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## **A Dark Tale of Capitalism: Individualism, Impotence, and Exploitation of Nature**

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## **1. Introduction:**

Some scholars have argued that by changing the environment, humans become alienated from nature (Stone, 2013, p. 52; Vogel, 2011, p. 187). Alienation happens as people view the environment as a pool of resources and they fail to recognise that they are part of nature (Stone, 2013, p. 52). Humans feel the need to control nature and reorganise it for human purposes (Spence, 2000, p. 95; Smith, 2007, p. 24; Vogel, 2011, p. 187). Consequently, as humans persist with this task of domination, nature takes revenge under the cloak of climate change (Stone, 2013, p. 52). By controlling nature, humans begin to experience the natural world as something alien or strange; they no longer see themselves as part of nature, but existing in opposition to it (Stone, 2013, p. 43). Alienation has negative effects as it aggravates the risks of climate change; without recognising that people are part of nature, they continue to justify their domination and exploitation of the environment (Stone, 2013). In order to overcome alienation, humans need to reconcile their relationship with nature (Stone, 2013, p. 53). Humans need to realise that they are a part of nature and although they depend on the environment, Stone (2013, p. 52) argues that they must treat it with a sense of “humility”.

Vogel (2011) claims that such an account on alienation from nature, does not fully illustrate why human transformations of nature are negative. He claims that “if human beings are really part of nature, it is not clear how their actions could possibly destroy it, or why an artificial or human-made world wouldn’t still be a natural one?” (Vogel, 2011, p. 188). The author argues that humans similarly to other organisms change the environment. Thus, nature around us is constructed and altered by both the human and the non-human (Vogel, 2011, p. 188). Spiders and beavers change the environment by building webs and dams however these transformations are categorised as natural (Vogel, 2011, p. 188). When humans build a dam, the action is no longer considered natural. Thus, this raises the question of why human transformations of the environment are understood to be unnatural while non-human transformations of the environment are natural. (Vogel, 2011, p. 188). A second question that arises is whether the definition of alienation should be expanded.

Critical theorists identify another important element of human alienation from nature; it is rooted in people’s self-conscious transformations of the natural environment (Biro, 2005; Adorno 2005; Marcuse, 2005). Transformations of the environment are understood as labour (Vogel, 2011, p. 192). Biro (2005) adds that it is important to make a difference between alienation from

nature that is biologically necessary for the survival of humans and transformation of the environment that are made necessary because of the imposition of a particular form of social organisation. As the first type of transformation is rooted in the human need for survival, it is counterproductive to fixate on it. Hence, this paper will focus on the latter. Humans transform the environment through capitalist labour as, currently, capitalism is the world's dominant form of social organisation (Vogel, 2011, p. 192).

Critical theorists that have touched on the issue of how labour under capitalism affects human relation to the environment, have mainly focused on the argument that capitalism treats nature as a pool of resources (Buck, 2007; Goods 2011; O'Connor, 2009; Smith, 2007). In order to increase profit, capitalism is conditioned to exploit raw materials (Smith, 2007, p. 17). In doing so nature is seen as an infinite pool of resources for humans to abuse (Smith, 2007, pp. 94-95). However, although significant this argument does not specify why humans cannot change their behaviour despite clear evidence that capitalist exploitation is not sustainable. People feel powerless in the capitalist system as they have little control over the labour process (Blakeley, 2024, p. 2). Moreover, they feel helpless in addressing the domination of capitalism, as it has invaded many other social spheres such as education and entertainment, making it difficult to criticise the capitalist mindset (Blakeley, 2024, p. 2). This raises the question that there may be something in particular about labour under capitalism that makes people feel powerless and helpless to change their behaviour towards nature. Therefore, this paper will examine the following research question:

*How has labour under capitalism affected people's relation to nature?*

The thesis will argue that capitalism not only treats nature as a commodity to be exploited but more significantly it individualises people in society and cuts away at their agency to make the necessary changes required to prevent the effects of global warming. Thus, due to capitalist labour, people's relation to nature is one of alienation as they no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created, and they feel powerless to make the necessary changes for it (Vogel, 2011). This argument is academically significant; by using critical theory and process labour theory, the argument complements previous literature that studied how labour through capitalism affected the human-nature relationship. These findings also have a societal

significance as they help readers understand one of the reasons why collective responses to climate change are lacklustre.

To answer the aforementioned research question, the thesis is structured as follows. Firstly, various explanations will be given to how labour under capitalism affected people's relation to nature. This establishes the importance of also looking at the agency of the individual in relation to nature and the effects of hyper individualised people in societies. Secondly, labour process theory will be employed to show how capitalism not only has reduced worker's agency and increased individualisation but also invaded many aspects of human life such as education, culture, and leisure time. (Braverman, Sweezy & Foster, 1998; Previtali & Fagiani, 2015). Finally, through critical theory, this paper will illustrate that, as many people are hyper individualised, they lack the agency to make the necessary changes for the environment (Vogel, 2011). Hence, due to different processes used to increase profit, this paper suggests that human alienation from nature also emerges, as people no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created (Vogel, 2011).

