Reconstructing the Normative Foundations of Socialism

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Résumé

Dans le présent article, j'avance qu'il existe une idée normative de la base de valeur de la vie, qui sous-tend les différentes permutations historiques du socialisme. Je m'efforce de reconstruire la base normative du socialisme en partant de cette base de valeur. Le but est de rendre explicite la valeur généralisable du socialisme comme étant dans les intérêts de vie de tout être humain. Vu la détérioration des conditions de vie partout dans le monde, on peut espérer stimuler un nouvel intérêt politique pour une solution de rechange socialiste ayant de larges bases, contre une économie de marché mondiale de plus en plus aveugle à la vie.

Abstract

In this paper I argue that underlying the different historical permutations of socialism is the normative idea of the life-ground of value. I attempt to reconstruct the normative basis of socialism on the basis of this life-ground. The aim is to make explicit the generalizable value of socialism as in everyone's human life-interests. In the context of a growing crisis of life-conditions across the globe, the hope is to revive political interest in a broad based socialist alternative to an increasingly life-blind global market system.

Introduction

As an idea that motivated struggles for fundamental social change, 'socialism' enjoyed its greatest success in periods of social crisis. By socialism I mean, in general terms, the idea of a social order in which the production and distribution of social resources is subject to democratic determination, in which the satisfaction of human life-requirements and not profit is the governing social value, and in which all citizens are, as far as is concretely possible, enabled to freely develop the capabilities that make human life meaningful for self and valuable for others. To say that this idea has had its greatest currency in periods of social crisis might seem obvious, but its full significance for a contemporary estimation of the plausibility of saving socialism from its own crisis has perhaps not been fully explored. When socialists, Marxist or not, think about social crisis they tend to think in economic terms, of downturns in production, rising unemployment, attacks on hard-won workplace rights, and so forth. Rarely is the reason why these economic indicators amount to a social crisis made fully explicit, even if it is implied. That which makes these developments more than normal economic trends is their relationship to the life prospects of those who are negatively impacted by them. That is, a social crisis is a moment where the quality of life of people is undermined by known social processes to such a degree that the unchallenged operation of those processes is no longer tolerable, both for those classes who suffer the consequences and the class whose social interests rule.

In periods of generalized social crisis standard theoretical (political and economic) and normative (philosophical, moral) legitimations of the status quo fail to provide arguments strong enough to sap the force of movements for institutional change.[1] Because social stability depends equally upon structural and conscious factors, successful social movements depend equally upon political strength and the cogency of the normative justifications to which they appeal to legitimate that power to others. Not only must there be a movement large and powerful enough to force change, its demands must be articulated through values whose superiority to the established values appears, within the context of crisis, sufficient to dissuade the ruling powers from all-out efforts at repression. As Richard Falk argues, "very little of lasting significance occurs without threats posed to the established order by those advocates of change sufficiently engaged to mount a struggle, take risks, make sacrifices, and in the end, generate incentives for elites to strike bargains of accommodation" (2004: 81). The great achievements of the worker's movement in its various permutations, the women's movement, civil rights and anti-racism movements, and the struggle for the rights of sexual minorities have all come about in this way. They

1 We should distinguish between a period of generalized social crisis which is a long-term set of structural problems in which the ruling social value system appears less and less convincing to all active social and political groups, and periods of momentary or acute crisis (a riot, local rebellion, etc). While a period of acute crisis (say, the riots in the United States following the assassination of Martin Luther King) can be repressed by overt violence periods of generalized social crisis (the long conflict over Jim Crow laws in the South of the United States, for example) cannot be solved by the simple application of state violence, given the depth of the problems and the ethical and political power of the opposition. It is periods of generalized social crisis that interest me here.

relied not only on political power, but also on ethical positions that proved normatively unassailable and ultimately not defeasible by force. As I will argue, this history provides the clue to future political action, which today should no longer be bogged down by the false dichotomy 'reform or revolution' but instead concentrate on achieving concrete objectives that, if achieved, reconstitute social relations on an ever higher levels of what I will call 'life-grounded organization.'

In general terms, the word crisis denotes a situation where a choice is demanded between two incompatible alternatives. If a crisis is general then major social actors become conscious of an alternative that in normal times is suppressed. Social change is not mechanical but depends upon the growth of conscious commitment to new sets of values and governing social principles. The contemporary crisis of socialism is a consequence not only of global political and economic changes, but equally of the failure of socialists - whether Marxist or social democratic - to pose normative arguments in terms which are convincingly superior to the established reality, even when all the problems of that reality are admitted by non-socialists. In other words, socialists have failed to defend socialism in a way that can build solidarity. Without solidarity, a new, broad-based, non-sectarian social movement for a democratic economy that enables people to more freely develop and enjoy their vital capabilities in community with others is impossible.

The most influential normative perspectives critical of established reality today tend to argue against it in terms of human rights and the underlying value of autonomy and human dignity.[2] Since human rights are developments of classical liberal rights it is far from clear to what extent they are a potential basis for the democratic governance of the global economy. On top of their political ambiguities must be piled the philosophical confusion that characterises their articulation. The one document universally agreed to by world governments, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is far from internally consistent. Finally, it is also the case that broad-based rhetorical support for human rights notwithstanding, the facts on the ground in the world today provide strong evidence that they are not solving even the most obvious problems of the degradation of the natural environment, growing inequality, and the persistence of absolute poverty.[3] My aim here is not to criticise the idea of human rights or its normative and practical limitations as

2 See for example Nussbaum (2006), Sen (1999), Beetham (2003), Held (2004) and Gould (2004). Although Habermas tends to focus on national political communities rather than cosmopolitan human rights, his arguments share with human rights defenders their normative grounding in the more or less Kantian conception of autonomy. See Habermas (1995; 2000). For more explicitly socialist interpretations of Kantian normative foundations see Van der Linden (1988) and Karatani (2003).

