The World Ecology of Living Labor

Insights from Artificial Intelligence

World-Ecology Research Network
Annual Conference
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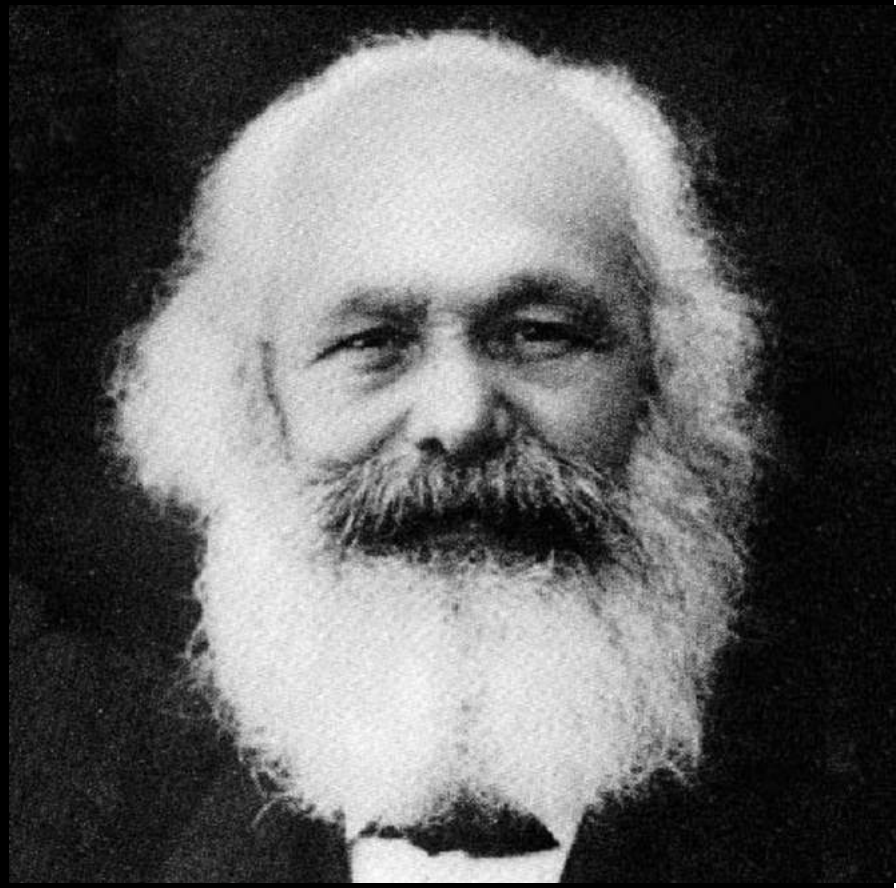
One of Marx's most important insights was that the "articulation between **living labour** and **dead labour** is the condition upon which the capitalist system of production is maintained" (Ricardo Antunes).



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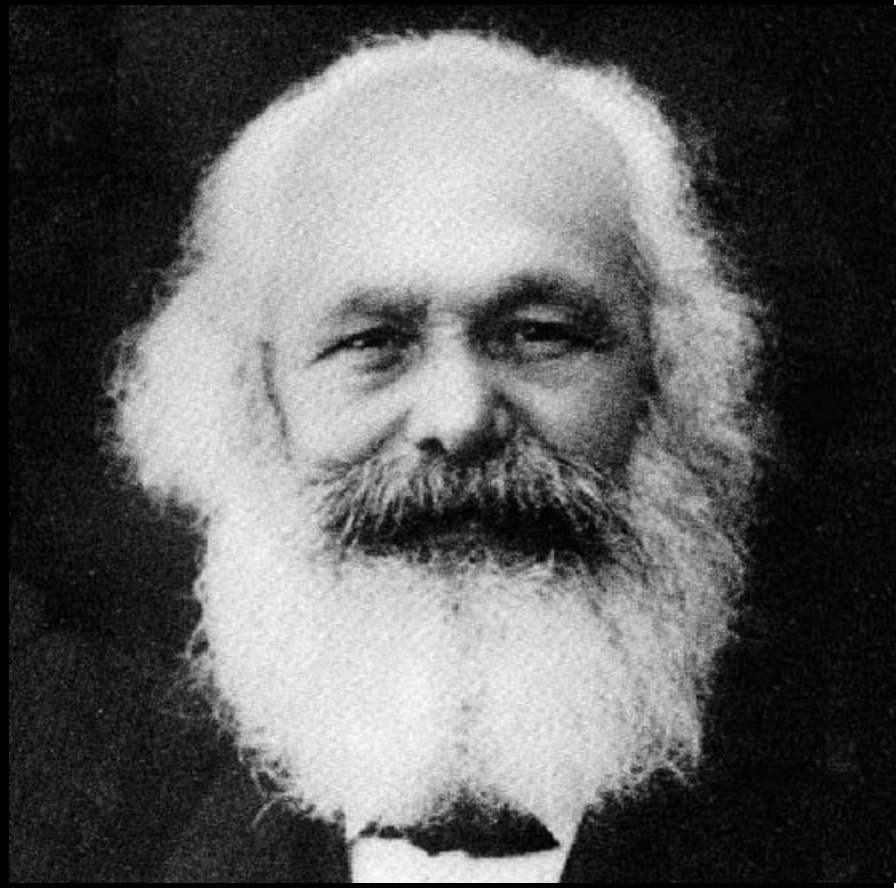
Let’s try to bring this idea up to date with ***world ecology*** by experimenting with the thesis that …



