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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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22.03.2025

## Live just to die

Preprint: More and more animal life and fewer and fewer species. How the rule of capital is ruining living nature



Papyrossa is currently publishing the book "How Capitalist Rule Ruins Living Nature – Species Extinction, Factory Farming, and the Poisoning of the World" by chemist and philosopher Ulrich Ruschig. With the author's kind permission, we are publishing the slightly abridged foreword. The book can be ordered at [www.papyrossa.de](http://www.papyrossa.de) (jW)

Living nature is increasingly falling under the domination of capital. It seizes living beings at their core and remodels them to suit the purpose of increasing abstract wealth. Visible consequences of the subjugation of living nature are the monocultures of agro-industrial plantations and factory farming. But even living beings that are unsuitable for capital's use cannot escape the pull of the capitalist mode of production that is conquering the globe. This mode of production is radically changing living conditions on the planet to an extent unprecedented in human history. Living beings cannot be safe from such encroachment, even

in the most remote regions and in the depths of the oceans. The extinction of species and the collapse of ecosystems are consequences of the advance of the capitalist mode of production. Both phenomena, factory farming (and no less so: the monocultures of industrial agropantations) and the extinction of species, initially appear to have nothing to do with each other, to lack any internal connection. At first glance, they are simply opposites: in one case, the number of living beings of a species increases enormously to an extent that exceeds natural dimensions; in the other case, the number of living beings of a species decreases to an extent that endangers its survival. Both changes have something in common: the number of individual specimens of a species is altered contrary to its nature, contrary to its species-typical frequency, and contrary to its natural living conditions. Ergo, both phenomena are connected; they are "related" to each other in a way that is not obvious. In general, "kinship" refers to a common ancestry: both phenomena stem from one and the same cause, namely, capital exerting influence on living nature, which creates such a strange kinship between the phenomena it produces. A direct link between the two exists in the sphere of agro-industrial monocultures. There, species extinction is the direct consequence.

Such kinship, if one takes a closer look at the phenomena, is characterized by one striking trait. The living beings, be they those in industrial agro-culture and factory farming, or the ever-dwindling, isolated specimens of endangered species, are all doomed to die. It is touching and strange to observe living beings that still behave in a species-typical manner and, at the same time, to realize that when the specimens just observed have died, the species as a whole will be extinct. Such a sight is linked not only to the knowledge that, while individual living beings are still alive, the species has no chance of survival, but also to the fact that such observations will be irretrievably lost, and the memories of certain species will gradually slip away from people. The resulting melancholy points to the fact that living alongside a diversity of species produced by evolution is an essential part of humankind's way of life. The death of a living being is part of the process of life within species. However, the death of the species itself—and the term "species extinction" refers to the scandal, which is underestimated in both its content and scope—is the consequence of the capitalist mode of production's grip on living nature.

### **Calculated life**

In factory farms (and correspondingly in agro-industrial plantations), the life of living beings itself, as such and considered in isolation, is worthless. This life (for example, that of a single broiler chicken) is systematically directed toward its predetermined end, and toward reaching this end as cost-effectively as possible, as quickly as possible, and even accelerated through

pharmaceutical doping, because only the dead animals count – as the commodity "chicken breast" to be sold, which promises profit. In the capitalist mode of production aimed at increasing profit, the lives of these animals are subordinated to the purpose of turning them into commodities for sale, which can only be achieved through the cessation of life, the killing of the animals. Thus, the death of animals, organized by capital, becomes the purpose of these animals' lives.

The life of the *Gallus domesticus* chickens is radically transformed from that appropriate to their species (typical)—into an artificial life, designed on the drawing board to calculate profitability. Bred in enormous numbers, the animals are only viable under the extreme conditions of factory farming. Their lifespan is limited—contrary to nature. If the chickens live longer than 50 days, their bones would break under the weight of the unnaturally fattened meat. The lives of these chickens, forced into a corset, are like riding on a razor's edge. Capital is testing how far removed from a species-typical life and from species-typical living conditions a life is possible without the system collapsing. With this method of "trial and error," crashes are not excluded. This kind of "playing" with the intrinsic purpose of the *Gallus domesticus* life means constantly experimenting on the precipice of the death of the animals and even the species.

