

Eva von Redecker

REVOLUTION FOR LIFE. A Philosophy of the new forms of protest.”

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Monograph – nine chapters, plus introduction and conclusion, word count 71.000.

Structure

The book’s structure reflects its argument for a wholesale transformation of the core spheres of capitalist life and society. The first four chapters analyse ownership, distribution, labour and life in their current form, tracing the impact of capitalist principles on intersecting structures of oppression and ordinary life. When we – members of industrial societies in the global North – own, we dominate, when we produce, we exploit, when we work, we exhaust and when we live, we destroy. The central fifth chapter serves, as it were, as a hinge. It is dedicated to the question of how to conceive of revolution under present conditions. In the mirror of an interstitial understanding of revolution, the second half of the book then tackles the crucial spheres again. Life, labour, distribution and ownership are now presented in reverse order, and transformed meaning. For each of these areas, the investigation takes cues from one specific social movement on how we could be doing things differently: save lives, regenerate labour, share goods and maintain what belongs to us.

- Introduction
- To dominate (property)
- To exploit (goods)
- To exhaust (labour)
- To destroy (life)
- Revolution
- To save (life)
- To regenerate (labour)
- To share (goods)
- To maintain (property)

Argument

The book’s main argument, already displayed in its structure, is that capitalism destroys life and that another social form is not only possible but already nascent in the interstitial practices of radical social movements. In particular, I look at Black Lives Matter, NiUnaMenos (i.e., Latin American feminism), the Standing Rock protests, the climate justice movement, Extinction Rebellion, and Fridays for Future.

In the first part of the book, I present a new way to analyse capitalism. This critique has two sources. The first is the notion of “dominion,” i.e., the particular form of disposal that the modern form of property promises: the right to use and abuse. The entitlement to dominate and destroy has thoroughly pervaded the white, colonial mindset and also structures patriarchal access to feminized reproductive labour. Furthermore, this object-relation is a requirement for resource and labour exploitation according to capitalist criteria of efficiency.

The second analytical source is, precisely, the exploitation of profits. I construe this in a fairly unorthodox way, highlighting not the labour input but the detritus discarded as constitutive

for profit. Generalizing Andreas Malm's account of fossil capitalism, I present capitalist production as that process which always has to emit carelessly – be it left-behind extraction wastelands, wastewater, exhaust fumes, or exhausted labour power.

Thus, the revolutionary perspective of this account is not one based in proletarian expropriation of the expropriators, but in the abolition of all dominion over life and the emancipation of reproductive labour as the need-oriented activity with which we can sustain each other and assist ecological regeneration.

In the second part of the book, I explore the political forces pushing for such a transformation. I claim that contemporary social movements form a new type of resistance. Rather than social revolutionaries or civil rights advocates, contemporary activists are militants against the destruction of life. Their agendas translate into new ways to cooperate and cohabitate. They update the core principle of socialism – need-oriented, self-determined production – by intersectional and ecological principles: non-violent, world-sustaining reproduction of life. Protesters directly mobilize around the category of life, starting from concrete cases of death incurred at the conjunctures of structural domination. Black Lives Matter is fuelled by outrage at racist murders committed by police forces as well as the suffocation of Black Lives in prisons. NiUnaMenos mobilizes against femicides and (trans)misogyny. “Water is Life” was the slogan of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, and Fridays for Future are concerned about future life on the planet. With the particular mismanagement of the Covid-19 health crisis by laissez-faire capitalist regimes, the preservation of life has moved into focus even in very mainstream contexts.

Chapter breakdown

Introduction

Short presentation of the book's core claims, illustrated in a somewhat bloody way on the example of the meatpacking industry as Covid hotspot. An alternative genealogy for the term capitalism from “caput,” Latin for property and cattle/chattle, is suggested to set the frame for the ensuing intersectional analysis. With the core terms and neologisms introduced, the introduction also warrants that the reader can understand select chapters out of sequence.

To dominate (property)

This chapter explains the emergence and specificity of the modern form of property as “despotic dominium” and traces its ideological repercussions through to the present.

To exploit (goods)

This chapter explains the core principle of profit-generation steeped in toxic emissions as well as the historic expansion of capital in the agricultural revolution, overseas trade, and plantation economy.

To exhaust (labour)

This chapter recounts proletarianization as the disciplining of the bodies of the poor. It draws out how different dimensions of dominion or propertization (of wage labour, enslaved labour, reproductive labour, land and resources) interlock to facilitate capitalist profit-making. However, the whole realm of labour is situated within the context of planetary ecological relations, adding a further dimension to Marx's famous account of alienation.

To destroy (life)

This chapter starts the movement portraits and discusses Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion as proponents of “catastrophe-realization.” To overcome some limits in their approach, the chapter argues that the catastrophe needs to be recognized as already present and rooted in the colonial and capitalist past. Instead of a coming catastrophe, we should understand our world-alienation. I first approach this with the help of Hannah Arendt’s conception of “world-loss” and then turn to the register of temporality. We are losing regenerative cycles of life, such as seasons, CO₂-absorption, or species reproduction. Such “tides” are bursting under environmental destruction, leading to a loss not of this or that part of the world, but to the disruption of our encompassing means of livelihood.

Revolution

This chapter discusses the Marxist approach to revolution as reappropriation of historical powers against Benjamin’s ideas of general strike or “emergency break.” Both seem incongruous in present circumstances, which leads to a first sketch of the interstitial revolution for life partly underway.

To save (life)

This chapter addresses Black Lives Matter as a movement against the racist denial of the capacity to breathe and lays out the abolitionist program. The abolitionist lens also serves to analyse European necropolitics on the Mediterranean and to problematise the differential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

To regenerate (labour)

This chapter covers Latin American notions of feminist mobilisation and focuses on the tool of the active strike. It centres on reproductive labour and explores the perspective of solidarity as need-oriented cooperation.