## **2. Literature Review:**

The literature review will summarize the dominant argument critical theorists have put forward to understand how labour under capitalism affected people's relation to nature. In developing this argument, this section will identify the need of also looking at the agency of people and the effects of hyper individualised people on nature.

### **2.1. The commodification of nature:**

The link between labour and the environment is established by Marxist thought that argues that labour is a process between humans and nature, through which the people change and control the environment (Goods, 2011, p. 50). Capitalism transforms this relationship as it takes control of the means of production and it frames the relationship between labour and nature in terms of profitability (Goods, 2011, p. 50). Capitalists are mostly private actors that take control of the means of production by gaining ownership over production enterprises such as industries, businesses, organisations etc. (Bellanca, 2013, p. 64). By taking ownership, capitalist actors take control of the production process away from the workers, and mould it in a manner that increases profitability (Bellanca, 2013, p. 59).

This literature puts forward the “treadmill effect” (Goods, 2011, p. 51) which explains why capitalism due its intrinsic need to generate profits, must constantly expand despite ecological damage. Capitalism views nature as a pool of resources that increases revenues. Therefore, as capitalists are driven by the need to make profit and gain an absolute advantage over the rest, nature is exploited (Buck, 2007, p. 60). In this process, nature is seen as an unlimited good that needs to be exploited in order to produce commodities for exchange (Katz, 1998, p. 46).

Workers in the capitalist system also start treating nature as a pool of resources as capitalist production objectifies nature (Smith, 2007, pp. 22-24). Capitalism conditions nature to a process of externalisation creating the sense for workers that it is justified to treat nature as a pool of resources (Smith, 2007, pp. 22-24). As people are depended on their jobs for survival, they begin to also treat nature as a pool of resources. Moreover, capitalism exploits human labour as well (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 213). Human labour is turned into a commodity as employees are kept or fired depending on whether they satisfy market demands (Satz, 2023, p. 13). Thus, labour becomes commodified as it is determined by market considerations (Satz, 2023, p. 13). Workers then become units of production within capitalism, who also view nature in terms of raw materials ready for exploitation (Smith, 2007, pp. 22-24). In this way, capitalist exploitation of nature transformed human relationship to the natural world (Smith, 2007, p. 16). People no longer saw trees for what they were; they view them in terms of wood for furniture or train tracks. Under capitalism people view nature as “a free good or source of wealth” waiting to be used (Katz, 1998, p. 46).

The drive to increase profits implies that capitalism continuously needs to expand; this means that as outputs need to increase to produce profitability, inputs also need to increase, and new resources need to be discovered (Walker, 2017, p. 56). This entails that as productivity increases, a larger quantity of wood, fibre, metals, water, energy and other inputs is needed (Walker, 2017, p. 56). Hence, capitalism as a system needs to expand geographically and its growth depends on the exploitation of nature (Walker, 2017, p. 56).

The scientific community has argued that the depletion of raw materials has an exacerbating effect on climate change (Buck, 2007, p. 60). Considering that raw materials are being used faster than they are being replaced this form of social organisation has faced criticism (Buck, 2007, p. 60). Due to this critique of not being sustainable, economists have argued that

capitalism needs to become greener by implementing sustainable policies that would replenish raw materials (Buck, 2007, p. 60). Scholars, however, have criticised this green strategy as an “ecological commodification which radically intensifies and deepens the penetration of nature by capital” (Smith, 2007, p. 17; Fox, 2023).

To illustrate this ecological commodification, the example of carbon credits can be used; these were introduced as a market mechanism that could help cap greenhouse emissions (Buen & Michaelowa, 2009, p. 41). This mechanism allows public or private institutions to invest in sustainable projects in developing countries in exchange for carbon credits. These credits can then be sold or bought on markets by carbon emitters to offset their own emissions (Buen & Michaelowa, 2009, p. 41). Despite different policies, this carbon market is susceptible to corruption. In addition, while the developing countries are polluting less through the implementation of sustainable projects, the rich countries can continue polluting by buying carbon credits (Buen & Michaelowa, 2009, p. 45).

Ecological commodity markets have expanded to include other aspects of nature such as fishery credits, rare bird credits, air and water pollution credits (Smith, 2007, p. 19). Thus, nature under green capitalism also becomes viewed as a “bank of biodiversity” (Katz, 1998, p. 49), where natural components are seen as credits to be exchanged in financial markets. As capitalism needs to expand, it views any area, including nature, in financial terms that can be exploited for profitability. Thus, even when adopting sustainable strategies, nature is further commodified and viewed by companies and individuals in terms of financial markets where profit can be made.

It is crucial to note that as nature is treated as a pool of resources it also becomes viewed as external to human existence (Smith, 2007, p. 23). People no longer view themselves as part of nature but as external to it. Nature becomes seen in objective terms; a unit part of a math equation put together by accountants who add up the profits attained. Capitalism conditioned nature to be external to humans (Spece, 2000, p. 108). In this process of externalization and objectification, the relationship between human and nature becomes seen in dualistic terms (Smith, 2007, p. 24). As the theoretical underpinnings of human-nature dualism, requires one element to be superior to the other, humans justify their relation to nature as one of domination (Boulangeat et al., 2022). Stone (2013) argues that as people see themselves as external to nature, humans begin to feel alienated from it or in opposition to it. She suggests that people must reconcile their relationship with nature by affirming the unity between human and the natural



world (Stone, 2013, p. 52). For her, this is the starting point to finding solutions to different ecological crises (Stone, 2013, p. 52).