Furthermore, death is a constant companion in factory farming, both during and as long as the vast majority of animals are still alive. Competition between capital companies forces them to keep ever more animals in ever smaller spaces with optimized use of materials. This presents managers with the challenging task of organizing the lives of 20,000 animals (e.g., chickens) in a very small space. This includes feeding the animals in a way that optimizes their fattening purpose, disposing of their excrement without disrupting operational processes, and regulating ventilation, lighting, and temperature in an overcrowded hall.

Compared to industrial production facilities (for example, for cars), a meat production facility (of the raw materials for the final product, the packaged chicken breasts and chicken legs) is fundamentally unstable because the predominantly automated production processes are based on living beings and because living beings are a substrate that cannot be standardized, unlike, for example, metal sheets in industrial production. Therefore, technically highly complex factory farming facilities are fundamentally prone to failure. Some animals that are less robust than the average animal that governs standard processes cannot withstand the harsh meat production conditions and die prematurely before they reach the scheduled slaughter date. If their deaths can be arranged in such a way that it does not disrupt the overall process,

the only problem that arises for the calculation is the accounting problem of counting the dead animals as waste, which, of course, should remain within limits.

### **Planned death**

A more serious problem, inherent in the nature of living creatures, is that when large numbers of animals are crammed together at relatively close distances from one another, the risk of infection among them increases dramatically. Diseases caused by bacterial and viral infections are rampant among animals kept far from their natural habitat. This also indicates that when animal husbandry is operated on a scale driven by capitalist profitability that ignores the animals' species-typical behavior, the technically complex facilities cannot fundamentally function smoothly because the basis for the technical processes are living beings that cannot be standardized and that contain a "non-technical" element that conflicts with technical functionalization. Capital attempts to eliminate these "disturbances" with ever more advanced technical means, or at least to minimize them so that they do not hinder processes. Advanced veterinary pharmaceuticals are used continuously, in higher doses if necessary, using the "trial and error" method.

Occasionally, systems collapse, which is not a random accident but a systemic necessity, because capitalism, oriented toward the increase of abstract value, seizes the concrete, particular, and very specific species forms of living beings, thereby successively damaging these species forms. Then, all of a sudden, 20,000 chickens, 30,000 turkeys, and 40,000 mink must be killed—"culled" or "slaughtered in an emergency," as managers put it. A similar situation—namely, that death is a constant, unavoidable companion of a functioning operation—applies to monoculture plantations in the agro-industrial sector. Disruptive plants are destroyed as "weeds." Fungi and insects are killed with fungicides and insecticides, which, since it's a lucrative business for the pharmaceutical industry, is made even more effective. And the birds, which otherwise live together with plants and insects in intact ecosystems, no longer exist because capitalist economics massively impairs, if not ruins, their livelihoods by forcing the profitable expansion of the production of "crops" on agricultural land.

The capitalist subjugation of living nature links the life of one living being with the death of other living beings that, under such conditions, are "disruptive." A paradoxical principle prevails throughout factory farming and agro-industrial plantations: the purpose of a living being's life is its death. This principle is paradoxical because, on the one hand, capital fuels the lives of certain living beings on a historically unprecedented scale—by expanding the number of individual specimens, by using pharmaceutical doping—and, on the other hand,

because capital increases its productivity by killing this life produced on such a massive scale. How this paradox can be arranged and profitably staged is the task of capitalist managers.