To share (goods)

This chapter portrays the German activist group “Ende Gelände” in the context of the international climate justice movement. Their practice of affinity-group based occupation targets production sites of the fossil industry and prefigures a different version of expropriation of the means of production. As a means of destruction, they need not only change hands, but also purpose. For coal and other fossil resources, the purpose seems clear enough – “leave it in the ground,” as one protest slogan has it. Touching on gift exchange and looting, the chapter also explores modes of distribution beyond the dichotomy of market mechanisms and centralized state planning.

To maintain (property)

This chapter describes the protest of indigenous activists and their allies against the Dakota access oil pipeline in 2016/2017. It reconstructs the complex first nation critique of colonial land theft, which references not only competing ownership claims, but also a different understanding of ownership as obligation to the maintenance of land and life. The communist formula, echoing from the peasant wars – “omnia communa sunt” – receives a new reading in this light.

Conclusion

The brief conclusion recapitulates the analysis of capitalism and summarises the portrayed aspects of a potential revolution for life in four gestures: breaking the cycles of propretization to save lives and life; stopping the cycles of wage labour to regenerate life; tending to the detritus of capitalist accumulation to henceforth share life's resources fairly; and maintaining a co-sustaining, flourishing interplay of life's tides to preserve them.

Style

Revolution for Life is written in non-academic style and does not presuppose pre-existing terminological knowledge, as all key concepts are won from examples and phenomenological analysis. It references literature and pop music alongside critical theory and activist writings. The theoretical approach is shaped by a Frankfurt-School education and offers a systematic integration of positions such as Silvia Federici's and Sophie Lewis', Cedric Robinson's and Ruth W. Gilmore's, Jason Moore's and Andreas Malm's. The book also contains some memoir passages, especially where agricultural background-knowledge becomes relevant for the overall argument.

Background on the author

Eva von Redecker grew up on a small organic farm. She studied philosophy, literature, and history in Tübingen, Cambridge, and Potsdam. She worked for ten years as a research assistant for Rahel Jaeggi at Humboldt-University Berlin. She served as deputy director of the Institute for Humanities and Social Change, and in that role, co-organized many Critical Theory events, including an endowed lecture series and annual international summer schools. In autumn 2015, she visited the New School, New York, as Heuss Lecturer.

Eva has written a monograph on Hannah Arendt's moral philosophy, an introduction to the work of Judith Butler, and fourteen scholarly articles in four languages. Her PhD thesis, *Praxis und Revolution* (supervised by Rahel Jaeggi and Raymond Geuss), appeared in German in 2018. Its translation is forthcoming with Columbia UP. The book attracted some general audience interest and led to several radio, TV, and newspaper interviews. Eva quit her academic job in autumn 2019 and successfully applied for a Marie-Skłodowska-Curie-fellowship hosted by the University of Verona, starting in December 2020. In her year between posts, she focused on her career as a public philosopher, writing *Revolution für das Leben* as a non-fiction book for a general audience, published by S.Fischer.

Eva's article "Reproduction Rebellion" appeared in *The Philosopher Magazine's* Winter 2020 edition (as well as online: <https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/redecker>); her writing has also appeared in *Radical Philosophy* and *Critical Times*.

Eva's specific approach of a critique of capitalism drawing from the genealogy of property was first laid out in the journal article "Ownership's Shadow" (*Critical Times* 3:1, 2020), the most-read article in *Critical Times* for several months.

Eva is already well known in the international critical theory community. Her work has been read, discussed and taught by some of the leading scholars and public intellectuals of the field, such as Judith Butler (Berkeley), Wendy Brown (Berkeley) and Penelope L. Deutscher (Northwestern). She is in ongoing intellectual exchange with colleagues such as Zeynep Gambetti (Bogacizi), Estelle Ferrarese (Amiens), Lorenzo Bernini (Verona), as well as her former supervisors Raymond Geuss (Cambridge) and Rahel Jaeggi (Humboldt Berlin).

Place in the literature

The book sits well with some recent, semi-academic highlights of left publishing, such as Sophie Lewis' *Full Surrogacy Now*, Vicky Osterweil's *Looting*, and Bini Adameczak's *Communism for Kids*. However, in its more narrative prose and explanatory focus, it might be better compared to Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark*, Raj Patel and Jason Moore's *The History of Capitalism in Five Cheap Things*, or even Maggie Nelson's *Argonauts*. Like Andreas Malm's most recent book, *Corona, Crisis, Chronic Emergency*, or the Care Collective's *Manifesto*, it draws some of its momentum from the urgency of the Corona crisis. The book is singular in its genealogical depth and intersectional movement analysis.

Critical reception (of this book or previous ones by the author)

Two weeks after publication, the book has already received some critical attention. One review on Deutschlandfunk Kultur (our BBC 4 equivalent) opened with the sentence **“This book might turn into the bible of intellectual resistance against real existing capitalism”**. The Berlin daily Tagesspiegel said *Revolution für das Leben* offered the long-awaited Political Theory tackling today's existential crisis, and even the *Spiegel*, besides labelling the author as hippie-ish and misled by Gender Studies, acknowledged in a two-page feature that the book was a vital contribution which offered a whole new world-view. Interviews are already organised with *die taz*, *Jacobin* Germany, ZDF, WDR. Besides many other podiums, Eva will speak at the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair. There also was noticeable momentum on Twitter, with several influencers advertising the book and spontaneous reading groups forming.

General recommendations

In Germany, the book has already reached audiences outside academic and activist circles, so again, it would be important to make sure the book is not framed as simply preaching to the converted.