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What Marx called “living labor” is maybe better distinguished from what he called “dead labor” *not* by using his own terms of “vital energy”, “will”, “bodily subjectivity”, “form-giving fire”, “self-negating capacity”, “the capacity to refuse or resist”, the “blood” on which the “vampire” of dead labour feeds to produce surplus – or the rest of the faintly archaic-sounding vocabulary Marx resorted to throughout *Capital* …

… but rather by using the term

rational or intelligent action

What's that? For my purposes, it's action situated in what the eminent anti-Cartesian philosopher Wilfred Sellars called a ***"logical space of reasons."***

International Sellars Colloquium

And what is a “space of reasons”? A space of “justifying and being able to justify what one says”.* Any act of living labor is constituted by being surrounded by reasons whose socionatural evolution is extremely long in duration.

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*And of being able to make a mistake.

Each of these reasons is in turn surrounded by *other* reasons of diverse but similar provenance. As noted by Donald Davidson, another anti-Cartesian follower of Ludwig Wittgenstein:

"To have even one thought — one belief or desire" — you need to have a "very great many other thoughts and desires."

Thanks to today's lively debates about artificial intelligence, we now have beautiful new ways of using this anti-Cartesian conception both

(1) *to distinguish between* **living** and **dead** labor

and

(2) *to illuminate the* **world ecology** *of their relations*.

Rodney A. Brooks, legendary MIT roboticist, “Just Calm Down about GPT-4 Already”

“Suppose a **person** tells us that a particular photo is of people playing Frisbee in the park, then we naturally **assume** that they can answer questions like ‘what is the shape of a Frisbee?’, ‘roughly how far can a person throw a Frisbee?’, ‘can a person eat a Frisbee?’, ‘roughly how many people play Frisbee at once?’, ‘can a 3 month old person play Frisbee?’, ‘is today’s weather suitable for playing Frisbee?’”

Rodney A. Brooks, legendary MIT roboticist, “Just Calm Down about GPT-4 Already”

“Today’s **image labelling systems** that routinely give correct labels, like ‘people playing Frisbee in a park’ to online photos, **have no chance of answering those questions**. Besides the fact that all they can do is label **more** images and can not answer questions at all, they have no idea what a person is, that parks are usually outside, that people have ages, that weather is anything more than how it makes a photo look, etc., etc.”

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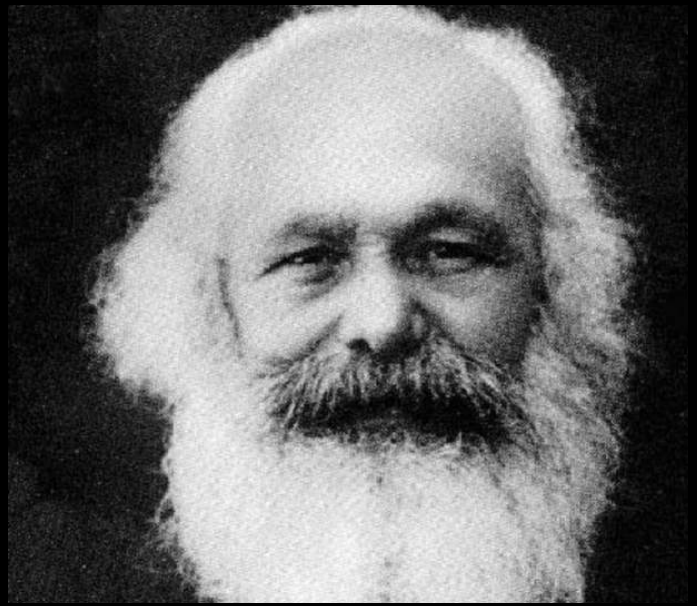