### **Like a vampire**

If the purpose of capital, which drives the exploitation and subjugation of living beings, means for the lives of the tormented "creatures," for their living conditions, and for species and ecosystems as a whole, that it brings about the death of these living beings along with the "extension" of their lives, and also the death of the ideal species forms, then that purpose itself must contain a predisposition to what it brings about. Consequently, within the capital relationship, constituted by the purpose of producing accumulative surplus value, there is a principle that also operates as a death-causing principle in the utilized living beings. Indeed, it is inherent both in the relationship of capital to living labor and in the relationship of capital to living nature.

What, then, is the systematic reason why capital seems to have a drive to bring death to those it subjugates, to living nature and living labor, as if it harbored a deadly germ that infects everything that comes into contact with it? The concept of value as coagulated abstract labor implies that all concrete labor, all concrete use-value, and all concrete purpose are abstracted. The capitalist mode of production makes the domination of abstract labor (value) over concrete, living labor socially real. This domination over living labor creates a paradox similar to the domination over living nature. On the one hand, capital has an interest in safeguarding the lives of the workers it uses to the extent that their continued use is not called into question, and to that extent also in promoting them. On the other hand, the life of the workers is not considered as such and as something to be respected in and of itself. Rather, the production of relative surplus value involves a constant attack on this life and experimentation via trial and error to see how much the workers' health can endure without collapsing.

Marx characterizes the domination of capital over the worker with a metaphor: Capital sucks the worker dry like a vampire sucks its victim. Abstract labor (valorizing value, capital) animates itself "vampire-like" by sucking in living labor, whereby it, abstract labor, can only sustain itself through life. In the metaphor, the sucked-out blood represents surplus value, through the accumulation of which capital, which is initially dead, objectified labor, is enabled to live quite vigorously. Such "vampire-like" use of living labor damages it, even to the point of its short- or medium-term death. The domination of living nature, analogous to the domination of capital over living labor, can be formulated accordingly: Agricultural

capital revives itself "vampyr-like" by killing (in Germany alone) 668 million chickens and turkeys per year (in 2021), can only maintain its existence in this way, and lives the more and the better the more poultry it kills.

### **Like the animal, like the worker**

Why is the situation for living nature so bleak, so dramatic? When the principle of capitalist production subordinates living beings to itself in order to prepare them for surplus value production, it encounters an eidetic moment in these living beings. This collision proves to be a disadvantage, even more so, a detriment to the living beings. For the two colliding sides—the abstract purpose of increasing value on the one hand and the concrete, particular, in-itself expediency on the other—are in a relationship of contradiction. This contradiction, brought into the world by bourgeois society, is irresolvable, yet is profitably exploited by capital, which in turn fuels it and prompts progressive litigation. In this collision, the abstract purpose, the purpose that dominates bourgeois society, prevails; the costs of the collision are borne by the living beings—their species forms are successively damaged or even destroyed. Living beings, when they live in bourgeois society, cannot avoid this collision, whether they are used by capital or not. The rule of capital in no way permits them to simply live as is typical of their species. They are always threatened with death by the violence of their owners and by the power of the conditions of life that degrade them.

The contradiction between capital and living nature resembles that between capital and living labor. This similarity suggests an analogy; an analogy must be based on the same logos. Thus, the workers subjugated by capital realize that they and the living beings subjugated by capital have something in common: namely, their domination by the power of abstract labor. Yet the commonality lies not only in the subjugating entity, capital, but also in the fact that this entity torments the subjugated, the workers and living nature, and in the reason why it does so. Starting from the experience of compassion, of empathy with the "creature" tormented by capital, the subjugated workers become aware that it is part of the human mode of existence to understand living beings as eidetically constituted, but by no means as soulless assemblages of molecules.

It is precisely this eidetic constitution that the "vampire-like" use of living beings aims at and which makes the latter so attractive to capital. The same applies—with a grain of salt—to living labor. As a result, it will be impossible for workers to side with capital against living beings and, in agreement with capital, to conceive of these living beings as material, available at will for arbitrarily chosen purposes, and to treat them accordingly. On the contrary, from understanding the analogy arises the insight that the workers' struggle for their liberation

from the domination of capital must include the struggle for the liberation of nature from this domination. Both struggles are therefore two sides of the same coin.

