

A Critique of Søren Mau from the Standpoint of Metabolic Rift Theory

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One of the positions undertaken by Søren Mau in his work *Mute Compulsion* is of staunch ahumanism (see Mau, 78–91 and 98) [1]. While ahumanism is in principle not an objectionable position, this essay analyzes one particular manifestation of this ahumanism in Mau’s work which leads to a gap in theoretical understanding.

One of the lines of thinking Mau adopts, in his rejection of humanism, involves a rejection of the notion of an “original unity” between humans and nature. Humans, for Mau, instead possess an “*original disunity*” in regards to nature; in other words, humans have no spiritually organic relation to nature, and instead secularly mediate their relation to nature through their own social relations. Humans may relate to nature in different ways across historical social formations, but none of such formations are more unified, organic, genuine, pure, or natural than the rest. This position then leads Mau to imply that no human social formation can cause a unique “disunity” between humans and nature — in Mau’s words:

“Living all of your life staring into a smartphone in a megacity and eating prepared food without ever knowing where it comes from and how it is produced **does not mean that a holy bond between you and nature has been broken; it just means that your individual metabo-**

lism is mediated by a complex system of infrastructures, data, machines, financial flows and planetary supply chains” (98, emphasis mine).

Thus, humans simply organize their social relations and distinguish these different historical relations by the particular way in which they mediate these relations amongst themselves. On the surface, this perspective appears coherent and quite plausible: humans are not at one with nature, and the way in which they mediate each other will determine their metabolism with nature as well.

The issue, however, is that this framework does not allow us to question the particular nature of the metabolism *itself* in specific historical conditions. Mau can show quite clearly how this metabolism is mediated by different human interrelations, and what this entails practically, but he cannot account for a potential change (or “rift”) in the very character of the metabolism between humans and nature *itself*; and moreover, he cannot account for the fact that this particular character of the metabolism between humans and nature could be a fact of a *particular social formation alone*.

In Mau’s framework, no social formation is allowed a privileged historical position — all social formations are existentially the same and exhibit the same essential metabolism between humans and nature, merely *mediated socially* in various ways. As will be shown, this is problematic. To better analyze capitalism we must really in a certain sense historically privilege it. Specifically, we must analyze how capitalism constitutes the metabolism between humans and nature *itself* in a way wholly incommensurate with any other major social formation in history. Humans may not possess any romantic and original “unity” with nature, true, but it cannot be denied that capitalism generates historically unique relations between humans and nature. Whether we call these relations a “rift” or a “disunity,” it remains that these relations exist as a particular social transformation of the metabolism between humans and nature that is unique from all previous major social formations. This is something Mau’s framework simply cannot account for [2].

The problem with Mau’s framework is that it cannot account for the particular metabolic relation between humans and nature that occurs *uniquely* in capitalism, distinct from all previous social formations in history. This particular relation we call the *metabolic rift* — and as a concept it attempts to theoretically elucidate the unique way in which the relations between humans and nature is mediated under capitalism, most notably mediated in a *highly deleterious manner*.

The term “metabolic rift” was coined by Marx in the third volume of *Capital*, in which Marx warned against an “irreparable rift” between humans and nature precipitated by capitalist relations of production. Kohei Saito, in his book *Marx in the Anthropocene*, then expanded this notion into three essential “dimensions” of metabolic rift:

1. The first dimension is “the material disruption of cyclical processes in natural metabolism” (Saito, 24). Whereas capital demands consistent rates of return and maximized profitability for as long as possible, nature does not act this way at all, relying instead on a “law of replenishment” (Justus von Liebig’s term) to keep itself alive and healthy. Capital disrupts this natural process, leading to averse consequences.
2. The second dimension is “the *spatial rift*” (25). The capitalist social division of labor entails “depeasantization and massive urban growth of the working-class population concentrated in large cities” (26). This entails constant transport of agricultural products from the country to the city, and the subsequent accumulation of waste in urban environments. Saito also cites Andreas Malm’s work in *Fossil Capital*, which elucidates the necessary transition from naturally flowing water-based energy to fossil fuel in the growth of capital.
3. The third dimension is “the *temporal rift*” (27). Saito explains:

“Capital constantly attempts to shorten its turnover time and maximize valorization in a given time [...] This process is accompanied by increasing demands for floating capital in the form of cheap and abundant raw and auxiliary materials [...] Furthermore, capital constantly

revolutionizes

the production process, augmenting productive forces with an unprecedented speed... This tendency can never be fully suspended because natural cycles exist independently of capital's demands" (27–28).

These three dimensions of metabolic rift describe, at least in part, how the metabolism between humans and nature is harmfully altered under capitalism. But what is particularly crucial to understand is that these dimensions of a “metabolic rift” are part of a problem conceptually applicable *only to the capitalist mode of production*. As anarchist writer Peter Gelderloos put it:

“When it comes to protecting the environment, nearly any social system would be better than the one we have now. **Capitalism is the first social arrangement in human history to endanger the survival of our species and life on earth in general**” (86, emphasis mine).

Indeed, this is the same framework which Saito uses as the foundation for his understanding of metabolic rift. He opens his book quite bluntly:

“The world is on fire. We are experiencing ‘the end of the end of history’... Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of ‘the end of history’ after the collapse of the USSR [...] is approaching a totally unexpected dead end today, namely **the end of human history**” (1).

This reality is one which Mau’s perspective simply cannot account for. Capitalism is *not* just another way to organize human interrelations, commensurate with any other one from the past. Rather, capitalism presents a *historically unique existential threat to human life itself*, and moreover, this existential threat is an *ecological* one, meaning that it is embedded in the particular metabolic relations between humans and nature. Thus, in order to understand why capitalism presents a historically unique challenge for

humanity, the historically unique way in which humans relate to nature materially under capitalism must be elucidated. Mau's work simply ignores this problem and instead renders it conceptually unthinkable.

Notes:

1. "*Critiques of capitalism in the name of human nature rarely go beyond solemn invocations of an ideal of the truly human, and when they do they tend to depoliticise critique by conceiving the abolition of capitalism as the restoration of a natural harmony. Such inadequacies plagued Marx's writings from 1843 up to and including The Holy Family (late 1844). But he changed his mind*" (Mau, 84).
2. As a partial aside, it should be indicated that my forwarded perspective does not entail humanism by any means. It may be commensurate with humanism, but does not necessarily rely on a humanist philosophy. Mau's hostility towards my perspective on the grounds that it is (or at least appears) humanist is unwarranted, and as we will see, has harmful political implications.

Gelderloos, Peter. *Anarchy Works*. The Anarchist Library, 2010.

Mau, Søren. *Mute Compulsion: A Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*. University of Southern Denmark, 2019.

Satio, Kohei. *Marx in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.