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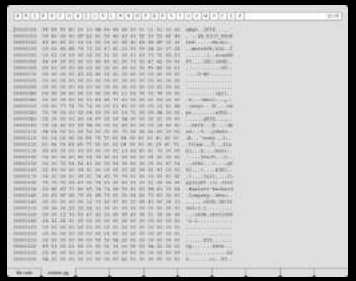
In sum, for the present, AI remains a paradigm example of **dead labor**. Its virtuoso *performances* cannot by themselves create any of the capitalist value whose production requires what Brooks calls *competence* – plural, heterogeneous, ecological, general, long-evolved – which is possessed only by **living labor**.

Let’s recap.

Here we have the very impressive dead labor of AI.

$\leftrightarrow$ “People playing Frisbee in a park”

(Or, more properly, the billions of, say, backpropagated Bayesian statistical operations using big data from past acts of living labor; fast processors; and lots of degradable thermodynamic energy to produce cool *predictions* about how a human might correlate one object of a binary pair with another.)



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Pixabay


DEAD LABOR

But to produce capitalist value, we need a ***lot*** more than this, namely …

“Weather is some combination of rain, sun, wind, etc.”

“Rain is not suitable weather for playing Frisbee”

“A 3 month old baby is physically unable to play Frisbee”

“People have ages”

“A Frisbee is shaped like a flying saucer”

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laying
a park”

“People don’t eat Frisbees”

“Usually no more than 5 people play Frisbee at once”

“A person can throw a Frisbee maybe 50 meters”

“Parks are usually outside”

“Outside/inside boundaries have become historically significant for humans”

LIVING LABOR

"Weather is some combination of rain,

suitable weather for playing Frisbee"

LIVING LABOR

"People have ages"

physically unable Frisbee"

DEAD LABOR

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"People playing ee in a park"

"People don't eat Frisbees"

LIVING LABOR

"Parks are usually outside"

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LIVING LABOR

become historically significant for humans"

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This particular space of reasons happens to consist of networks of ***beliefs***. But many *other* kinds of reasons are also possible, and many other spaces of reasons associated with many other kinds of living labor.

For example, the kind of living labor that consists of the "**deliberative respecification of ends**" – where just to continue carrying out instrumentalist capitalist thinking, you have to change your goals – tends to be characterized by the elaboration of causal, body-permeated reasoning about the dangerous places that certain goals could lead to.

Similarly, much artistic living labor can only take place in a "space of reasons" consisting of, *i. a.*, networks of *metaphors* generating new experiences that then assume the status of new goals whose realization new techniques may be required to facilitate.

Pascal Bernardon/Unsplash

“Not like a river: more like a path through a spiky pine forest”

↔

↔

“Pine trees are pointy”

↕

“More staccato throughout”

↕

…

“A pine forest has a certain sharpness”

↕

“Such paths may be rocky underfoot”

⤢

“Lean into the dissonance”

Pascal Bernardon/Unsplash

“Not like a river: more like a path through a spiky pine forest”

↔

“Pine trees are pointy”

↕

“M… …ughout”

↕

…

LIVING LABOR

LIVING LABOR

“A pine forest has a … sharpness”

↓

“Such paths may … rocky …erfoot”

“Lea… the disson…”