3 While some progress towards meeting the United Nations Millennium Goals of poverty reduction is evident, the trend over the last thirty years, a period dominated by the 'neo-liberal' model of capitalist globalization (open markets, fewer restrictions on foreign direct investment, roll backs to welfare state income support programs, etc) is towards increased inequality and poverty (United Nations, 2007; Wade, 2003).

a framework to solve key global problems. I have explored the problems of trying to derive a solution to fundamental global social problems from human rights elsewhere, and Gary Teeple has articulated in great detail the internal inconsistencies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Noonan, 2006a; Teeple, 2004).

Instead my aim here is positive and reconstructive. My goal is to reconstruct the normative foundations of socialism according to what McMurtry calls the "life-ground of value." In general terms the "life-ground of value" is the total set of conditions upon which the existence and living things depends (1998: 24). This ground of value discloses an essential relationship between fundamental life requirements or needs, the natural resources and social institutions necessary to satisfy them, and the realization of the vital capabilities of living things that makes their lives valuable to self and others.[4] I will argue that the globe is currently facing a universal social crisis of life-conditions as a result of the operation of the social value system that underlies and justifies capitalist globalization. This claim does not mean that capitalism is incapable of satisfying human life-requirements, but rather that its normal metric of value understands human and other life as valuable only to the extent that it is profitably exploitable. It is thus incapable, on its own terms, of comprehending reduction or destruction of life-value when its reduction or destruction is profitable by the system-metric of increasing money-capital. Thus, if it is profitable to employ labour in dangerous conditions, at work that is both harmful to individual workers and socially valueless as a contribution to life-requirements, this situation will appear as a good from the perspective of the ruling value system. Any turning away from this sort of life-destructive practice will occur only as the result of struggles mounted against them from a life-grounded perspective. The point to be established is that the ruling value system cannot recognise the damage it causes to life so long as it remains unconfronted by life-grounded alternatives. Given the space limitations of an essay-length argument I will have to confine my comments to a general level.

By reconstructing this crisis in terms of the global degradation of life-conditions the argument hopes to obviate charges that it is defending a self-interested normative-political position. If there really is a crisis of life-conditions then it affects everyone's

4 The use of the terms 'needs' and 'capabilities' suggests a superficial resemblance between the life-grounded approach to social criticism and Sen and Nussbaum's 'capabilities' approach to human justice. I will not explain in any detail the differences between these approaches, but for the sake of clarity the basic differences are: 1) neither Sen nor Nussbaum explicitly define needs or examines the instrumental relation between needs and capability realization in any explicit detail; 2) Sen and Nussbaum prioritise the value of choice, my approach, while not ignoring the value of choice identifies the realization of capabilities as of ultimate value; 3) Sen and especially Nussbaum develop their capabilities approach as a species of liberalism, my interpretation of the life-ground of value leads to socialist conclusions; and 4) Sen and Nussbaum are critics of certain policy options for governing global capitalism, the ultimate practical conclusion of my approach is that capitalism itself is the essential global problem. These differences do not mean that there are not great strengths to Sen and Nussbaum's work or that there is no connection between their theories and the life-ground of value. The differences, however, should not be underestimated.

continued existence and, if socialism is the name applied to a general conception of life-grounded socio-economic priorities and democratic economic institutions, then it cannot be rejected as a 'special' interest' (of Marxists, workers, etc.). This reconstruction of normative foundations cannot of course guarantee the political efficacy of the position. The extent to which it is practically useful in building solidarity cannot be determined by its philosophical explication and defence. I hope only to demonstrate that conceiving of socialism as the most consistent political manifestation of the life-ground of value best articulates the true universality of socialist values, their pressing relevance to the structure of global social crisis, and consequently that a non-sectarian socialism is a living possibility today.

A Global Crisis of Life-Conditions

If it is true that the political power of socialism is contingent upon its responding effectively to a general sense of social crisis, then the first step in rebuilding the plausibility of a socialist alternative to global capitalism is to explain the different manifestations of global crisis today according to a unifying principle. Treatments of global problems in the popular media do not so much suppress discussion of the main issues (environmental degradation, poverty, etc.), as to treat different elements in abstraction from one another and the general dynamics and value system of global political economy. The popular media thus operate on the assumption that the 'fundamentals' of global social interaction are sound and that all that needs to be done is to fine tune and coordinate different policies in different regions of the globe and different dimensions of social life. This fragmentary treatment encourages fragmentary consciousness and fragmentary consciousness encourages single-issue forms of political activity. A unified account of global social crisis is the precondition (but not a guarantee) of the gradual emergence of unified understanding and a solidaristic global movement for fundamental change.