### **Nihilistic dead end**

Bourgeois philosophy, it can be assumed, plays a role in the damage the capitalist mode of production that characterizes bourgeois society does to living beings, species, and ecosystems when it subjugates living nature for its profitable exploitation. But what exactly does it mean to "play a role"? To answer this question, texts by Descartes, Spinoza, and Fichte on the relationship between "human" and "creature" are used as examples. It is astonishing, if not shocking, how deeply involved philosophers are in the subjugation of living nature. These texts must be taken with the utmost seriousness.

Descartes and Spinoza, both of whom lived in the 17th century, had no idea about capitalism; Fichte, who lived a century and a half later, could have familiarized himself with the capitalist mode of production that was rapidly spreading in England at the time, but he didn't, and he understood it just as little as his idealistic predecessors. Yet all three, highly sensitive to the emerging bourgeois spirit of the era, proclaimed it, as they believed, as a stream of human progress and enthusiastically propagated it. Thus, swimming with this current, they uncovered the innermost motives for what the capitalist mode of production does to living beings and had already formulated a concept for the subjugation of living nature and, like Fichte, even believed to have derived such a concept *lege artis*, although they definitely had no concept of capitalism and therefore did not know what the real subsumption of living nature would mean in consequence: extinction of species and factory farming.

This anticipatory exploration of the spirit of an era is truly astonishing, especially when one considers how excessive the philosophers' representations are, how excessive they are of the capitalist reality of their time and their knowledge of the natural sciences of their time. Descartes: Animals are machines, soulless, and mere material for humans. Humans alone are the subject who sets and enforces their ends without regard for the living beings that are essentially external to them! Spinoza: "Sound reason" rejects "vain superstition" (for example, the conception of ideal species forms; UR) and "womanly compassion"—precisely therein lies its "virtue"—and decrees that living beings should be "used as we please and treated as best suits us"! Fichte: Respecting the life of animals as such is not a possible end in the state. Only the death of animals is the purpose of animals' lives!

And so those idealistic philosophers are far from dusty, even less museum-like, and by no means impractical. Under the cloak of idealism, they thoroughly erase any reminiscence of metaphysically founded, idealistic moments and, believing themselves to be on the side of

"freedom," accomplish a morally practical and politically highly significant special task: to prepare living nature for capitalist exploitation, thus trimming it in a theoretical and fundamental sense and presenting living beings as if they were mere material, a priori free of in-itself ends and consequently passive objects for the action of an abstract purpose that cannot be highly valued or praised enough.

The idealists Descartes, Spinoza, and Fichte paved the way for positivism. They deprived living beings of what essentially distinguishes them: the eidetic moment that encompasses their intrinsic purposiveness, and in doing so, they were confident that they were marching at the forefront of enlightenment and progress. They completed what nominalism began, namely, the process of desubstantializing species forms. They justified this process by formulating an ideally elevated ground of the world as its goal and even deluding themselves into deriving it. It is of paramount importance to understand that this process, in truth, leads to the dead end of nihilistic thinking, including its contempt for individual beings. This contradicts the biological concept of species, which refers to an eidetic, ultimately metaphysically founded moment. To declare such a moment, which is not recognizable in the empirical facts discernible by physics and chemistry and which turns out to be constitutive of existing living beings, as null and void, is characteristic of contemporary positivism, which was developed as the worldview appropriate to the capitalist mode of production. The rejection of metaphysically located concepts in the field of philosophy corresponds to the annihilation of living beings and their species-specific way of life in capitalist reality. "The nihilistic consequences of such a rejection refute the modern notion of the impunity of plundering the given. It is neither insubstantial nor defenseless. Whether this is recognized or not is of the utmost importance not only for the fate of philosophy, but also, and above all, for the fate of humanity." (Karl Heinz Haag)