## **2.2. Feelings of powerlessness and helplessness**

Although, the previous argument is highly significant, it does not explain why humans do not change their behaviour and continue to treat nature as a pool of resources. Blakeley (2024, p. 9) observes that “many people feel a sense of hopelessness” in the capitalist system. She argues that democratic societies still feature a lack of liberty; although people are free to vote and choose representatives in government, once they arrive at work they must obey the capitalist corporations. She argues that the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness caused by capitalist forces, drives humans into a “deep sense of despair” (Blakeley, 2024, p. 2). People cannot disentangle from capitalist webs of production and consumption as they underpin the world’s dominant form of social organisation (Blakeley, 2024, p. 2). Thus, in the contemporary world many people feel powerless due to the capitalist domination, and they feel helpless to address this domination (Blakeley, 2024, p. 11).

Although, Blakeley (2024), identifies important effects capitalism has on society such as the feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness, it is not clear how the process of labour through capitalism has caused these problems for individuals in the first place. The process of labour under capitalism has impacted the agency of individuals, identified by Blakeley (2024) under the feelings of despair and powerlessness. However, although she identifies that it is caused by capitalist domination, she does not illustrate the internal mechanism within capitalist labour that has led to these feelings and has impacted people’s agency to act. To understand how the labour process has impacted the agency of people and how it individualises people, it is important to look at what labour under capitalism entails (Vogel, 2011).

In addition, it is important to identify how different modes of production, have increased individualisation affecting the manner in which people relate to the environment, and how different capitalist processes have cut away at the agency of people to act for the environment (Vogel, 2011; Previtali & Fagiani, 2015). Furthermore, this thesis will also show how capitalistic work has invaded many aspects of life, further individualising people and making it difficult for them to criticise the capitalist system or envision a different social or economic system of organisation (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). These elements would then illustrate why hyper

individualised people do not have the agency to respond appropriately to nature crises and how both hyper-individualism and lack of agency impact the human-nature relation. To reiterate this argument does not contradict the former view that capitalism has altered human relation to nature, by conditioning nature to a pool of resources; it complements this perspective and strengthens it as it helps readers understand why people who have become increasingly individualistic and lack the agency to act for the environment.

### **3. Methodology:**

In order to dive into the research question - How has labour under capitalism affected people's relation to nature? – both critical theory and labour process theory will be used. The former is rooted in ideas of the Frankfurt School, who in the 1950s have identified the dominating character of humans in relation to nature (Wilding, 2008). Critical theorists have argued that alienation from nature is rooted in the process of human transformation of the environment (Biro, 2005; Adorno, 2005; Marcuse, 2005). Biro (2005) makes the important distinction between biologically necessary transformations of the environment and those transformation imposed by a social organisation. This paper will focus on the latter.

Transformation of the environment is achieved through labour (Vogel, 2011). Vogel (2011) argues that it is important to examine labour under capitalism as it is main form of social organisation. Thus, in this paper, critical theory will be used to analyse how labour, through capitalist processes of division of labour and specialisation, has increased individualisation. These processes have led individuals to no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created, chipping away at their agency to respond for the environment (Vogel, 2011).

The latter, labour process theory, is developed by Braverman (1998) who analyses different modes of production, such as Taylorism. Braverman (1998) identifies how capitalism through Taylorism has increased individualisation by further dividing labour. Taylorist methods also cut away at the agency of workers, especially when it comes to assembly lines of production (Braverman, 1998). Previtali and Fagiani (2015) take labour process theory further and examine it in relation to contemporary labour processes. The authors identify that Braverman's (1998) analysis is still highly relevant for other types of work, and not just in terms of manufacturing industries. Therefore, this theory will be used to show how labour under capitalism diminished

the agency of workers both within manufacturing and intellectual labour as well as how it individualised people, by further dividing labour and increasing competition in society.

Both critical theory and labour process theory will be used to analyse how capitalism has infiltrated in many spheres of society such as education, culture and leisure time. Critical theorists such as, Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002) illustrate how capitalism invaded leisure time and how entertainment has become the continuation of work. Conversely, Previtali and Fagiani (2015) use labour process theory to point out how the education system has been moulded by capitalism in order to produce workers that fit market demands. As capitalism invaded many societal spheres it has impacted the critical agency of humans. Therefore, both critical theory and labour process theory will show why society is blinded from the possible effects capitalism has on nature.

Lastly, critical theory will be used to analyse the effects of – division of labour, specialisation, the lack of agency within both manual and intellectual work and the effects of hyper individualised people created by both labour, education, and leisure time – on the human-nature relationship. Both theories are appropriate to use as they answer different parts of the research question. Labour process theory looks at how labour under capitalism moulded the workers, and critical theory ties it to the effect on human-nature relationship. Both of these theories will underscore how capitalism infiltrated in all societal spheres, cutting away at the agency of people to be critical and further individualising society.