The unifying principle that can link together the different elements of global crisis is the life-ground of value. The life-ground of value is implicit in every account of a crisis in so far as life is the necessary precondition of meaning and value. In other words, were there no life on earth, there could be no problems either, since the existence of a problem presupposes beings for whom existence is a matter of better and worse. Every social problem, therefore, is a problem in so far as it imposes worse conditions on life than would exist in different social conditions. Better and worse life conditions, however, require an objective standard against which alternatives can be evaluated. In the absence of objective standards better life conditions will always be identified with existing social arrangements or with merely abstract ideals whose possibility cannot be determined with any certainty. Fortunately for the social critic, life itself carries with it the objective standards required. All life forms depend upon the satisfaction of relatively invariant life requirements, or needs. Needs are, in general terms, universal life requirements which, if not satisfied,

lead to objective forms of harm. Thus needs can be distinguished from subjective wants or desires by the criterion: "N is a need, if and only if, and to the extent that, deprivation of N always results in a reduction of organic capability" (McMurtry, 1998: 164). Life-needs which, if unmet, generate objective forms of harm is, nevertheless, a controversial claim, and not only amongst neo-liberals who conflate need with consumer demand, but even amongst astute critics of capitalism. The latter tend to worry about culturally imperialist forms of thought and practice which would coercively impose the needs of western society on the needs of quite different societies (De Martino, 2000). I will not repeat here at great length responses to these objections that I have developed more fully elsewhere, since my aim is not to settle every abstract philosophical dispute but to set out a general case for a new conception of the normative foundations of socialism. (Noonan, 2006b; Assiter and Noonan, 2007). Nevertheless, some response is called for if that case is to be convincing.

The first objection is easier to respond to than the second. The neo-liberal argument is nicely encapsulated by Friedrich von Hayek's ethical defence of the market. Von Hayek claims that "there can exist ... no single ordering of needs" (1976: 113). There are only consumer demands and these are not determined by any facts of human social-organic nature but only by observing what in fact different people are willing to pay for. This position, however, clearly rests upon an uncritical psychologism which cannot survive confrontation with the facts of human existence. If we define needs relative to harms, the neo-liberal can respond that people feel harmed when they are deprived of the means of consuming whichever commodities they happen to feel like consuming. Harm is always agent-relative and is essentially a subjective feeling of deprivation. That this subjective feeling of deprivation is not actually harm is easily proven through an example. Subjective feelings of harm are no doubt real, but they can be overcome through changing one's self-interpretation in such a way that one's consciousness opens towards the superior value of higher levels of activity. For example, the smoker who can no longer smoke in a restaurant will no doubt feel deprived relative to smokers in other jurisdictions who are still able to smoke indoors. Rather than rail against anti-smoking laws, however, she or he could use these restrictions as a reason to try to quit smoking. If successful, the debilitating addiction will give way to increased ranges of activity, better health, and a renewed sense of independence from predatory corporate drug dealers. The same reasoning holds across the board when what is at issue is the consumption of commodities which have no demonstrable connection to increasing the ability of people to develop and express the fundamental cognitive, imaginative, and materially creative capabilities that distinguish human life. The feeling of harm disappears as soon as the addiction is broken and one experiences for oneself higher levels of activity and superior forms of capability realization. The same reasoning does not hold, however, in relation to actual needs. A brain deprived of oxygen for significant amounts of time will suffer catastrophic failures

of functioning. The depth of the loss of cognitive capability may be such that the subject is not even conscious of it. Lack of consciousness of the loss of capability in this case, however, is proof of the objectivity of the harm.

The second objection is more difficult to meet. It is indeed the case that there is a real legacy of powerful groups usurping for themselves the right to define for everyone the scope of their needs. Thus, for example, successive Canadian governments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries enacted the policy of residential schooling in order to satisfy what they defined as the 'needs' of the children of First Nations people. It can reasonably be objected that this form of residential schooling was in reality not need-satisfying, but brutal cultural imperialism. While the life-grounded perspective agrees, it would nevertheless refuse the inference (drawn by postmodern social critics) that there is therefore no general human need for education, but only culturally relative needs that must remain plural. The need for education, from the life-grounded perspective, is grounded in the social-organic nature of human beings, in the fact that the cognitive abilities of the brain can only develop through a rich variety of structured experiences and symbolic interactions. A human being deprived of all sensory inputs and structured symbolic interactions would not even be able to develop basic capabilities like language use, and without the ability to use language *at all,* it would prove impossible to assimilate any richer cultural content no matter what the identity of the person. As an overview of recent research into early childhood neural development concludes, "an impoverished environment diminishes the brain. Unfortunately, many children's brains are starving due to a lack of attention and the right kinds of experiences. Without the opportunity to be used, neurons can actually wither away and die" (Department of Early Learning, 2007: 1). Yet no specific form of institutionalising this need follows from the general need for education. Education is not a mechanical or physiological process that can simply be induced; it has irreducible symbolic dimensions which entail that effective forms of education must be grounded in (but not reducible to) the culturally specific backgrounds of students. In other words, the same human brains, existing concretely in different symbolic matricies, require different forms of institutions to attain the same general range of cognitive and imaginative capabilities. While forms of education must develop in response to changing social and scientific environments, it does not follow that changes can be successfully imposed by force. The alienation and anomie produced by external force undermines whatever pedagogical benefit more complex forms of education might have. However, it does not follow from the necessity of culturally appropriate educational *content* that the *need* for education is culturally specific. The need for education follows from the nature of the human brain, whose cognitive and creative capabilities do not automatically or naturally develop. Critics of cultural imperialism tend to conflate needs (universal) and need-satisfiers (specific) (Doyal and Gough, 1991). Cultural imperialism is a form of falsely universalizing specific need-satisfiers, rather than (as is assumed) imposing needs. A genuine need is not only

universal, its universality can be discovered to be such by anyone who thinks critically about what is required and what is not required to develop their basic human capabilities. McMurtry's criterion is not intended to dictate to everyone what their needs are but rather is a tool of critical self and social reflection. It enables people to think for themselves, to distinguish needs from forms of desire coercively imposed on them. It neither entails a culturally coercive set of needs to be imposed by social power nor any specific form of institutionalising the needs its use uncovers.