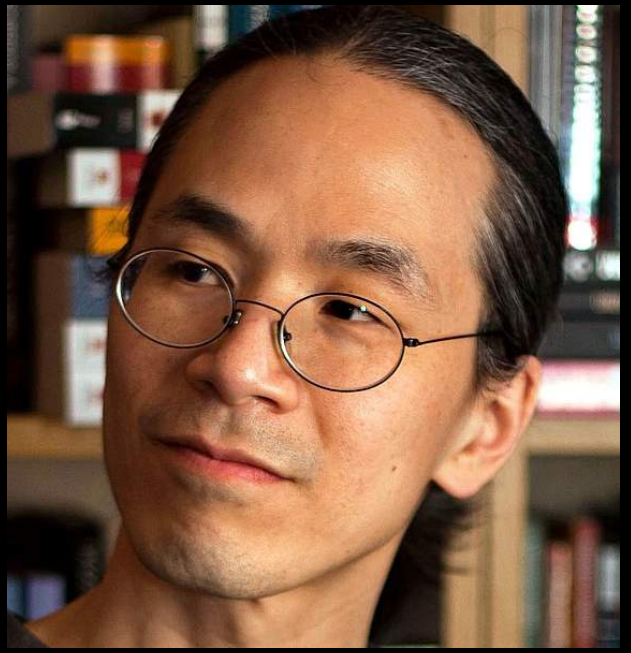
LIVING LABOR

Pascal Bernardon/Unsplash

A couple of basic aspects of the “spaces of reasons” that characterize living labor:

#1 Time

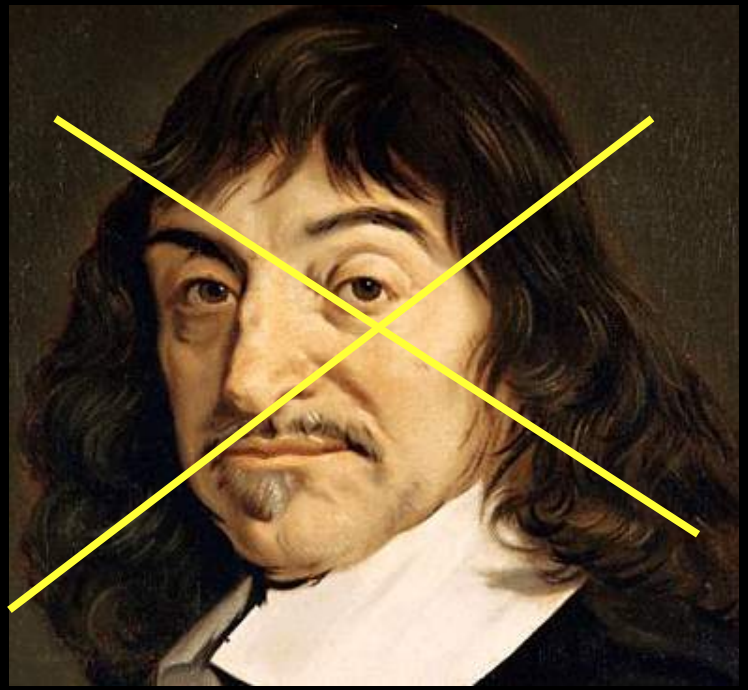
There is a temporal "stickiness" about spaces of reasons in that, bodily speaking, they have to be acquired at a certain pace, i.e.: They are "***algorithmically incompressible***."



Ted Chiang

#2 Ecology

Pace Descartes, spaces of reasons (and living labor) are ***of the earth***.



Donald Davidson:

> To find out if a being thinks (*read:* can perform living labor), you have to be able to see how it "interacts with the world" as well as how its responses to questions "depend on mutually observed events, changes, and objects … there must be a three-way interaction among being, interrogator, and a shared world."

Spaces of reasons (and living labor power) are **ecological** in the same sense that the capabilities of maize, inculcated over millennia of co-evolution with human beings, are ecological. They owe their existence to a long history of intra-action among the human and the more-than-human. They are aspects of sedimented socionatural evolution that capital cannot produce or reproduce by itself, but tends to parasitize, degrade and "max out" in a series of frontier moves.

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Dead labor can be energized and performed, but does not occur in that "logical space of reasons."

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This is why AIs can't (yet) labor as scientists do on causality. They lack the specific kind of bodily, developmental background that is needed. (Instead, they just "make up stuff.")

Conservation biology, e.g., is a reasoned, physical, bodily conversation.