#### **4. Capitalism's Dual Impact: Individualisation and Impotence**

The argument developed in the next section looks at how capitalism has affected the human-nature relation in four stages. Firstly, it looks at what labour under capitalism entails through the lenses of critical theory. Part two and part three, using labour process theory will look at how the process of labour within both manual and intellectual work has decreased the agency of workers and fostered competition, individualising the worker further. Lastly the fourth part will look at how capitalism invaded other social spheres such as education, culture and entertainment, cutting away at the critical capacity of humans and moulding people from a young age with a capitalism mindset.

#### **4.1. On Specialisation and Division of Labour**

At the root of capitalism, two processes stand out that lead to profitability: division of labour and specialisation (Smith, 2000). Adam Smith (2000, pp. 25-28) claims that in order to increase productivity, industries need to divide the work in many different branches. Dividing the work and the knowledge per task, allows firms to produce more, as each individual is in charge of smaller tasks rather than one large task. Minimising the time to produce a certain good, increases the amount that can be produced (Smith, 2000, p. 26). For Smith (2000) specialisation goes hand in hand with division of labour; as workers specialise in specific smaller tasks, they become experts in doing them. Thus, productivity further increases as workers become more efficient in doing their smaller specialised tasks (Smith, 2000).

Although these two processes of capitalism increase profitability till a certain point, critical theorists suggest that it individualises people in society affecting the way they view and treat nature (Vogel, 2011, p. 201). As people go to work and finish their smaller specialised tasks, society becomes a place of private individuals with private goals (Vogel, 2011, p. 201). Division of labour and specialisation have created a social structure where people can mainly act as private individuals (Vogel, 2011, p. 201). Due to capitalist labour, people are compelled to act in individualistic manners, so they no longer acknowledge the sociality of production. Hence, as individuals engage in private transactions, many cease to recognise that the sum of all individualistic transactions has an environmental consequence which individuals by themselves would not choose (Vogel, 2011, p. 202).

Given that specialisation and division of labour increase individualism (Vogel, 2011, p. 201), many people are conditioned to act as private actors focused on their own personal agendas (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 2). Studies have shown that people with individualistic tendencies are less likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours (Cho et al., 2013; McCarty & Shrum, 2001). Due to increasing individualism, people mainly care of themselves and their own goals or achievements, so they push group goals aside (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 3). In general, there is a consensus within the scientific world that climate change requires a global response with people working together (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 3). However, as capitalist labour conditioned many workers to acting as private individuals it becomes harder for them to think collectively and focus on group goals (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 3).

In addition, scholars have found that as people become individualised, they do not make the necessary changes for the environment due to examples such as “I’m concerned that these changes will take up too much of my time ... there is not point for me to change” (Gifford & Chen, 2017, pp. 169-170). Individualism has as an effect on people’s agency to act for the environment. People do not see the value in making the necessary changes for the environment especially when currently the direct consequences of climate change are affecting other people and not necessarily themselves (Leiserowitz, 2004). Thus, as people have been pushed to think in individualistic ways, it becomes difficult to envision communal change and prioritise group goals.

Furthermore, although the environment in which people live in, is transformed by human labour, due to specialisation and division of labour, people no longer acknowledge the sociality of production, so they no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created (Vogel, 2011, p. 197). As the sociality of production is not easily recognisable in a society where people are conditioned to act as private individuals, people no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created. This then leads to human alienation from nature (Vogel, 2011, p. 197). Humans become alienated from nature as they no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created (Vogel, 2011, p. 197).

#### **4.2.The effects of capitalism on workers involved in manual work**

Other capitalist processes have been used to dominate and structure the labour process in such a way that profit can be accumulated (Braverman, Sweezy & Foster, 1998, p. 36). The next part of the argument will emphasise using labour process theory how workers in manual labour within capitalism have become powerless to act for the environment.

The way capitalism chips away at human agency is mostly visible within manual work, especially when it comes to assembly lines of production (Braverman, 1998). In order to make a living, working is necessary (Braverman, Sweezy & Foster, 1998, p. 36). The employer converts some of the capital produced into a wage which is received by the worker in exchange of their labour (Braverman, et al., 1998, p. 36). In capitalism, labour is embedded in the drive to increase profit; different modes of production then try to maximise worker’s surplus labour – the time worked for the capitalist – in order to increase profits (Braverman, et al., 1998, p. 38). This

means that employers will always look for means to increase the output of labour: by enhancing efficiency, capitalism increases profitability.

In order to increase the worker's surplus labour, different conditions of capital accumulation are based on the intensive control and surveillance of the worker (Braverman, et al., 1998). In manufacturing industries, different conditions of capital accumulation, also known by as Taylor's theory of scientific management, were employed to maximise efficiency (Braverman, et al., 1998). According to Braverman et al., (1998, p. 78), an industry that employs Taylorism to increase efficiency, must dissociates between "conception" (the knowledge of production) and "execution" (different tasks that achieve the industry's goal). This involves the managers being in charge of conception, or the thinking behind the labour process, while the workers are given a list of criteria and told to perform a set of routine specialised tasks. This design has become the "bedrock of all work designs" that want to improve efficiency and productivity (Braverman, et al., 1998, p. 60). Moreover, Satz (2023, p. 14) finds that contemporary factories such as Amazon and Walmart continue to employ tactics such as Taylorism to increase productivity.