Thus, to argue that the different problems that the world confronts today are manifestations of an underlying crisis of life-conditions is to say that the global crisis is a crisis of need-satisfaction. If needs are objective life-requirements, then consciousness of the global crisis as a crisis of life-conditions unifies understanding of the problem across all forms of social difference. It does not follow, of course, that people will draw the same practical and political solutions. As I noted, however, practical agreement cannot be produced by philosophical argument alone. Nevertheless, if a convincing case can be made for this understanding of global problems, one major hurdle in the race to a unified global movement has been cleared. I will now turn to the task of setting out the basic problems of the world today from the perspective of the life-ground of value. I will then turn to the task of connecting each of these problems to the more or less unregulated operations of the value system of the global economy. In the final section I will explain how the shared forms of fundamental human need and capability can be interpreted as a new normative foundation for socialism.

The following list of manifestations of the crisis of life-conditions ranges from generalized threats to organic life to threats to the specific socio-cultural, political, and temporal nature of human life.

1) Generalized Environmental Crisis

A snowless 2006 December in much of Canada accomplished what more than a decade of scientific argument failed to produce, namely, a growing social consensus that climate change is a serious threat to the continued health of established patterns of planetary life. Whether the cause of climate change is attributed to the industrial growth economy in general, or to the specific dynamics of capitalism, is not essential to establishing the claim that there is a growing recognition that unlimited economic growth that does not take account of the necessity of a healthy natural field of life-support is materially irrational and unsustainable.[5] Climate change, however, is not the only sign of the increasingly degraded ability of the natural world to support life. To climate change must be added a growing extinction crisis affecting large mammals, large marine life and, perhaps most serious

5 The debate between a generalized critique of industrial growth and the Marxist critique of specifically capitalist forms of growth is too complex to do justice to it here. An excellent overview of the intersections and debates between Marxism and 'ecology' may be found in Benton (1996).

over the long term, plankton that forms the basis of oceanic food chains (International Conservation Union, 2000). Underlying both climate change and the extinction crisis is the ever rising demand of human life for more energy. The essentially thermodynamic basis of environmental crisis is generally unexamined in popular discussions, perhaps because when it is put in terms of rising energy demand the necessity of a fundamentally different pattern of social and economic development becomes obvious. There is no way to satisfy ever rising demand for energy no matter what form of energy societies try to utilise. The entire planet cannot be covered in windmills and solar energy is not efficient for large scale industrial enterprises. The point is that widespread damage to life on earth - human and non-human alike - is inevitable so long as the 'good life' is identified with higher standards of living measured by the quantity of goods and services that people consume.

2) Generalized Crisis of Basic Human Life Conditions

Human life depends not only on its place within the planetary web of life, but also on the specific social conditions in which it reproduces itself through social labour. In its most basic dimension the crisis of life-conditions for humanity appears as the scourge of absolute poverty that still affects more than 2 billion people who are forced to try to subsist on less that 2 dollars (US) per day (United Nations, 2003: 5). The world's poorest peoples live in countries dependent upon the export of raw materials whose prices are too low to support projects of basic social need-satisfaction. International trading rules continue to be stacked in favour of wealthy Northern countries, as is to be expected in a world where law codifies existing social power relations. The growing rhetorical consensus around human rights has not led to the sorts of deep value changes necessary to support a serious international commitment to wealth redistribution. Poverty, however, is not only a problem in the global South. Its life-damaging effects reproduce themselves fractal-like in rich nations, in rich provinces and states, in rich cities, and rich neighbourhoods. Women and children the world over suffer disproportionally from the harms of absolute poverty.

It is true, on the other hand, that market reforms in India and especially China have had great success is creating a growing urban middle class and in alleviating poverty for millions of people. These successes should not be dogmatically dismissed by socialists in the West. At the same time, it is necessary for any critical analysis of global life-conditions to note the limitations of this model of social development. The growth of urban middles classes is a reality, but it has barely touched the deep poverty of rural areas. As Greg Palast notes sarcastically in response to Thomas Freidman's paean to Indian economic development:

> *The average Indian can't even afford eighteen holes on the weekend - 79.9 percent of the population still makes under 2 dollars per day ... the new flat earthers might say that two bucks a day wage is the vestige of the old India, or rural fields with oxen-plowed fields. What about the new India, the manufacturing colossus that lifted India's gross domestic output by 48 percent per worker ... in just six years. In those same six years wages in this modernized manufacturing sector went from 25 cents per hour to ... 23 cents per hour (2006: 155-156).*

The situation in China bears the traces of exactly the same contradiction. As David Harvey argues, "the situation in China is fraught with dangers. There has actually been a net loss of manufacturing jobs there since 1995 - more than 15 million (15 percent of the total) - due to the bankruptcy of many ... village enterprises .... power shortages are frequent ... and labour relations highly unstable ... class equalities appear to be increasing" (2003: 229). When one re-thinks Indian and Chinese development from the perspective of the energy demands that would be required to sustain this level of growth, the hopelessness of this model of capitalist development becomes all too apparent. A solution to the problems of global poverty cannot be coherently conceived along lines of untrammelled capitalist development. Instead it will require a redistribution of global income within a different set of economic institutions governed democratically according to life-grounded priorities.

