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REALISING THE TRANSITION TO THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY - #3030 ITM

GORZ'S LABOUR-BASED POLITICAL ECOLOGY & ITS LEGACY FOR THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

ReTraCE webinar

25 March 2021

Emanuele Leonardi
emanuele.leonardi@unipr.it

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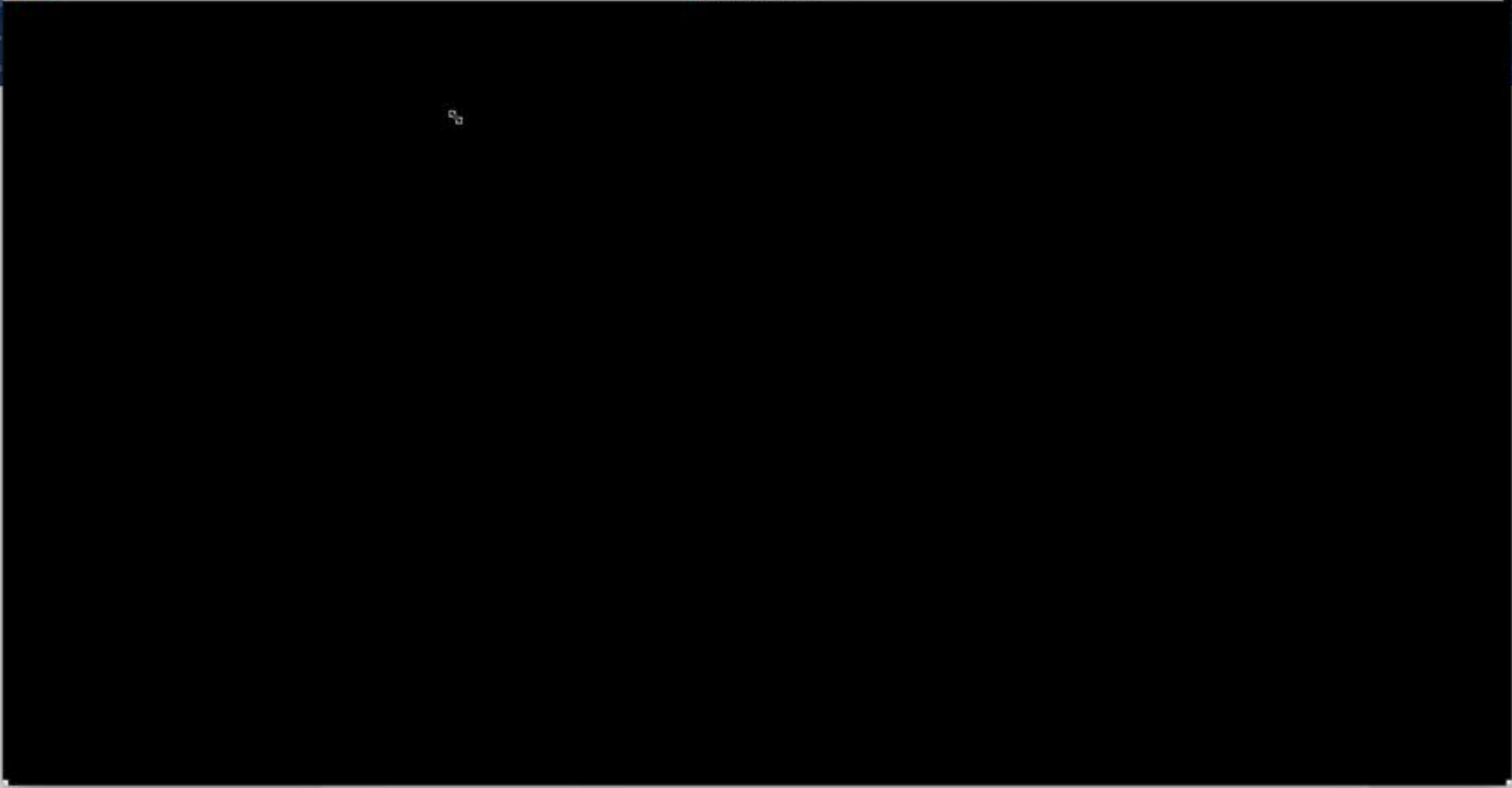
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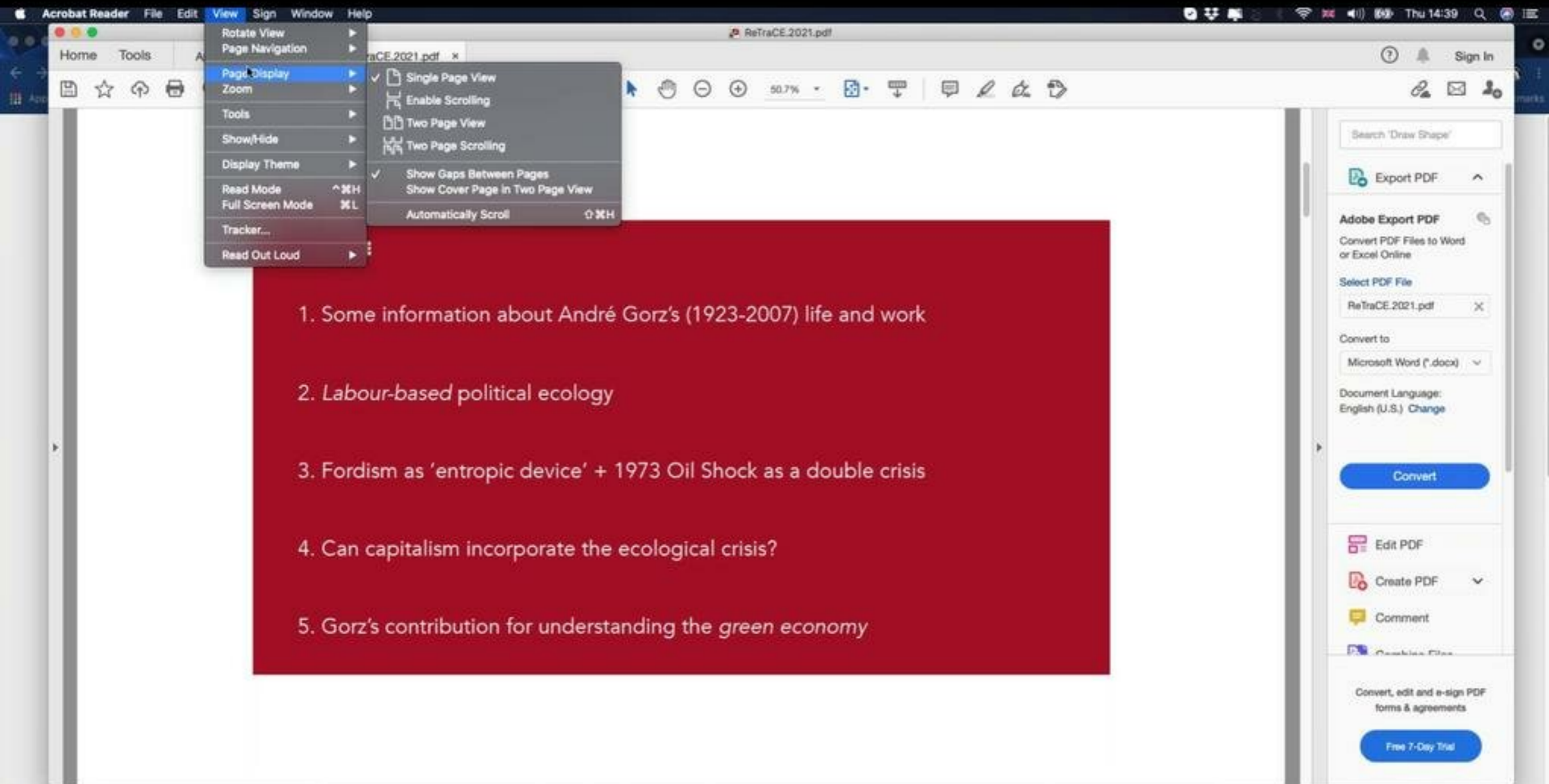


