

On theoretical approaches to the Anthropocene challenge

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Abstract

Frank Oldfield (2018) reflects about the need for conceptual frameworks to confront the Anthropocene challenge and about the capability of Marxism in this regard. Against his view, I argue that conceptual or epistemological frameworks are necessary to face this challenge and that Marxism is in the best position to do so when it is compared with other theoretical approaches.

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Among the positive features of the Anthropocene issue are the open and radical character of the debates it generates. Frank Oldfield (2018) provides an example of such character in his review of book reviews. The essential points raised by Oldfield are that Marxism cannot address the social dimension of the Anthropocene challenge and that it precludes the necessary synergy between Earth system science and social science that is demanded nowadays. Oldfield reaches these conclusions based on book reviews on the Anthropocene topic—three books ascribed by him to Marxism—and on his own convictions. In doing this however, Oldfield falls into some misconceptions about Marx and Marxism that I will try to refute.¹

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3 According to Oldfield, social scientists need to place their discourses on
4 particular conceptual frameworks that seemingly exclude other approaches. Oldfield
5 appears to assume that Earth system sciences or natural sciences do not adhere to
6 particular conceptual frameworks, an assertion that is disputable. When analysing a rock
7 exposure, for example, structural geologists and palaeontologists provide different
8 interpretations because they observe different features on any given outcrop. Paul L.
9 Hancock, founding editor of the Journal of Structural Geology, used to say ‘you see
10 what you know to see’. Theoretical frameworks are not only necessary, but are
11 unavoidable for whatever understanding of reality is pursued, whether it is natural or
12 social. Social sciences and natural sciences do indeed have their internal and different
13 conceptual frameworks that are not necessarily to the exclusion of others. For geologists
14 to understand the essentials of palaeomagnetism, for instance, it is necessary to
15 approach an understanding of Newtonian and Quantum physics. Similarly, historians
16 should comprehend Marxism in order to understand the essentials of capitalism.
17 Moreover, Oldfield appears to see Marxism as simply a social science. This view
18 impoverishes Marxism, at least according to many Marxists that for a long time
19 understand it as a philosophy of praxis—and not of just any praxis but of one
20 particularly oriented to transcend capitalism.² Understood in this way, Marxism is a
21 materialist-based and dialectic world view (Ilyenkov, 1979). Marxism as a philosophy
22 of praxis is in agreement with Marx’s theses on Feuerbach; in particular with his 11th
23 thesis that, as a sort of corollary, states: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the
24 world, in various ways; the point is to change it’.³ The fact that a scientific
25 understanding of the socioeconomic system that is to be transcended is a requirement of
26 both the system itself and of the revolutionary praxis needed to transcend it in a rational
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3 and conscious is a topic far from Marx and Marxism being simply an academic social
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5 science.

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8 According to Oldfield, Marxism is a useless theoretical framework for the
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10 working class since it is superfluous and demeaning. Oldfield feels more comfortable
11
12 with empirical descriptions of the living conditions of the working class than with
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14 theorization. Paraphrasing Oldfield, working in a factory does not qualify anybody as
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16 Marxist, but certainly qualifies everybody as workers and may allow workers to intuit
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18 that there is some sort of labour appropriation therein, which perhaps is not fully clear.
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20 Because labour appropriation in capitalism is not immediate—such as is the case for
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22 slave labour and bonded labour, in which it is rather direct—it is necessary to
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24 investigate what are the specific forms that mediate labour appropriation under capitalist
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26 conditions—commodity, surplus value, salary, etc. Hence, if workers want to overcome
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28 their labour exploitation they need to be equipped with the suitable critical and
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30 theoretical tools, since a mere description of their working conditions is not enough.
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32 This is the kind of research undertaken by Marx and Marxists and it is neither
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34 superfluous nor demeaning but, rather, the opposite. On the other hand, Oldfield
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36 disregards the contribution of Marx, Engels and many Marxists to the international
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38 labour movement from the beginnings in the 19th century until today. Honestly, it is
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40 difficult to attribute decent retirement and working conditions and many other social
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42 accomplishments to the generosity of capital rather than to the social pressure exerted
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44 by the working class and the labour movement. Underlying Oldfield's critique of
45
46 Marxism there seems to be the usual neoliberal mantra conflating Marxism with
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48 Stalinism. But as we would likely not blame Jesus and the twelve apostles for the
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50 Inquisition crimes, we should equally not blame Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Marxism as a
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52 whole for Stalinism, disregarding the fact that many of those purged during Stalinism
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3 were actually Marxists.⁴ Marxism is itself not safe from vulgarization and
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5 dogmatization, nor is Christianity or empirio-positivism. But, while the capitalist regime
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7 consists of a society of classes based on labour exploitation, Marxism pursues a society
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9 without classes nor labour exploitation, and this makes a big difference. The critique of
10
11 the vulgarization and dogmatization of Marxism, and to Stalinism in particular,
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13 including Stalinism outside the USSR, has been done from inside Marxism and can be
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15 traced back to Lenin.⁵
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19 Oldfield attributes to Marxists that of characterizing the demands of
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21 consumption of the working class as a product of fetishism and false consciousness.
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23 However, I do not know of Marxists—at least not Marxists that can be typified as
24
25 Marxian—with such a poor conception of fetishism and false consciousness. Doing this
26
27 is certainly falling into the vulgarization of Marxism and has nothing to do neither with
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29 Marx' conceptualizations nor with those of Marxists.⁶ The levels of demands of the
30
31 working class are related to the objective perception that in a capitalist society workers
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33 get a much smaller “slice of the pie” than do capitalists, and to the objective perception
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35 of the unequal distribution of wealth that, conversely, is socially produced.
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42 **Why and how Marxism can address the Anthropocene challenge**