3) Generalized Crisis of the Social, Cultural, and Political Form of Human Life

Humans share with all other life forms on the planet basic organic needs. However, the specific evolutionary history of the human species has produced an organ, the brain, with the unique capability of generating individuated perspectives on reality and establishing meaningful relationships with the world. In short, human nature cannot be understood from any one-sided biological-evolutionary perspective. The human organism depends upon social relations and interactions, not only for continued organic life, but, equally important from the specifically human point of view, meaningful and valuable forms of activity and interaction. A life led without meaningful and valuable activity, for self and for others, is generally agreed to be a misfortune for the life-bearer, a 'waste' of life. The realization of the capabilities of our self-consciousness - for original cognitive and imaginative thought, for world and self-transforming modes of creative action, for non-instrumental and mutually rewarding relationships, for work that contributes to the overall health and value of society, and for deliberative participation in public affairs - are dependent not only on satisfying the fundamental needs of our organism, but also on satisfying uniquely human socio-cultural and political needs. Socio-cultural and political needs are satisfied through the forms of social interaction established by prevailing social institutions and the social morality and value system that regulate and legitimate their normal operations. It is a peculiarity of capitalism that the operation and values of major

social institutions are governed by the overriding value of serving the profitable expansion of the economic system. Hence governments conceive of the national interest primarily in terms of international competitiveness. International competitiveness is defined in terms of attracting investment. In order to attract investment all other social institutions have to be 're-engineered' to serve the interests of international capital. Thus political institutions, educational institutions, artistic practices and other cultural forms face severe pressures to conform to the norms of global market dynamics. Given the fact that humans individuate themselves within major social institutions, the priorities of the global economy as mediated by these major institutions come to dominate their self-consciousness. Hence human individuals come to think of all forms of activity as 'investments' - people 'invest' in their education, their relationships, their future. The overall result, no matter where on the globe we look, is what Erich Fromm called "automation conformity" (1965: 183-204). Automation conformity is the adaptive behaviour of people confronted by forces they believe that they cannot control. They thus internalize its norms of action no matter how life-value impoverishing these might be. Hence the generalized crisis of life conditions at the social, cultural and political level is manifested as the growing instrumentalization of specifically human capabilities. That is, the capabilities that make us human are reduced to merely instrumental values to be exploited by capitalist enterprise.

4) Generalized Crisis of the Temporal Framework of Human Life

The value of human life is not fully realized simply through the development of creative capabilities. These capabilities can be developed unfreely, i.e., as conformist responses to economic forces when prevailing social conditions leave people with no real alternative. Hence there is a difference between developing creative capabilities and freely developing those capabilities. In addition to satisfying the basic organic and socio-cultural political needs of human beings the free development of creative capabilities depends upon the satisfaction of a need, first systematically explored by Marx but implicit in much of Western philosophy, for free time (Marx, 1986). Considered from an existential perspective in abstraction from concrete social determinations free time is an experience of time as an open matrix of possibilities for life-activity. Humans confront their life-time in a way that other life-forms do not, as necessarily and unalterably finite. Consciousness of the necessity of death (regardless of whether one believes in an afterlife) entails the prioritisation of the actual realization of possibilities for meaningful and valuable activity on earth. Human freedom presupposes an experience of time as an open matrix of possibilities as opposed to a pre-determined sequence of pre-programmed activities. If the experience of time as an open matrix of possibility is absent one cannot imaginatively reflect on one's deepest possibilities and how they might be realized. Absent this experience of free time, life appears as a closed routine into which one must conform one's activity. Freedom, by contrast, demands that the filling of life-time be responsive to one's own choices about one's highest capabilities.

The concrete experience of time, however, is not an abstract existential problem but is mediated by the organization of time in major social institutions. As Marx was the first to demonstrate, the experience of time is radically transformed under capitalism (Marx, 1986; Braverman, 1988; Postone, 2003). Rather than being experienced as an open matrix of possibilities, time is quantified (now down to the nanosecond speeds of microprocessors) in accordance with the imperatives of capitalist efficiency. The consequence for citizens are two-fold. First, for those who are unfortunate enough not to find remunerative employment, time is experienced as an empty but crushing burden. Since few if any possibilities can be realized in a capitalist world without money, absence of money entails absence of the key social condition of activity, and absence of the social condition of activity tends to encourage feelings of worthlessness and the social pathologies (boredom, addiction, etc.) that such feelings bring in their wake. For those who are remuneratively employed, work-time is experienced as a reified power that determines the content of life activity (this point holds whether one is a worker or a manager). Movements and thoughts are determined by the organization of production, not freely in relation to how the individual thinks or feels his or her activity should be expressed. This same quantification of time according to a standard external to different forms of human activity structures life outside the workplace as well. Life becomes 'modularised' and routinised, a pre-determined sequence of leisure activity, consuming activity, and commodified social and sexual relations (Van der Poel, 2001). In short, rather than enabling people to organize time in response to freely determined life projects, the quantification of time under capitalism determines life-projects in relation to patterns of behaviour calculated with frightening precision to produce the most efficient levels of output.

These four determinants of crisis have been expounded at a quite general level in order to bring out their shared relation to universal life requirements. I do not claim to have explicated every nuance and permutation of differently situated peoples' experience of these determinants. The concrete differences of people's experiences are central to the actual building of effective social movements. Effective social movements, however, also require shared frameworks for the political interpretation of different experiences. That this shared framework is built on more than mere inference from stipulated principles is evident from the reality of movements addressed to each of these manifestations of crisis. The global environmental movement represents a complex manifestation of growing consciousness of the intrinsic value of life in its different earthly forms. Although it is often abstracted from a critique of the material and symbolic contexts that structure definite histories of oppression, the growing consensus around the value of human rights expresses a growing consciousness of the contradiction between human dignity and the costs imposed on billions of people by the dynamics and value system of global market forces. Debates around multiculturalism, participatory and deliberative democracy, and the value of education manifest an awareness of the reality of social, political, and cultural

needs. Finally, while it is often treated in the popular press as an expression of middle class burnout, arguments about the importance of 'work-life balance' testify to the reality of the harm caused people by loss of free time. What is lacking in these movements is consciousness of a unifying principle that explains the depth cause of these different manifestations of crisis.

