The dangerous intensifications of surplus alienation, or why platform capitalism challenges the (more-than-)human

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Abstract

This response gratefully acknowledges and engages with the commentaries on my article 'The nonhuman Turn: critical reflections on alienation, entanglement and nature under capitalism'. It highlights the importance of further defining key concepts like anthropocentrism, 'the human', more-than-life and others in discussions of the more-than-human. It challenges desires for 'returning' to idealised forms of relationality or animism or the idea that historical, 'basic alienation' between humans and the rest of nature rests on some notion of 'The Fall'. Overall, it aims to reemphasize one of the core arguments in the original article, namely the dangerous intensifications of historical capitalism, how this is critical for both non-human turn scholars and their critics and how this may provide common ground for opening up space for post-capitalism. Central to this argument is a further elaboration of the dangers of intensified surplus alienation due to contemporary platform capitalism for the (more-than)human but also, more specifically, for academic exchange.

Introduction

I am grateful to the authors of the commentaries for their thoughtful, critical, and generous engagements. It is more-than-meaningful to have these debates across commonalities and differences. The responses are highly diverse and give a good indication of the breadth and depth of discussions in more-than-human geography. As my original article evidently could not do justice to this breadth and depth, this response, too, can only

respond to some of this diversity. Now, this latter point is something that arguably all responses emphasize: in any writing, we need to be selective. But my reason for doing so is somewhat different here. It relates to why I ended my original article

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with an exposé on platform capitalism, the import of which was perhaps not clear enough, as indicated by Srinivasan. I therefore aim to show why it is central to my argument, why platform capitalism should worry all of us, including more-than-human scholars, and by responding to several points raised in the commentaries, why it reinforces my earlier arguments about alienation.

Platform capitalism

I wrote the original article while finalizing a book on the links between environmentalism and platform capitalism (Büscher, 2021). It concluded that speaking "truth to power" remains critical to imagine post-capitalism and create space for alternative ways of being. It also showed that this is becoming increasingly difficult, given that platforms thrive on the circulation of maximum information -regardless of content- to collect maximum data. This platform capitalist power, I argued, is popularly known as "post-truth" and is highly detrimental for (dealing with) contemporary environmental crises and human-nonhuman relations more broadly. But its impacts go much further. According to Couldry and Mejias (2018: xii), "the exploitation of human life for profit through data is the climax of five centuries' worth of attempts to know, exploit, and rule the world from particular centres of power. We are entering the age not so much of a new capitalism as of a new interlocking of capitalism's and colonialism's twinned histories, and the interlocking force is data". They describe how basic daily activities are increasingly surveilled to produce (monetary) value for third parties. This is dangerous as it can drastically increase (social, intellectual, political, racial) stratification and polarization and hollow out democracy (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

As noted in the original article, platform capitalism is different from but also connected to over five centuries of capitalist domination and exploitation. My concern - shared by others in (more-than-human) geography, as noted by Lorimer - is that across centuries of astonishingly complex and contingent histories, the *less-than-contingent* central drive of historical capitalism has led us to a particular moment where the weight of the pressures on human and nonhuman life-as-a-whole are becoming increasingly overwhelming. I referred to this context as "more-than-life". A related concern in the original article is that these pressures (and the gains they generate) are extremely uneven. While I did not conceptualize this unevenness in class-terms, my persistent emphasis on unevenness is the opposite of "erasing the relation between class and the violent expropriation of nature" (Greco, p.5). Rather, I argued that unevenness (and diversity and difference) is critical in the workings of capitalist power – not just in terms of an elite minority who benefit from obscene inequalities, but also how the exploitation of diversity and difference *in and through historical capitalism* have increasingly led to deeper forms of alienation from other people and the rest of nature. I emphasized this through the dialectics between more-than-human and less-than-human.