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1. Some information about André Gorz's (1923-2007) life and work

2. *Labour-based* political ecology

3. Fordism as 'entropic device' + 1973 Oil Shock as a double crisis

4. Can capitalism incorporate the ecological crisis?

5. Gorz's contribution for understanding the *green economy*

OUTLINE

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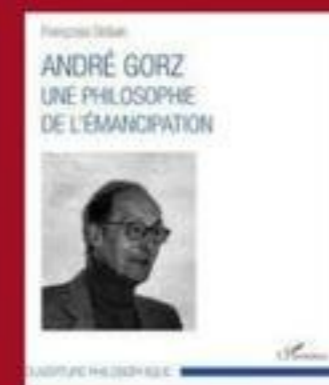
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SOME INFORMATION ABOUT ANDRÉ GORZ'S (1923-2007) LIFE AND WORK

- Journalist / Public Intellectual / Heterodox Marxist
- Continuity: Sartrean Notion of Subjectivity

Discontinuity:

- 1) 1950s – Existentialism
- 2) 1960s – Classical Marxism
- 3) 1970s – Political Ecology
- 4) 1980s + first half 1990s – Critique of Alienation
- 5) second half 1990s + 2000s – Critique of Cognitive Capitalism (+ pro Basic Income)



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LABOUR-BASED POLITICAL ECOLOGY I - 'ECOLOGY AND FREEDOM' (1977-1980)

- *Non-self-sufficiency* of the ecological crisis: environmental data, alone, cannot explain it. The crisis of nature is not external to the economy, to society, to politics; it is, rather, their extreme instance.
- **Historical Materialism as method**: *labour/work* functions as 'filter', as 'mediator' between *society* and *nature*. Hence the need to investigate the historical origin (accumulation-imperative) and the political solution (eco-socialism vs. techno-fascism) of the ecological crisis.
- The link between **ecology** and **freedom** is not a natural given, a state of affairs to be taken for granted; it is, rather, a task to be assumed, produced, cared for and eventually defended.