To argue that the crisis facing the globe is a unified crisis of life-value is to say that the ruling socio-economic and political forces and powers systematically fail to understand the proper relation between the value of life and that which serves life. Whether one is talking about harms done to the web of planetary life, the satisfaction of the basic organic needs of human beings, the development of principles of institutional governance that ensure the cultivation of peoples' specifically human capabilities, or the priorities of the economic system, the depth cause of the problems is an inversion of value between life-requirements and system-requirements. The global capitalist economy and the political regimes that support its extension treat life as an instrument of the further growth of the value of that system (i.e. profit). Human needs are satisfied if and only if people can pay for the need-satisfiers and only if it is profitable to produce them. All major social institutions face challenges to prove their relevance to the 'real world,' (i.e. the world of economic (money) value). All people are subjected to the pressure of instrumentalizing their own lifetime to ensure that each moment is 'expended' in the most 'profitable' way. In sum, life, which alone is intrinsically valuable, is subordinated to the value of the capitalist economy.

I will return to the question of the realizability of a life-grounded socialist alternative in the final section. To conclude this section it is necessary to explain and justify more completely the essential argument here - that a life-blind decision-structure is essential to capitalism. To argue that capitalism's decision-structure is life-blind does not mean that *no* life-requirements are satisfied under its rule. Nor does it mean that capitalism has not proven itself superior, from the standpoint of productivity, to hitherto attempted alternatives. What it does mean is that the framing values within which economic decisions are made (and political policy relevant to economic decisions formulated) understand life-value in terms of the growth of money-value. This reduction of life-value to money value always supports policies or decisions that assume that the return of money-profit to powerful economic agents is identical to an increase of life-value for all. This elision of the difference between life-value and money-value results in a systematically unnoticed *inversion* of life and money value. The assumption is always that gains in profitability equal gains for life-value, and once this assumption has been made it is impossible to detect, from within that decision-structure, failures of life-requirement satisfaction. Take for example a startling article published in December 2006 in *Newsweek* (2007) that reported that the Iraqi economy was growing and, indeed, booming, in some sectors. This judgement constructs the economy in narrow money-value terms, and thus concludes that

the Iraqi economy is healthy even though living conditions have reached near collapse for the majority of the population. From within the money-value decision structure life-need-deprivation does not factor into the evaluation of the state of the economic system. Given this evaluation, no need for a fundamental shift of investment priorities will ever appear. The same set of economic policies demonstrably failing to meet basic life-requirements will persist unless a change of course is forced from the outside, via the agency of life-grounded political movements.

This example is only one from the one hundred and fifty year period of global capitalist dominance. The political history of that period is punctuated by clashes between the money-value system and various life-grounded movements of opposition. The history of life-grounded movements of opposition is a complex narrative of partial successes. On the one hand, these movements have succeeded in imposing life-requirement priorities on the capitalist system. On the other, this same history expresses a failure to fundamentally transform that decision-structure and the forms of social power that employ it in their particular interests. The sets of social problems that persist from decade to decade over one hundred and fifty years cannot be adequately explained as accidental results of poor policies choices. Instead their persistence is the empirical ground for the conclusion that there are systematic causes underlying particular social failures of life-value realization.

The systematic cause of the set of problems examined is the way in which value must be understood in capitalism. Smith and Marx called this value 'exchange value;' it may be more rhetorically effective to follow McMurtry and call it money value. Whichever language one chooses, the essential point is the same; the wealth generating capability of capitalism follows from its measuring value in terms of an abstract measure that has no natural limit to its increase. When an economic system measures value in terms of money, and its possession becomes the presupposition of both survival and (feelings of) happiness, human intelligence will be marshalled in the service of discovering more and more efficient ways of creating it. The idea of having 'too much money' is strictly inconceivable from a capitalist perspective, since the point of having money is not to hoard it but to reinvest it to make even more. Does any other principle better explain the history of capitalism viewed in general terms and regardless of whether one wants to laud or criticise the system?

At the same time, because money interposes itself between life-requirement and life-resource, people become socially blind to the costs that this conception of value necessarily imposes on those who, for systematic economic reasons, lack it. Life-requirement is assimilated to consumer demand. Those without money, as Marx pointed out in the *1844 Manuscripts,* lack, from the capitalist perspective, the life-requirements money alone can satisfy (1975: 272). Hence as soon as the universal measure of value is money, the system

cannot recognise the instrumentalization of life-value that inevitably follows.

This way of measuring social health, however, actually contradicts the real health of society. Since economies depend upon the wider natural field of life-support and the complex symbolic-institutional structures of human society, they become materially irrational when their patterns of growth harm these conditions of existence. No one would disagree with the claim that an agricultural economy that depended upon a system of irrigation that knowingly increased the salinity of the soil was operating with a materially irrational system of production. Yet this self-destructive tendency is precisely the drive motor of capitalism when it is viewed over the long term. This fact points to a normative principle. Economies develop from the fact of human life-requirements; better and worse economies, judged from this life-grounded perspective, therefore ought to be judged in terms of how well they satisfy the full range of organic, social, cultural, and political, and temporal needs, (within the known carrying capacity of the natural environment and with due respect paid to the value of other life forms). On the one hand, as Marx emphasized, the historically progressive role of capitalism was to have vastly increased the productive capability of human societies. The life-costs of the specifically capitalist form of economic growth, however, can no longer be ignored and increasingly cannot be tolerated, either by the natural field of life-support or the symbolic-institutional structures through which the specifically human life-capabilities are developed, realized, and enjoyed. Hence the generalized crisis of life-values points the world towards a shared need for a global alternative. To conclude, I will argue that this systematic, life-grounded alternative, is best understood in general terms as socialism.

