

“Inorganic body of man”: the transhumanist ideas in Marx

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Abstract. Transhumanism is a young ideology, and its creators have hazy and confused notion of their forerunners and philosophical roots. The authors attempt to show that some of the ideas and concepts of Karl Marx meet the aspirations of transhumanists to radically transform the human body. This is, first of all, the idea of the revolutionary role of labor and technology in the history of mankind, along with the concepts of the “inorganic body” of man and the essence of man as an “ensemble of social relations”.

1 Introduction

Those who aspire to glimpse into distant future should, as Newton advised, climb onto “the shoulders of giants”. For an ideology as newborn and as unfledged as transhumanism is, it is vital to lean on firm points of support in the history of human thought. So far, transhumanists have failed in this task, nor have they displayed any particular interest in undertaking it. They have been more passionate about the technological side of the matter, viz. androids, cyborgs, nootropic drugs, etc. Nick Bostrom’s effort to identify the ideological roots of the transhumanist movement can hardly be considered a serious contribution to the history of science [1].¹ Nick Bostrom is a Director of the Oxford Institute for the Future of Humanity, and a co-founder of the World Association of Transhumanists.

Christian theologians’ excursions to the background of the problem, from Francis Bacon to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin [2], have been more impressive, but remain a view from the outside, not the kind of self-critical introspection transhumanism requires as, for that matter, any other ideology or research program does.

Following is an attempt to see whether and how Marx’s philosophy of history can help solve the problems on the transhumanist agenda.

2 Marx as a Precursor of Transhumanism

The cornerstone of transhumanist constructions is the idea of the infinity of human being. Philosophers have been familiar with it since the time of Heraclitus (B 45 DK): “By setting off you would never find out the ends of soul, though you should travel along every path:

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so deep a measure does it have” [3]. Plato, too, stressed the difference between the infinity of soul and the limited capacities of human body. He would even call the body the prison of the soul.

As Plato writes in *Phaedo* (82e), “the lovers of knowledge are conscious that their souls, when philosophy receives them, are simply fastened and glued to their bodies: the soul is only able to view existence through the bars of a prison, and not in her own nature”.

Transhumanism tries to resolve this contradiction of classical metaphysics in its own way. It seeks to *transform the human body* by means of technologies, endowing it with countless degrees of freedom, overcoming, indeed, death itself, and thus to force open the door of the “prison” of our corporeity.

Marx was the first to point out the revolutionary role of technologies in the history of mankind. (Incidentally, Bostrom enlisted Marx in the party of “bioconservatives”, without a shadow of a doubt and without a single argument.) Marx showed how technological development changed the structure of society, creating new social classes and forms of property. “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist” [5]. And earlier, Marx wrote about man’s universality “which makes all nature his inorganic body”. Plants, animals, stones, air, etc., that “constitute theoretically a part of human consciousness, ... in the realm of practice ... constitute a part of human life and human activity” [6].

A man, therefore, has not one body, but two. He constructs his second, inorganic, body by his own labor from the material of external nature. All strictly human, i.e. the *ideal*, programs of human behavior, including habits and norms of everyday life, rules of language, moral and legal imperatives, dogmas of religion, etc., are “recorded” in this man-made body. Laboring man can turn any natural thing or any phenomenon of nature into a “chromosome” that stores information about his personality, the character of his thought and behavior. It is this technology of “programming” man’s own vital activity with the help of external things that is human race’s major advantage over other living species: it gives us *freedom*. Every time man changes the surrounding world, he changes himself, and in this improves the common “genotype” of mankind. Man is both a subject and a product of his own labor: “*The entire so-called history of the world is nothing but the creation of man through human labor*” [7]. Marx called this conceptual novelty a materialistic understanding of history.

Marx, to be sure, understood “the human essence” to be “the ensemble of the social relations” and, by no means, an “abstraction inherent in each single individual” (as this is stated in his Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach). There is neither a trace nor a shadow of “biosocial” dualism in this definition. The essence of man is one hundred percent social. As to the body, it is a violin the “ensemble of social relations” plays.

3 The “Bio-conservative” Objections

Critics of transhumanism put the concept of human “biological nature” in the forefront of their argument. This is precisely the concept Marx rejected, that of the “abstraction inherent in each single individual”. The guarantee of our human identity is seen in some anthropological constant or in the human genome, technological interference with which threatens to destroy both “our generic-ethical self-understanding”, and “the necessary conditions for an autonomous way of life, and universalistic understanding of morals”, Francis Fukuyama writes [cited in 8].