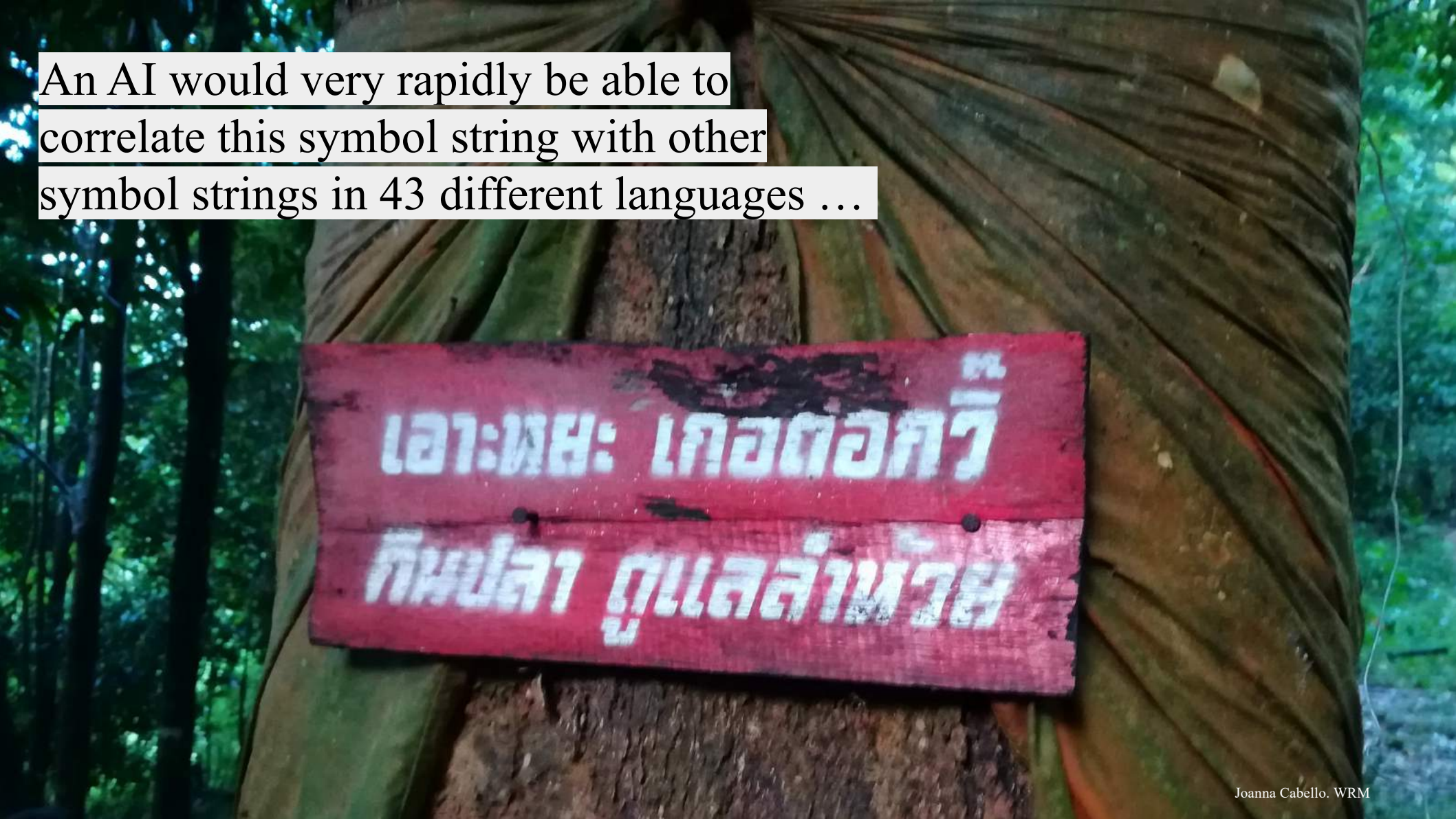
Gary Peeples, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

As is swidden agriculture.