5) Socialism and Life-Value

In its many different historical permutations spanning the extremes of revolution and social democratic reformism in all their variants, the meaning of socialism is always linked to an economic system that prioritises human life-requirement satisfaction over considerations of profit. The major differences one finds in the history of socialism concern less the goals of a socialist society than the most appropriate means of achieving them. The generality and increasing severity of life-crises today, combined with the global weakness of socialist movements and ideas, leads to the practical conclusion that the important twentieth century debate between reformist and revolutionary roads to socialism is counter-productive. Whether or not socialism ultimately requires a revolutionary break with capitalism, as, for example, Callinicos maintains, or whether it can be achieved by a quasi-evolutionary re-conquest of life-resources from their current subordination to commodity markets, as I maintain, is an empirical question and not a matter of normative first principles (Callinicos, 2003). All can agree that it is ahistorical to expect a universal leap of public consciousness from its current indifference or hostility to socialism to a fervent embrace

of revolution. If that is true, then it follows that the best practical strategy to reinvigorate socialist movements is to articulate its goals and values in non-sectarian life-grounded terms whose centrality to the health and freedom of anyone is undeniable from all but the most partisan positions. These goals and values, in turn, must be connected to a political project whose plausibility is ensured by its first steps being realizable within the given structure of actually existing social, political, and economic institutions.

While it is not possible here to provide a complete political project for the evolutionary transformation of capitalism into socialism, it is important to at least defend the plausibility of this approach. The key to such a defence seems to me to discover, within the given structures of institutional organization, spaces where new forms of democratic, life-grounded economic organization can emerge on a wide enough scale that they provide evidence that another way of life is possible. These new forms of economic organization and governance need not be non-capitalist initially (i.e. workers coops or non-commodified delivery of public services). Such developments have their merits, but tend to be local and forced to rely upon the will of committed activists to sustain themselves (or, if they are successful, to be re-absorbed by commodity markets, as many kibbutz's in Israel have been). A better approach, because more socially diffused, is to make demands on existing social institutions that are, in the words of Pat Devine (1988), 'prefigurative' of a new society. Devine, in his superb *Democracy and Economic Planning* constructs a consistent model for a negotiated coordination economy that would gradually replace the rule of market forces in the production, distribution, and use of life-resources with democratic planning. The model is too complex to do justice to here. The only point I want to stress is the way in which Devine's conception of prefigurative demands provides an alternative to a revolutionary road which seems, for all practical purposes, dead, and a reformism which, where it has not politically regressed to Blair's Third Way reconciliation with the privatising agenda of global capitalism, finds itself in a crisis of political stagnation.

The key political value of Devine's (1988) approach is that it relies upon a norm of self-government that is central to the legitimacy of liberal-democratic capitalism but which is not itself liberal and indeed, when extended to the economy, 'prefigurative' of a democratic socialist economy. By exploiting the ideological currency of the idea of self-government and demanding that its practices be extended to economic institutions, Devine lights upon a political strategy revolutionary in its ultimate implications, but realizable through an evolutionary dynamic. The key to realizing the overall implications of the idea of democratic economic governance is for movements to fight for and achieve progressively deeper levels of democratic control over economic life on the basis of the actually existing (but limited) means of participation operative in even the 'freest' of free markets. The actually existing means of participation that forms the link for Devine between the capitalist present and a possible democratic socialist future is negotiation.

The difference between the type of negotiation that goes on now and the type that Devine (1988) proposes is a difference of degree, not kind. The best evidence for the plausibility of Devine's model is the reality of planning and negotiation in the actual capitalist economy as it exists. The money-value decision structure that drives the capitalist economy has been everywhere enmeshed in a more complex legal, institutional, political, and cultural contexts as a consequence of successful democratic life-value counter-pressures. As a result, in every capitalist nation, and even in the standard-bearer of open markets, the United States, planning and negotiation is ubiquitous. Price-signals may ultimately rule corporate decisions, but they are not self-evident in terms of what they imply at the level of corporate strategy. Corporations do not make investment or divestment decisions over night, but meet to discuss and argue about how best to respond to changing economic circumstances. They generate long-term forecasts and determine future courses of action accordingly. Nor do nations simply leave the course of their economic futures up to market forces exclusively. Every nation retains some degree of control over macroeconomic factors and all publish national budgets. National budgets set out economic priorities and encourage or discourage different forms of economic activity through tax rates and other sorts of direct and indirect regulation. Political parties and social movements plan party and movement activities in accordance with agreed upon objectives. Governments, unions, social movements and businesses are constantly negotiating and re-negotiating the terms of economic life, who will benefit and who will suffer increased costs, as well as over which values ought to govern society. As Devine concludes, "in the most successful capitalist countries, even those apparently most ... market-oriented, the long-run development of the economy is not left primarily to the determination of market forces. Some degree of *ex ante* coordination is attempted, both within and between industries and sectors" (1988: 52). At present, however, these processes of negotiation are embedded in a structure of social power that is fundamentally asymmetrical which guarantees that in normal cases it is the interests of money-capital that carry the day. The democratic, life-grounded potential of negotiation is thus suppressed beneath the ruling power of the money-grounded ruling value system and the classes that derive private advantage from it. Nevertheless, negotiation still represents a real, if implicit, democratic moment existing within the capitalist system. Devine's model for a self-governing society is thus rooted in real processes of planning and negotiation central to actual economic life. On analogy with the universalization of civil and political rights over the past 300 years, it argues that those currently shut out of negotiation and planning, or those who voice is effectively marginalised when decisions are made, be formally and substantively included. The evolutionary development towards socialism would thus be brought about by successful political conquest of terrain currently controlled by major capitalist institutions on the basis of practices that those institutions rely upon (but currently are able to manipulate in their own private interests).