From Marx’s point of view, the “biological nature” of man is but a *naturalistic myth* rooted in the misunderstanding of human practical life, of the fundamental difference in the way of life of man and animal. If so, the entire line of reasoning of the opponents of transhumanism is beside the point, and this applies not only to the rationalist arguments of

enlightened “bio-conservatives”, such as Fukuyama, but also to anathemas from the lofty perspectives of “theological anthropology”.

The prime example of the latter can be found in Vladimir Kutyrev’s writings. “Transhumanism is an anthropo(humano)phagia, a direct challenge to the identity of man, as we know him, as we know ourselves having evolved over millions of years in the tempos of reason living and born on that basis or having been created by God “who saw that it was good” [9].

The nature of human body or, for that matter, the nature of any other body is no obstacle to labor. Practical transformation of nature, including and primarily the nature of human body, is the “generic activity” of man. To attempt to impose any kind of anthropological taboos on our practical abilities would be both senseless and useless. Labor has long since changed our natural body and changed it irreversibly, has straightened our spine vertically (despite a whole bunch of adverse health effects), has transformed the anthropoid’s upper limb into that “tool of tools” we call human hand. Modernization of the body will doubtless go on, no matter what its opponents, the “biohumanists”, say.

In general, transhumanism should not be portrayed as an *alternative* to classical humanism. The “hard core” of the humanistic worldview, as shaped in the age of the Renaissance, remains safe and sound: *man is the ultimate goal, the end in itself of any human activity*. Man’s self-perfection, including that of his body, mind and social relations, is the principal vector of world history. It is not difficult to find this basic provision in the transhumanist manifestos provided they are read without prejudice and with a minimum of scientific honesty.

There may be theorists and practitioners of transhumanism, of course, who might try to destroy this core, but any research program must be judged by its *best, advanced* developments. Marxism, it will be remembered, did not avoid being deformed and discredited by some of its adherents already during Marx’s lifetime, prompting Marx to refuse to identify himself as “a Marxist”.

4 Human Nature and the Problem of Freedom

For Marx, human freedom is directly proportional to man’s command of nature, including command of his own biological nature. Command of nature depends, in turn, on the development of productive forces. i.e. tools and technologies. Freedom is, therefore, a dimension of sociohistorical, not individual life. The paradox of history is that societies have developed enormous productive forces at the expense of crippling bodies and minds of men of labor. Some social classes have expanded their freedom by enslaving others.

Marx called this paradoxical development alienation. A great social revolution was needed for the progress to cease resemble a pagan idol drinking the nectar of freedom from skulls of the dead.

What does this mean as far as the problem of transformed human corporeity is concerned?

Technological progress is a necessary, but far from sufficient condition for liberating the body. Human bodies cannot be free unless human society is free. In situations of alienation freedom of some implies bondage of others. This deplorable fact is virtually ignored by transhumanists.

As James Steinhoff correctly observes, “most transhumanist thought tends to place little emphasis on the social nature of the human – and this is where transhumanists should take a point from Marx. The transformation of the human seems to be regarded by most transhumanists as a process undergone by atomistic individuals who each exist in no more than a loose aggregate with others” [10].

Since human body is an element of the productive forces, indeed, their primary, key element, development and transformation of human body has to and will continue. From this standpoint, bioconservatives' protests are hardly more than Luddite-type naïveté devoid of any historic sense. But bioconservatives are right to highlight threats and risks new technologies entail for living individuals. In the world of alienation these threats are more than real. However, new technologies entail not only threats, they promise new possibilities, hence greater freedom. Would this not justify the risks?

5 Conclusion

For all their apparent differences, Marxist and transhumanist theoretical programs turn out to be blood relatives, at least, in a number of aspects. However, we have no intention to present Marx as an apostle of transhumanism. No doubt, he would have found his own objections, and severe those are likely to have been, to the basic tenets of transhumanism, not to mention the former's historical predictions. The scope of this paper forces us to limit ourselves to highlighting the affinity of Marx's understanding of human nature and technology with the implicit, still not properly understood, premises of the transhumanist project.

Man is an artistic and artificial creature, from head to toe. Humans are creators of their own identity, "and this is good", as the author of the book of Genesis used to say.

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