

Working Between Human and Non-Human Nature: Using Labour as a Tool to Capture the Transformations of Planetary Life

Authors : Ellen Kirkpatrick

Abstract : Deforestation, toxification, and loss of environmental habitats, accompanied by expanding production and urbanization, are visibly altering planetary life. This is bringing humans and non-human nature into closer contact, resulting in the emergence of infectious diseases such as the Covid-19 virus which, while zoonotic in origin, spread through market relations and networks of local and global production. However, while the pandemic sharply illuminated the role of labour within social transformations, the question remains about the role of labour in transforming ecological relations. Drawing on a historical materialist approach, this paper explores the emergence and transmission of the COVID-19 virus through the Marxist conceptualization of metabolic rift. This allows for a perspective of human and non-human nature, which is in constant motion and dialectical. This negotiates distinctions and binaries between them as humans and non-human nature are taken to mutually constrain, enable and constitute one another. This is particularly significant when considering the ongoing transformations of a climate-changing world and the corresponding effects on social life. To do this, this paper empirically focuses on the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China, where the COVID-19 virus was first detected. It examines how the virus jumped from non-human animals to humans through concrete production operations locally before traveling globally through networks of abstract market relations based on the logic of circulation, trade and exchange. As a mediating relation between human and non-human nature, labour is an analytical tool that can create a dialogue between the concrete and the abstract, as well as the local and global.

Keywords : Marxism, social reproduction, metabolic rift, labour

Conference Title : ICM 2025 : International Conference on Marxism

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : June 03-04, 2025