as being worth living – “[if] I have no certainty that I will have food or shelter, or that no social network or institution would catch me if I fall, then I come to belong to the ungrievable.”³¹ This predicament leads Butler to claim that “it surely does not seem worth it to survive under such conditions [being ungrievable].”³² Hence, it seems that grievability can be a helpful term for elaborating on Agamben’s

29 M. Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. 3: Power, edited by James D. Faubion, New York: The New Press, 2000 [1982], 331.

30 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1998 [1995], 128.

31 J. Butler, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?,” *Radical Philosophy* (2012), 15.

32 *Ibid.*

distinction between Zoé and Bios. On the one hand, grievability allows us to understand those specific conditions under which a life can be deemed liveable or not.

On the other hand, Butler's notion is also easily translated into Agambian terms. The grievable life is comparable with bios, and the precarious life with zoé. *If a bare life is not worth living because it is regarded as worthless in the eyes of the state or society, how can we begin thinking about those lives that take up such a position in our societies?* To answer this question, Agamben's idea of Homo Sacer seems useful. The sacred human is a term that describes a (human) life exempt from the political sphere, a human who can be killed or sacrificed – it is a profane life, a bare life – and the killing of the sacred human is, therefore, neither murder nor is it sacrilege. In Butler's terms, such a person constitutes an ungrievable existence – a person “who are unreal ... [who] cannot be mourned ... [and thus] must be killed.”³³ Thus for Butler, “human vulnerability ... emerges with life itself ... [and is the] condition of being laid bare from the start.”³⁴ The notions of bare life, species-being, and grievability all seem concerned with a similar question: *what are the conditions of life itself?* This concern is, therefore, something which both Agamben and Butler share with biocommunism.

Conclusion

The introduction showed that Dyer-Witheford's conception of biocommunism was directly related to Marx's idea of humanity's common species-being. Following this, I suggested that

33 Butler, *Precarious*, 33.

34 Ibid.

biocommunism could be a novel intervention, a new kind of communism, which is reoriented towards a sensitivity towards the social life of humans instead of a focus on mechanical production and the state. With the detour to Japanese modernity in general and Tanabe in particular, we saw how the notion of species became problematic because of the nationalistic tendencies that so easily perverted it. Furthermore, with Miki's critique of Tanabe, we were led to our present task: to inquire into the emancipatory possibilities of biocommunism in light of Miki's rejection of those kinds of social ontologies that emphasizes society above individuals. Moreover, Miki's critique of Tanabe suggested that creativity and imagination are shared universally by all humans, a sort of shared, as Marx would have called it, species-being.

Restrictions to what possibly counts as a grievable life must necessarily foreclose any possibility of understanding what it means to be a human being. In light of this, biocommunism should attempt to provide an unrestricted account of all the nuances of human life. I must, however, confess here that I do not mean this in a logical or progressive sense. Instead, I suggest that biocommunism must refrain from becoming a static theory of what constitutes a human(e) life. Therefore, biocommunism must, if it is to be a successful term, always be ready to backtrack on its claims and reiterate the constant need for reevaluating its attempts at providing a complete description of what constitutes a life worth living.³⁵ By making the biocommunicative life negotiable, fluid and dynamic, it is possible to hint toward it being a utopian project without settling on a consensus regarding its final form. From Marx's writings, we know that any description of a society is always limited to the specific historical situation in which it finds itself. Hence, biocommunists must be aware of the term's limited perspective.

35 Dyer-Witheford, "Species-Beings," 5.

This awareness must materialise itself as a constant preparedness to reexamine one's own assertions as much as those of one's opponents. Biocommunism constitutes a possibility of understanding humans in their ever-evolving stages of development without being restricted by pre-given theoretical givens. Moreover, biocommunism would be a kind of communism concerned with the creative force of humanity in all its shapes, present and future alike. However, the rise of biopolitical regimes means that the individual has lost direct control over their development, which suggests that society is currently being dictated by institutions rather than by the individuals themselves.

There is a sense in which biocommunism is a specific conception of communism, which could align itself with Bookchin's idea of social ecology (a theory whose emphasis on the relationship between nature and society, ecology and social disaster, makes it specifically well suited for engaging with current humanitarian predicaments, e.g., the Kurdish cause, climate change and so on). However, in this text, Bookchin's writings figure only in the back of my mind.³⁶ Therefore, I must urge the reader to remember that if biocommunism turns out to be viable, then the real test of this term will not be in the head of any academic but in the hands of a freedom fighter. Biocommunism is, therefore, an attempt at insisting on the need for an increased sensitivity towards individuals' lives, and this means to insist on biocommunism's possibility of rethinking our alienation from our species-being in new ways that enable each individual to be creative and through this creativity to have a direct relationship with their development both as individuals and as social beings living in a society.

36 M. Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, Edinburgh; Oakland: AK Press, 2006; M. Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, Montréal; New York; London: Black Rose Books, 1996.