Braverman et al. (1998, p. 62) observe that this model of production necessitates full control of the worker by the manager. The manager controls the labour process and dictates to the worker "the precise manner in which work is to be performed" (Braverman, et al., 1998, p. 62). Thus, modes of production such as Taylorism, further divide labour by separating the intellect behind the tasks, handled by the managers, and the work itself, performed by different workers (Braverman, et al., 1998, p. 62). By separating conception from execution, this model enhances productivity as the workers only need to follow routine tasks, set out by the managers, and not waste time on the intellectual work behind. Therefore, the surplus labour is increased as labour is further divided into "conception" and "execution" (Braverman et al., 1998, p. 78).

Due to labour being further divided, people become more individualised given that workers are conditioned to think as private individuals with specific tasks. Furthermore, Braverman, et al. (1998) emphasise that as managers take control of conception, workers become deskilled. More importantly, given that they are under the strong control of a hierarchical administrative structure, they lose their agency in making decisions about the labour process. Many of the workers feel powerless; they do not have the agency to change the labour process, as the thinking behind it is in the hands of the managers (Braverman, et al., 1998).

Furthermore, Braverman et al. (1998, p. 78) argues that as capitalism breaks down the unity between conception and enforcement in the labour process, manual labour becomes dehumanised as workers become units of production no longer capable of changing the labour process. The knowledge of the labour process is absent as the workers lose control of their own labour process and the way it is performed (Braverman, 1998, p. 80, p. 82; Robinson, 2016, p. 10). Therefore, the workers within manual labour feel powerless to act for the environment as they lack the agency to change the labour process. As labour is further divided into conception and execution, many workers find it even more difficult to recognise the sociality of production (Vogel, 2011). Thus, as people cease to acknowledge the sociality of production, they no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created. This as well as the feelings of helplessness rooted the lack of agency to change the labour process led to human alienation from nature (Vogel, 2011).

#### **4.3. The effects of capitalism on workers involved in intellectual work**

The subsequent section of the argument will look at how labour process theory can also be used to identify the loss of agency and increased individualisation within non-manufacturing work, also known as intellectual work.

Previtali and Fagiani (2015, p. 80) find that Braverman's et al. (1998) analysis can be applied to contemporary modes of production as well as intellectual work. If under Taylorism, workers involved in manual labour were not expected to think, but rather follow orders from their managers, in the current age, most workers are required to think for capital (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, pp. 81-82). Most workers involved in intellectual work receive slightly more autonomy when it comes to their work but only as long as it serves the objectives or the goals of the company (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 81). Thus, the separation between conception and execution still persists within much of intellectual labour as, although workers have access to the thinking behind the labour process, many of them can only change it as long as it is for the benefit of capital (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015). The worker is invited to suggest changes to the labour process only as long as it fuels productivity.

As worker satisfaction is important for efficiency, the worker is given a sense of autonomy through different meetings that value participation and commitment of workers to the goals of the company (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 82). This illusion of autonomy is presented

as worker's desires; contemporary modes of production co-opt worker's needs and assimilates them with the imperative to produce capital (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 82). Capitalism promotes active participation of workers in order to improve efficiency and calls it worker satisfaction: if the company is doing well so do its employers, so if the employer wants to be satisfied, the company must be efficient (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 82). This can be seen by the introduction of certain job denominations such as associate or collaborator or even by the implementation of problem-solving meetings (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 82).

This process not only gives the workers a false sense of agency, but it increases individualisation of many workers (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 89). Encouraging workers to participate in devising new more efficient ways of production, invites competition amongst them. In the present times, workers are taught to think of their own individual careers and success (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 89). In order to ensure employability, workers need to focus on themselves and think for capital (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 89). Capitalism gains from competition given that workers struggle to find efficient ways of production to ensure their own employability. As workers devise more efficient ways of production, they often find ways for tasks to be accomplished by fewer people in less time. This leads to more layoffs, reducing the number of jobs and further intensifying competition (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 83). This competition further individualises people as they are forced to think for themselves rather than the needs of the rest.

The intensification of control and surveillance is also evident within intellectual labour. Workers find themselves under the rule of highly hierarchical administrative structures where they are monitored through performance rates (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 88). Although they are invited to innovate the labour process, they only have the autonomy to change it if it boosts the profitability of the company. Therefore, intellectual labour, like manual labour, undergoes a process of deskilling, as society is compelled to only think in ways that innovates the labour process for capital (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 89; Robinson, 2016, p. 10).