LABOUR-BASED POLITICAL ECOLOGY II - UNION POLITICS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

- Theoretical framework: 1. interlinking amongst **environmental crises**, **labour transformations** and **capitalist development**; 2. Influence of May 1968: condition of possibility for an *ecological renewal* of the workers' movement.
- *Civilization of liberated time* = recognition of **biophysical limits** + **workers' control** over productive processes + **self-management** of local communities.
- Implications for unions: desirable shifting from a focus on the *quantitative distribution of value* (wage-related demands) to the *qualitative composition of production* (what should be manufactured, and why, where, when, by whom). [in actuality, the two options co-existed, but the first prevailed]

FORDISM AS 'ENTROPIC DEVICE'

"[it] succeeded in combining raising wages, greater social benefits and public expenditures and, above all, increased production and employment [...] With the exception of a minority Left-wing section of the trade unions, the labour movement didn't criticize the nature and orientation of this expansion but called, rather, for it to be speeded up [...] From the ecological standpoint, speeding up the circulation of capital leads to excluding everything that reduces profit in the immediate term. The continual expansion of industrial production thus entails an accelerated pillaging of natural resources" (Gorz 2005/2010: 155).

-Growth Paradigm (Schmelzer 2015) + Productivist Nexus (Offe 1992) => Displacement of social antagonism: from the *qualitative composition of production* (what, where, when is to be produced, and how, by whom, for whom?) to the depoliticized terrain of the *quantitative distribution of value* (wage-related demands). [there are notable exceptions - yet, just a few]

CAN CAPITALISM INCORPORATE THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS? I - 'CLASSICAL' VALUE-NATURE NEXUS

- 1972: **YES**. "In a not so distant future [...] there will be a new cycle of accumulation based on the capitalization of Nature itself, on the capitalistic subsumption of the totality of factors and conditions which allow life on Earth [...] Even air will become a commodity". [Consider carbon trading]

- 1977: **NO**. The crisis is decisive and the two only options are both **beyond capitalism** (conviviality or techno-fascism). "Either we agree to impose limits on technology and industrial production so as to preserve natural resources [...] or else the limits necessary to the preservation of life will be centrally determined and planned by ecological engineers" (pp. 16-17).

=> Nature as internal limit to valorization (free and infinite provider of raw materials + free and infinite garbage bin [tap & sink]) => Growth vs. Physical Limits.

1973 OIL SHOCK AS A DOUBLE CRISIS - 'ECOLOGY AND FREEDOM' (1977-1980)

A) Over-accumulation (tendency of the rate of profit to fall) => substitution of living labour with machinery;

B) Reproduction: the environment must be either preserved (*ex ante*) or cleaned up (*ex post*) in order to maintain the same levels of productivity (but with higher prices) => internalization of nature as pure cost for companies.

=> no 'ecological' accumulation strategy:
either higher prices or environmental indifference.



CAN CAPITALISM INCORPORATE THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS? II - 'NEW' VALUE-NATURE NEXUS

- 2005: **YES BUT NO**. The ecological crisis is 'manageable' in a knowledge-based society, but such 'management' requires a non-capitalist setting (i.e. de-commodification of knowledge). "It is capitalism itself that, unwillingly, works towards its own extinction by developing the tools for a sort of high-tech craftsmanship, which allows the fabrication of basically everything with a productivity which is higher than that of industry and a requirement of natural resources which is lower". [Gorz is too optimistic, though]

Why this change of mind?

=> nature as direct element of valorization (political wager which constitute the pillar of contemporary climate and biodiversity governance). Emergence of an unprecedented 'accumulation strategy'.

Sergio Bologna (1987): "Capital needs environmentalism for a new industrial revolution".

GORZ'S CONTRIBUTION FOR UNDERSTANDING THE GREEN ECONOMY

Inceptive phase: *Sustainable Development* (1987) => Growth and ecological preservation can be pursued simultaneously]

Green Economy: shift from a crisis of capitalism to a crisis for capitalism => internalization of the environmental limit as an unprecedented opportunity for development (political pillar of climate & biodiversity UN governance).

This is possible because the units of 'nature' exchanged on new green markets (Carbon trading, PES, etc.) are produced as information by (exploited) cognitive labour and exchanged onto financial markets => (new wave of primitive accumulation: ecological research and innovation subjected to the profit imperative).

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

Gorz is useful to think the articulation of the 'classical' value-nature nexus and the 'new' one in contemporary capitalism.

[their are complementary; one does not 'substitute' the other]

Gorz is useful to think the genealogy of the presente conjuncture, especially with regard to the role of workers' struggles (their ecological potential, but also their limits vis-à-vis the 'growth paradigm').

Gorz is useful to think the fundamental ambivalence of the green economy (but also the Circular Economy): these are paradigms which could be successful in a de-commodified context but are implemented within profit-oriented economic environments (which significantly reduce their ecological potentials).

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