I concluded that increasingly alienated forms of entanglement render current interests in (reconnecting with) other-than-human natures historically logical. But here is where the real import of platform capitalism enters: it eagerly jumps into this felt need for (re)connection, and then exploits it ruthlessly through the appropriation of data (and its subsequent use to surveil, steer and control humans *and* nonhumans, Zuboff, 2019). From this perspective, it matters that academic exchange is also increasingly subjected to platform capitalism. It makes it harder to have meaningful debates across epistemological, ontological and theoretical differences, as these too are increasingly stratified under the need to "mine" data for profit (Büscher, 2020). But the larger point is that data-driven (re)connection under platform capitalism does not alleviate (surplus) alienation. On the contrary: it supercharges (surplus) alienation by further embedding human and nonhuman relationalities and connections into novel-yet-historically familiar capitalist forms of domination and exploitation (Han, 2018). All of which makes it even more logical to desire a "return" to meaningful forms of relationality, more organic bonds between humans and nonhumans, and to forms of animism.

"Returning" to relationality and animism?

This is the central point Singh makes. She argues that the more-than-human turn is a "much-needed return to animism and relationality that is at the core of diverse indigenous cultures". To be sure, Singh and I agree on many issues, including moving away from flawed ideas of what constitutes the human and the need to challenge "human hubris of treating the rest of the world as inert and disposable" and value different, post-capitalist ways of being. But I was surprised by the desire for a "return", as though we can go back to a time when "relationality" or "animism" were straightforward and uncomplicated. Moreover, while it is critical to learn from the wisdom of indigenous peoples, this too is not straightforward or without contradictions. Especially not when, according to Singh, indigenous peoples are *simultaneously* the most marginalized and alienated *and* have held on to indigenous wisdoms, relationalities and animism.

Singh's analysis seems overtly idealistic, as though "indigenous", "relationality" and "animism" are straightforward concepts or practices outside of history and power (see De la Cadena and Starn, 2020). Or as though heated debates around these concepts and practices have not happened (see, for example, the debates on the "return of the native" - Kuper et al., 2003). Moreover, actual attempts to "return to relationality" are never straightforward in practice. An example here is research by Koot and myself (2019) on the complications of the state 'giving land back' to indigenous San communities in South Africa, given how the relationality they had with the land drastically changed due to colonial dispossession and subsequent further alienation and marginalization. The broader point is that the notion of "return" does not do justice to how non- or pre-capitalist forms of relationality have "hybridized" with and changed by capitalist relationalities and how to unmake or disentangle these (Feola et al., 2021) – all of which becomes even more problematic in a time of platform capitalism that thrives on exploiting and hollowing out *any* form of relationality.

Animism is not straightforward either. I quoted Mbembe (2017) in the original article, who is deeply troubled by the combination of animism and (platform) capitalism. Instead, he insightfully connects class and race to our new "planetary" condition where, according to Chakrabarty (2018: 280), "it is not always possible for humans to transition smoothly from being attached to a human-dominant order to being one species among many". Rather than "returning" to some uncomplicated past, I argue that we need to combine learning from historical capitalism *and* from non-capitalist ways of being in the past and present to *unmake* some relationalities, while *(re)inventing* new relationalities going forward. In this process, as agreed by the commentaries, "the human" holds a special responsibility. But what, then, is "the human" and how does "it" relate to the rest of nature?

The human (and anthropocentrism)

I agree with Lorimer that we need "more capacious ontologies of the human". However, my proposal was adamantly not to reinstate the Nature-Society divide or to grant these categories some "stable ontological reality". As I stated, we should be careful to "place ourselves firmly within the dialectical tension that the co-constitution of nature and society represents" (p.5). I explicitly omitted *ontological* in this statement, and stressed that this is an *epistemological, analytical and political* balancing act, based on my more foundational argument that ontological entanglements cannot be easily translated into the realms of epistemology, practice and politics. This is key and explains why we can hold on to and -if need be- recentralize the self-conscious human without resorting to some narrative of The Fall.

Responding to Lorimer, I cannot say what an unalienated relation looks like, as I do not believe it is possible to *consciously or otherwise* "unalienate" humans from the rest of nature (i.e.: to undo *basic* alienation). In fact, it was my argument that some more-than-human authors *do* problematically seem to think it is possible to overcome or dismiss basic alienation. Instead, I argued that humans are the only agents that can *consciously* unmake the

specific forms of *surplus* alienation that have developed under capitalism. In other words, there is no "The Fall" in relation to basic alienation: this is the accidental outcome of evolutionary mechanisms, i.e.: the specific, *material history* of hominin differentiation from the rest of nature. Palaeo-anthropological research has made interesting strides in probing the evolutionary dynamics that led to the exceptional forms of consciousness and cognitive abilities of humans vis-à-vis other animals (Gärdenfors and Lombard, 2020). Yet they also acknowledge that we will never know exactly how these developed historically.