Thus, as aforementioned Taylorism required workers to not think about the labour process and leave it in the hands of the managers. Workers in assembly lines or industries were expected to be "trained gorillas" (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 86) following the strict guidelines of the managers. In contemporary capitalism, when it comes to much of intellectual work, workers are invited to think for capital. This not only increases individualisation due to high



levels of competition, but it also prescribes workers with a false sense of agency. Therefore, many workers involved in intellectual labour do not have the capacity to make the necessary changes for nature as their agency is constrained by the limits set by capitalism (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015). In addition, labour in this case is also divided, further individualising people and making it more difficult for workers to acknowledge the sociality of production (Vogel, 2011). This leads to human alienation from nature as people no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created and they feel powerless to make the necessary changes needed (Vogel, 2011).

#### **4.4. The invasion of capitalism in other spheres**

In order to sustain this society, the capitalist system requires workers to easily mould and be flexible in order to fit the demands of the market (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 85). Hence, the final part of the argument will look at how education within schools is shaped in order to produce workers ready for the demands of capitalist labour (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 85). In addition, the next section will also illustrate how capitalism has infiltrated in other social spheres eroding people's agency to be critical of the economic domination and further individualising society.

In many capitalist countries, schools and universities have been moulded in such a way that they produce workers who fit the demands of the market (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 85). Such a worker must be multi-skilled, flexible and able to adapt to new market demands; therefore, there is an emphasis placed on skills such as analysis, synthesis, fast and clear communication, speaking different languages, teamwork and time management (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 86). Education is used to socialise children by teaching them from an early age, what characteristics define disciplined workers (Fanelli & Evans, 2015, p. 11). Hence, education becomes responsible for producing highly specialised workers who can enter the global economic stage (Marcias, 2015, p. 267). Capitalism as a system is then embedded in many schools and universities in different capitalist countries in order to produce future professionals with a capitalist mindset (Marcias, 2015, p. 267).

Many schools and universities in different countries are forced to standardise curriculums and pedagogy to the demands of their labour markets (Noonan & Coral, 2015, p. 60). These institutions no longer educate students for the sake of "free development of imaginative and

cognitive capacities, [as they] are encouraged to produce compliant employees” ready for whatever job is available in the market (Noonan & Coral, 2015, p. 60). Any change within the pedagogics in different countries is justified as a better method in preparing students “for the real world of tough competition” (Noonan & Coral, 2015, p. 64; Karpov, 2013, p. 80). Thus, much of education in many capitalist countries prepares children from a young age to be competitive in order to prepare them for the harsh demands of the labour market.

The dynamics created by competition and the embeddedness of capitalism at many different levels of education undermines the capacity of students to be critical of the economic structure (Noonan & Coral, 2015, p. 64). Much of education is focused on students developing skills that are demanded for the labour market, “in which supply always far exceeds demand” and not necessarily focused on teaching students how to develop a critical attitude towards capitalism (Noonan & Coral, 2015, p. 64). Therefore, many students are taught how to be productive and compliant workers, at the expense of understanding the criticisms and contradictions of capitalism and how they could possibly change this economic system (Noonan & Coral, 2015, p. 65). Thus, in many countries, capitalism has infiltrated in education, moulding it in such a manner that prepares people to offer their labour and not criticize the capitalist system (Robison, 2016, p. 1).

Competitive dynamics and individualism are built within education in many capitalist countries; although teamwork is seen as a skill within schools, children are taught to compete for grades in order to enter the best universities and increase their chances of employability. This teaches them to think in individualistic manners, as in order to succeed in the global economic system, one must think of themselves and their own connections (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015, p. 89). As capitalism infiltrates in the education system, people are formed as individualistic subjects prepared to join a competitive labour market that further individualises people in society. Therefore, the economic domination gripping at education and the labour process has individualised people creating a society where many people prioritise personal goals over group goals (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 2). Consequently, as people become hyper individualistic both due to education and labour, they find it difficult to enact environmental change that requires communal effort.

As people mainly have the agency to be critical of the labour process as long as it benefits the goals of capital, the question arises whether workers can be critical of capitalism

outside work or outside schools or universities. Scholars find that capitalism has also invaded other social spheres; “those features of our lives that were once reserved for life outside of work have been swallowed by work” (Bousquet, 2023, p. 138). Most people organise their day around the work, even when they are not working: preparing meals for the office, making sure the office day clothes are washed and ironed etc. (Bousquet, 2023, p. 138). Thus, the majority of the time, people’s mental energy is focused on work and how to make sure they are able to provide the labour time they are being paid for (Bousquet, 2023, p. 138).

In addition, critical theorists have argued that capitalism has such power over human life, that it invades leisure time and happiness (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Any entertainment or fun activities “are inevitably after-images of the work process itself” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 109). As leisure is industrialised, it ceases to become a vehicle for expression and critical thinking and becomes a vehicle of capital accumulation (Biro, 2011, pp. 233-235). Leisure time begins to resemble work time; any behaviour shown in shows, television or movies is imprinted on people (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 100). Thus, many people are no longer able to be critical of the effects capitalist labour has on nature, as sources of entertainment resembles the work process itself (Biro, 2011, pp. 233-235). Considering that critical faculties are impacted, and there is no more room for imagination, it becomes difficult for many people to envision another social system (Biro, 2011, p. 233).