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45 Marxism clearly acknowledges the geohistorical determination of the Anthropocene;
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47 namely, that the global ecological crisis expressed by the Anthropocene is constrained
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49 to the historical period of capitalism. Robust empirical data on the Anthropocene leave
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51 little doubt about this. More importantly, Marxism has a long tradition of critiquing the
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53 political economy and has undertaken scientific—phenomenological and ontological—
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55 research of the production mode based on the sociometabolic reproduction of capital.
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3 This allows one to view the Anthropocene as a result of the globalization of Marx's
4 metabolic rift. In addition, it permits us to untangle the intimate links between the
5 Anthropocene and the sociometabolic reproduction of capital (Soriano, 2018). For these
6 reasons, Marxism is in the best position to understand the structural roots of the global
7 ecological crisis, and therefore to provide a theoretical and practical framework aimed
8 at confronting the Anthropocene challenge.
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16 A Marxist approach makes a big difference compared to other approaches such
17 as Ecomodernism and hyper constructivist theories like Actor-Network, hybrid
18 socionatures or "Internet of things" conceptualizations, which disregard, minimize,
19 and/or relativize the historical determination of the Anthropocene. Ecomodernism, for
20 example, promotes an optimistic, even "fantastic" decoupling from the negative
21 environmental impacts by means of geoengineering and planet management that, most
22 likely, will lead us to a dystopian society; in many ways, it is already here. Hyper
23 constructivist theories provide a deterministic view of reality, in which human products
24 are seen as "actors" of a human's life at a similar level to humans themselves. This
25 deterministic view is expressed with a muddled rhetoric that is far and away from
26 pretending to 'change the world' but just the opposite, it defeats any action other than
27 accepting the status quo. All these approaches assume without any criticism Margaret
28 Thatcher's slogan 'There Is No Alternative', by which neoliberalism proclaimed itself
29 as the only possible socioeconomic organization.
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47 Marxism makes a big difference compared to Degrowth too. Although Degrowth
48 has quite rightly identified some of the reasons for the Anthropocene in the core of
49 capitalist society, a theoretical deficit in understanding the fundamentals of the capitalist
50 mode of production hinders most of the proposals of this movement, with which,
51 incidentally many Marxists would probably agree. For example, a steady state and/or
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3 degrowth economy and decommodification are impossible within the limits of capital
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5 reproduction. Wealth in a capitalist society is expressed as ‘an immense accumulation
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7 of commodities’, of which money is the ‘universal equivalent’ and the reproduction of
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9 capital is inherent to the commodification of nature, including labour as a natural force.⁷
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11 Although any commodity has to satisfy human needs, consumerism in a capitalist
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13 society is rather the need for the reproduction of capital than is it a need for people,
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15 which is socially determined by this production mode. The only type of degrowth
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17 possible within the limits of capital reproduction is the selective one that occurs in
18
19 periodic economic crises—namely, destruction of capital along with the living
20
21 conditions of the working class. Hence, decommodification and controlled degrowth is
22
23 only possible outside the sociometabolic reproduction of capital. Misunderstanding this
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25 has led Degrowth to idealize individuals and to rely on voluntarism to confront the
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27 global ecological crisis without questioning the economic basis of capitalism.⁸
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32 The diagnosis made by Marxism is this one: the sociometabolic reproduction of
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34 capital requires undermining the two sources of wealth: labour and nature, an
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36 undermining that is driven by economic laws that escape the control of individuals. This
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38 is not something accidental in capitalism; rather it is inherent to the fundamentals of the
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40 reproduction of capital, leading to a very simple conclusion: within the limits of
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42 capitalist society, it is not possible to confront the Anthropocene challenge and to leave
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44 behind the global ecological crisis for some sort of harmonic, sustained and/or balanced
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46 relation with nature. The Anthropocene challenge should certainly be confronted with
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48 technological measures aimed at avoiding or reducing harmful environmental impacts
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50 on Earth. However, if these measures do not take place within a socioeconomic system
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52 that has left behind or is driven to leave behind the socioeconomic reproduction of
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54 capital, sooner than later they will be useless (see Soriano, 2018 for examples).
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3 Soviet-style socialist countries with dominant state capitalism and centrally