The next question is what value we attribute to this, which brings me to anthropocentrism. I am glad to see that Srinivasan and I agree on many issues, including that "recentering humans" indeed only refers to culpability and responsibility; not to "the ethical privileging of humankind over all other life". Clearly, this too is often difficult to negotiate in practice. But I agree with the principle and Srinivasan's goal to clarify key concepts. There is, however, an intriguing contradiction here: *consciously* aiming to go beyond anthropocentrism is one of the most anthropocentric things humans can do. It ironically provides further evidence for the historical division between humans and nonhumans. And while paleontological research attempts to understand what unalienated early *homonin* existences looked like, this is of no interest to me here.

My argument was about overcoming capital-induced surplus alienation, something I have aimed to imagine in other work (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020). In doing so, the focus should be on overcoming capitalist-colonial dichotomies and distinctions without losing the ability to make distinctions necessary for effective politics. To do so, we need to develop and learn from historical and existing alternatives-to-capital and study and challenge historical and changing forms of capitalism by speaking truth to power (Büscher, 2021).

The politics of challenging capitalism

Historical capitalism has created or reinforced particular dichotomies and essences that have been intensely violent. Hence why a key aim for many more-than-human theorists is to try and overcome the violence of dichotomies and forms of codification under capitalism. The codification of humans as something special and unique, and the violent, destructive consequences this has had for nonhuman others, is central hereby. But what if "violence originates not only with overcodification, which razes all free spaces with its rigid, repressive order, but also with unbounded decoding and dissolution of boundaries, which releases the world into a flood of undirected events, stimuli, and energies" (Han, 2018: 112)? In a world where many people depend on myriad capitalist boundaries and dualisms for survival or otherwise, undoing these would – at least in the short term - *also* lead to forms of violence. This is the burden of actually-existing material histories that Marx referred to and that humans, exclusively, carry.

In dealing with this, I situate myself between Greco and Singh: we must centralize capitalist relations in our analysis (Greco), while not succumbing to capital-centrism, but also do justice to other-than-capitalist histories, knowledges and experiences (Singh). However, the most dangerous thing we can do in the process is to stop "theorizing anew", as Singh argues we should, for this is precisely what would not only fit but intensify contemporary forms of capitalism. Take Byung-Chul Han (2015: 6) again: "theory [...] is a phenomenon of negativity, too. It makes a decision determining what belongs and what does not (…) Without the negativity of distinction, matters proliferate and grow promiscuously". This, of course, is precisely the core focus of platform capitalism, whereby the growth and proliferation of more-than-human analyses are as welcomed by platform publishers as their ideological opposites. Platform capitalism turns our "infinite differences" against us to proliferate all of it as the same form of abstraction and value: as data.

So I finally come back to my main point in the original article, namely that there is space to fight injustices against both humans and animals, but only if we agree that capitalism and its promotion of *surplus* alienation is the foundational problem, not anthropocentrism or basic alienation; and that

humans built capitalism and only humans can unbuild/unmake it (lest we wait for it to collapse onto itself, which may or may not happen). I further believe that these two points are often shared across the epistemes of more-than-human scholars and their critics including the authors of the commentaries and myself. And precisely the potential coming together of these two epistemic communities is the "expanded we" I was arguing for at the end of my article, not – as Greco assumes – a "human-nonhuman we". Moreover, I did not aim to promote a new language. Instead, I argued for *shifts* in analytical perspective that can help to "theorize anew" the connection between changing forms of political economy and more-than-human worlds. Based on the commentaries, I maintain that these shifts can help to expand the "we" across divergent theoretical traditions and niches that can confront capitalism. But only if we ourselves do not let platform capitalist power come in the way of seeking commonalities across "infinite difference".

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