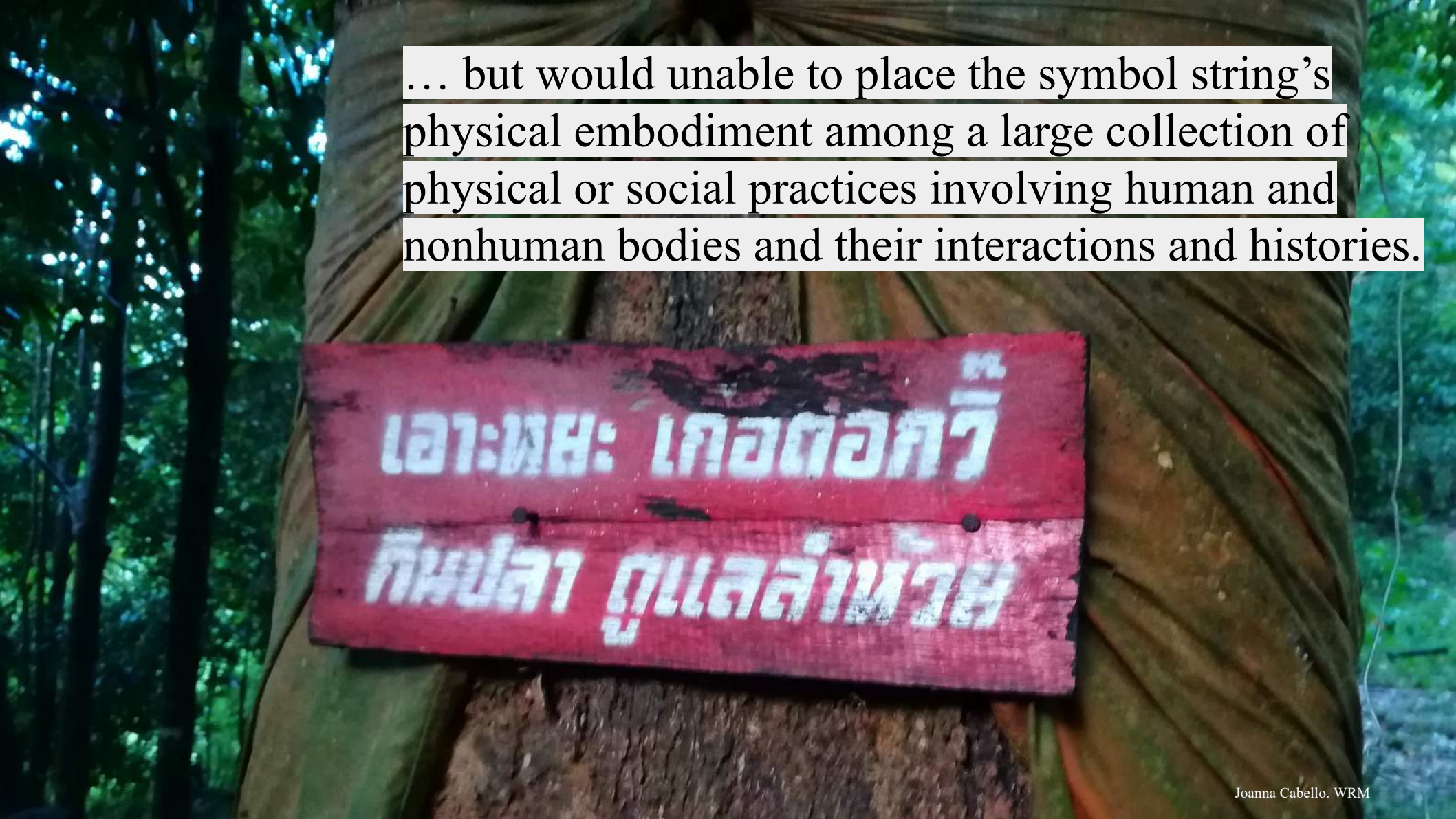
Larry Lohmann

Here is a photo taken last year of an "ordained" tree in Doi Chaang Paa Pae community, Lamphun, northern Thailand …

Joanna Cabello. WRM


An AI would very rapidly be able to correlate this symbol string with other symbol strings in 43 different languages …
Joanna Cabello. WRM

… but would unable to place the symbol string's physical embodiment among a large collection of physical or social practices involving human and nonhuman bodies and their interactions and histories.



Joanna Cabello. WRM

That requires the living labor of conversation.

Joanna Cabello. WRM

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Here I am arguing against a whole *non*-ecological Cartesian tradition of understanding labor power carried on by, say, Alan Turing or Noam Chomsky, with their view of machine-like *recursion* as capable of providing the adaptibility needed for capital accumulation (but that Marx and I associate instead with living labor).

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Turing's famous Test, for example, assumed a "fairly sharp line between the physical and the intellectual capacities of man [sic]." But as Davidson observes, the reality is that "there is no such line."

So while, as in the 19th century, dead labor's combination of speed, mass production, conceptual impoverishment and regimentation of human activity is key to industrial/digital capitalism …

… it will continue to be also a limitation on capital, and the living/dead labor contradiction a root of ecological/labor crisis.