## **5. Analysis and discussions on the impacts on the human-nature relation:**

The argument developed describes how labour under capitalism – through division of labour, specialisation and the separation between the conception and the execution of the labour process, within both manual and intellectual labour – has increased individualisation cutting away at people’s agency to act for the environment (see Figure A). Many people in society have become individualised, as both the labour process and education created workers who can only act as private individuals with private goals. Furthermore, due to increased competition rooted in many schools and universities and the labour system, individualisation has increased. This results in most people being hyper individualised as they have been constrained to thinking and acting as private individuals; most people then can no longer recognise the sociality of production leading to human alienation from nature as they no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created (Vogel, 2011).

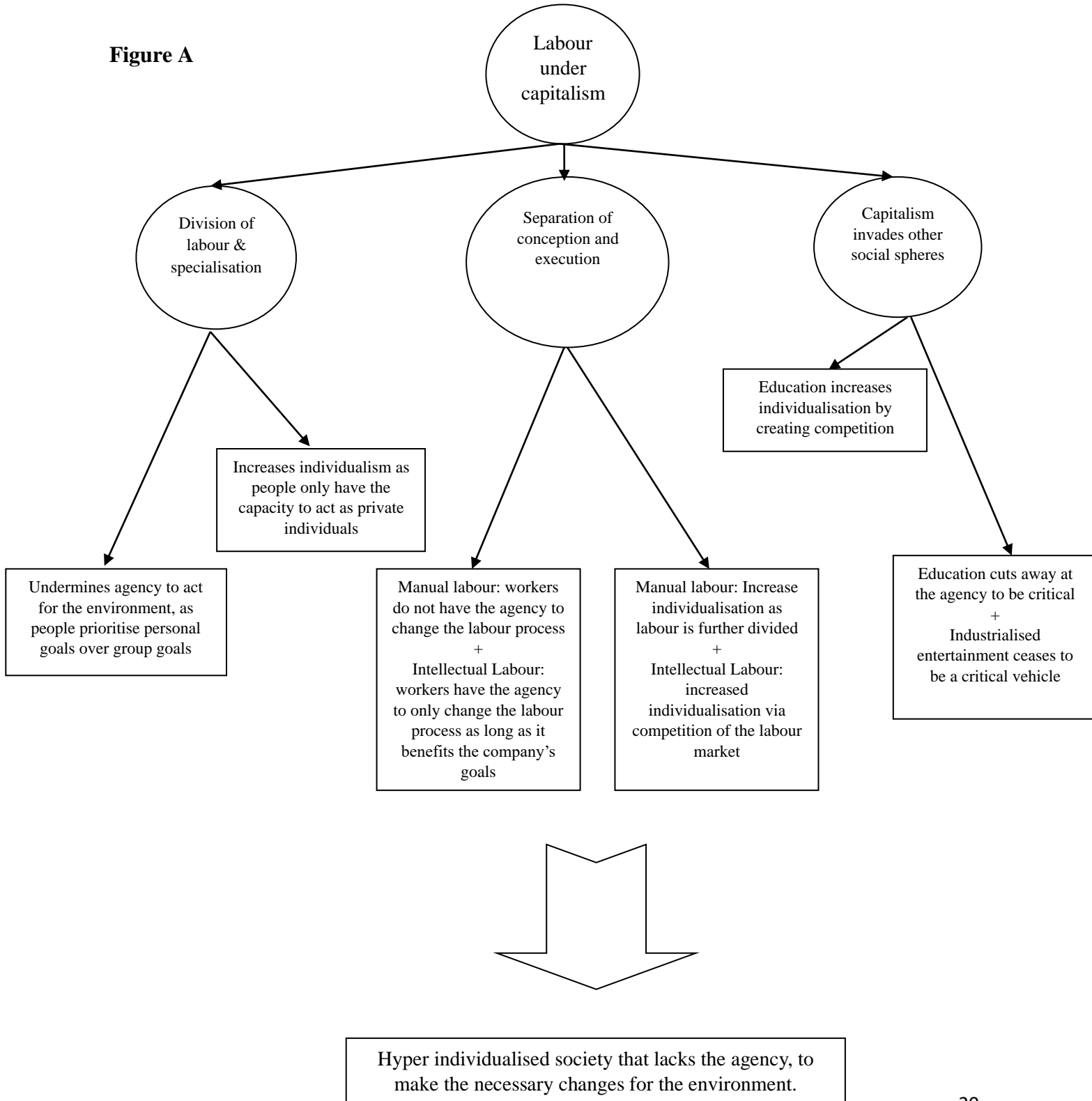
Some critical theorists argue that as people become increasingly individualistic due to capitalist processes of division of labour and specialisation, they prioritise private agendas over communal goals and needs (Vogel, 2011; Xiang et al., 2019, p. 1). Capitalist labour results in many individualised workers who prioritise private gains over pro-environmental behaviour that would help a communal cause. In addition, people's agency to act for the environment is undermined due to different modes of capitalist production. According to labour process theory, within manual labour, many workers feel powerlessness to act for the environment as they do not have the agency to change the labour process (Braverman et al., 1998). When it comes to intellectual labour, many people continue to feel helpless as they have a false sense of autonomy when it comes to the conception of the labour process; they only have the agency to make changes as long as it serves the goals of capitalist production (Previtali & Fagiani, 2015).