4 planned economies, Yugoslavian socialism, in which cooperatives were dominant at
5 least for some time, and the mixed capitalism of Western countries were, to some
6 extent, and with obvious differences among them, attempts to control the reproduction
7 of capital. They all represent the failure in doing so. As such, they are historical
8 experiences that would have been inconceivable without Marx and Marxism, and many
9 lessons can be learned from them regarding how to leave capitalism behind us.
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11 However, to extract useful conclusions they have to be considered within the overall
12 historical context of this production mode and within the particular context of each
13 experience. Otherwise the analysis of socialist experiences becomes a vulgar exercise
14 that “throws the baby out with the bathwater.” For example, socialist experiences took
15 place in countries with much less developed capitalist societies than those of Western
16 countries, in which bourgeois revolutions had already succeeded. Moreover, they had to
17 face strong internal and external opposition that included economic and military
18 aggression. None of the socialist experiences were able to transcend the determination
19 of labour as value and the capitalist-based social division of labour, including the
20 division of manual labour and intellectual labour. Hence, historical socialism was not
21 “*developed* on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from
22 capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and
23 intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it
24 emerges” (Marx, 1970, emphasis in the original).
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49 The first conclusion comes from the empirical evidence that the sociometabolic
50 reproduction of capital cannot be governed. Bourgeois civilization—with a world view
51 based on empirio-positivism that defeated former religious-based world views and that
52 allows domination of nature—is reluctant to admit that its own creature, capital, cannot
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3 be controlled, and like all civilizations pretends to be eternal. For this reason, and in
4
5 particular after the failure of socialist experiences, any attempt to transcend capitalist
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7 society is disregarded as an impossible utopia. Overall guidelines and some specific
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9 measures aimed at transcending the sociometabolic reproduction of capital were already
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11 pointed out by Marx and other Marxists, and there is no need to repeat them here (Marx,
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13 1970; Mészáros, 2000; Lebowitz, 2015). Beyond the social division between owners
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15 and those dispossessed of the means of production, class structure and division of
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17 labour in capitalist society—including socialist experiences—is based on the fact that
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19 labour has value, whose magnitude is determined as is the case for any commodity.
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21 Transcending capitalism means transcending such a value determination. Only in this
22
23 way can labour shift to be not just a means to satisfy needs, but a satisfaction of needs in
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25 and the principle ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’
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27 can be fulfilled (Marx, 1970). This has to be accompanied by a change in the way we
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29 approach the world: from the bourgeois empiric and positivist-dominated world view
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31 into a materialist-based and dialectic world view, which by the way, does not exclude
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33 empirio-positivism.
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38 It took nearly 300 years of bourgeois revolutions, starting in 1572 in Holland, for
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40 capital to be the prerequisite, mediation and result of social reproduction in many
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42 countries worldwide (Callinicos, 1989). The Anthropocene is telling us to hurry up in
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44 transcending the sociometabolic reproduction of capital.
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53 This research has been partly funded by project AGAUR 2017 SGR 1022
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Notes

1. This contribution does not pretend to be the particular defence of the authors' books reviewed by Oldfield but of Marxism understood as a philosophy of praxis, to which those authors might be doubtfully ascribed.
2. The list would be exhaustive, starting with Engels declaration in the speech at Marx's grave, 'For Marx was before all else a revolutionist' (see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm>) and including Antonio Gramsci, György Lukács, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, and Wolfgang Fritz Haug, to mention a few.
3. See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>
4. The analogy is merely illustrative and does not intend to confer any prophetic sense to Marx and to Marxists.
5. See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/index.htm>
6. Alienation, fetishism, false conscious, and apparent objectivity are Marxian elaborations with a long tradition in Marxist philosophers like those of the Budapest school, Frankfurt school, and others.
7. See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/>. On the multiple determinations of money and on the theory of money, there is a vast Marxist literature that is unnecessary to cite here.
8. A possible explanation for such a subjectivist turn is that the philosophical roots of Degrowth originated back in the 1970s partly in response to French structuralism. On

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3 the other hand, the critique made by Marxism to Degrowth closely resembles that of
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5 Marx to the utopian socialists in the 19th century, in particular to Proudhon.
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