The capitalist system by infiltrating in education, it has conditioned many schools and universities to producing future professionals with a capitalist mindset. Therefore, although capitalism is responsible for environmental degradation, this economic system shapes so much of people's lives through labour, education and other social spheres, it hyper individualises people so much that many no longer have the capacity to change the system or be critical of it. Alienation from nature thus arises from the failure to recognise ourselves in the world we have created and from the feelings of helplessness rooted in the lack of agency to change the labour process. The human-nature relation is one of alienation due to what capitalist labour entails: division of labour, specialisation, separation between conception and execution, intensive control of the worker and invasion in other social spheres; all these aspects create hyper individualised people that lack the agency to make the necessary changes for the environment.

These necessary changes for the environment would involve taking the essential steps to mitigate the impacts of climate change. For example, to reduce carbon emissions, people could have plant-based diets (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017). Scholars have argued that combating climate change requires the "combined actions of millions of individuals working together" (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 3). Furthermore, steps would need to be taken at a global level and people would need to subordinate personal goals to the group goals (Eriksen et al., 2011; Xiang et al., 2019, p. 3). However, individuals have been reluctant to respond effectively (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 1). The argument presented in the thesis suggests that due to hyper-individualism caused by different capitalist processes, people have been conditioned to act as private individuals thinking in terms

of personal goals. This not only cuts away at their agency to act for the environment but also as capitalism infiltrated in different social spheres it undermines people’s capacity to be critical of the economic system.

**Figure A**



## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper looked at how labour under capitalism has affected human relation to nature. The dominant view literature has put forward is that capitalism, commodifies nature reducing it to a pool of resources due to its drive to increase profits (Buck, 2007; Goods 2011; O'Connor, 2009; Smith, 2007). People then involved in capitalist labour develop the same mentality towards nature; as they depend on their work for survival, they view nature in terms of profit (Buck, 2007). Given that capitalism conditions nature to a resource deemed necessary for exploitation, it objectifies nature to the point that people treat it as external to them (Stone, 2013). People no longer see themselves as part of nature but in opposition to it (Stone, 2013). Therefore, labour under capitalism changed the human nature relation from one of unity to one of domination (Stone, 2013).

This paper has examined how the argument can be strengthened by looking at how labour under capitalism affected the human-nature relation from the perspective of critical theory and labour process theory. Labour under capitalism has hyper-individualised people to the point that many no longer have the agency to change the labour process in a way that could bring back the unity between human and nature. People feel alienated from nature as they no longer acknowledge the sociality of production and no longer recognise themselves in the environment they created (Vogel, 2011). Furthermore, different modes of production have undermined people's agency to change the labour process and so alienation from nature also comes from the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. This is scholarly significant as it underscores the necessity of also looking at how people in society have become individualised and how their agency to change their behaviour towards the environment has been undermined.

Given that capitalism is embedded in different social spheres it socialises people from a young age to think in capitalistic terms and no longer envision the possibility of a different economic system. Therefore, although capitalist labour is to blame for environmental degradation, the system has individualised people in society, undermining their agency to the point that they can only alter the system as long as it benefits capital. As society has become hyper individualised, they can only act as private individuals who prioritise private gains over group goals (Xiang et al., 2019, p. 2). Thus, one societal element that arises from the analysis is that collective responses to climate change are lacklustre due to the fact that people have been mainly conditioned to think and act as private individuals.

There are a few limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, the project does not take into account how social norms would affect the behaviour of workers in different societies. Social norms such as individualism or collectivism have been analysed in social sciences since the 1980s (Bhawuk, 2017). Bhawuk (2017, p. 2) argues that people, tend to treat their ingroup or outgroup differently and they engage with societies in distinct ways, depending on whether they hold individualistic or collectivist norms. Therefore, it would be interesting to research whether people who hold collectivist norms over individualist norms would be able to respond better to climate change. Furthermore, social norms in different cultures or areas in the world could be analysed to see whether they impact how people relate to nature.

Secondly, a potential criticism or limitation is that the paper does not look at the role of the state and how it may combat the effects of capitalism. The state is responsible to its citizens thus it needs to act when the voters may no longer feel satisfied with the status quo (Brosio, 1994, p. 45). However, although this is the case, the state is not always neutral when it comes to struggles with capitalism. The state has tended to support this economic system especially when capitalism as a form of social organisation has been perceived as threatening (Brosio, 1994, p. 45). Although the state is responsible for the demands of the voters, it is “fundamentally committed to the continuation of capitalism-as-a-system” (Brosio, 1994, p. 47). Therefore, future research could analyse whether the role of the state in supporting the status quo, has also affected human alienation from nature by increasing the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness in society.

Lastly an interesting avenue for research could be how capitalist labour has pushed people into supporting far-right populist parties through its alienating effect from nature and heightened feelings of helplessness in society (Moore & Roberts, 2022). Given the urgency of climate change and the impotence of society to make the necessary changes for the environment, some may be persuaded to vote for far-right parties that may be more inclined into taking extreme measures in the name of the community (Moore & Roberts, 2022, p. 3).

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