However, while I believe that Devine's prefigurative demands to transform current forms of negotiation represents the best alternative to revolutionary socialism and social democratic reformism, it cannot be achieved to even a minimal degree without political organization and struggle. Successful political organization and struggle, in turn, requires solidarity, and solidarity ultimately rests upon a shared commitment to binding values that all agree are equally expressive of their deepest interests as human beings. Without a convincing set of shared values struggles will continue to be distinct and diffuse, able to achieve temporary local gains at the expense of building sufficient social power to effect more secure, pervasive, and transformational objectives.

As I noted in the introduction, socialism has had its greatest influence when it generated broad-based social agreement as to its efficacy as a solution to general social crises. There is an emerging sense, I also argued, of a growing global crisis. What is lacking is any agreed upon framework of values to combat it. The life-ground of value, I suggested, supplies the basis for discovering that framework in the needs and capabilities demonstrably harmed by the value system and social dynamics of global capitalism. What remains now is to spell out the alternative framework of values, whose roots lie in the social-organic nature of human being, as, in essence, socialist.

To begin this task let us reflect for a moment on the meaning of 'value.' This term can best be understood by thinking about the relation between a valuing subject and an object that has value for him or her. The value of an object alters the relation of the subject to the object in such a way that the one for whom the object has value determines his or her activity so as to realize the value of the object. In general I define value as 'that in the object which makes it an object of care and concern for a subject,' where 'care and concern' serve to indicate that people regard the value of objects as legitimate reasons to alter their behaviour in relation to them. Art objects, for example, have aesthetic value which gives people a reason to contemplate them and protect them from damage. Food has nutritional value which gives people a reason to eat and not waste it. Money has economic value which gives people a reason to spend it wisely. Mementos have sentimental value which gives people a reason to cherish them. I could multiply the examples, but what I want to draw attention to is what all these different forms of value share. In every case the value is related to expanding the life-capabilities of the subject in question. Every object of value would lose whatever value it has were there no subjects to value it. Nevertheless, values are not simply arbitrary inventions of the subject. The subject values the object in question because of the contribution that object makes to its own (perceived) well-being. Value judgements can of course be poorly made. The difference between that which is of real value and that which is of perceived value but in reality of actual disvalue can be determined in relation to what I called above the 'life-ground' of value. The life-ground, recall, is the set of conditions without which life cannot reproduce itself and/or most fully

develop its individually meaningful and socially valuable capabilities. Satisfying the objective conditions of life's reproduction and development is the material condition of expanding life-value. Interaction with art increases the refinement of our sensibilities, eating nutritious food gives us the energy needed to undertake physically and intellectually demanding tasks. In short, the growth of these vital capabilities is the underlying life-value that connects all objects of value to valuing subjects.

Human beings differ from other life forms in so far as our life-requirements are satisfied (or not) within social, institutional, symbolic, and normative frameworks. The institutional, symbolic, and normative context of human life makes human life richer, but also creates the potential for a contradiction that does not affect other living things. Animals might make particular mistakes about whether a given object has life-value or not (a 'nuisance' bear, for example, might step into a trap bated with poisoned food). Animal communities do not, however, create symbolic and normative frameworks that rely upon a set of values that contradict their underlying life-interests. If there is enough food, animals survive, if there is not, they die. There are no examples where animal communities construct symbolic and normative frameworks that systematically undermine their essential interest in satisfying their life-needs. Human societies, however, regularly construct such frameworks. In those cases there is a contradiction between system-needs and underlying objective life-needs. Global capitalism, understood according to the manifestations of crisis explained above, is the most universal form of this contradiction.

The contradiction between system needs and life-needs occurs when the regulating principles of institutions and the motivating values of individual lives confuse what is of value to the reproduction of the specific social system with what is of real value to human life. Global capitalism is a generalized form of this basic value disorder. Here both institutional and individual values prioritise the growth of money - for nation, firm, and self - over maintaining and improving the natural and social conditions of life-maintenance and development. This means, recall, that the growth of money-value is assumed to equal the growth of life-value, with the result that life-development is reduced to a mere means of money-growth. Once this value inversion has taken hold people become unable to distinguish between what is in everyone's shared interests from what is necessary to maintain the given way of life. Wholesale destruction of other animal and human life can then be accepted as the necessary cost of maintaining 'our' way of life. Other life is valued or disvalued not according to its intrinsic nature, but only in so far as it can be marshalled in the service of the particular social system and its specific values. Societies can therefore become programmed in such a way that practices which tend toward the destruction of life's universal conditions of maintenance and development are generally supported as 'good.' Because the life-ground of value is objectively real, however, the reality of the contradiction will eventually be proven to the system's defenders, not by

political, philosophical, or scientific argument, but the observable degradation and destruction of the living beings who depend upon it for their health and activity. Witness the (at least rhetorical) mass conversion of the right wing to 'environmentalism' in the first two months of 2007.

Judging the effects of social dynamics, institutions, and normative frameworks from the perspective of life value, by contrast, solves the contradiction between life-needs and system needs by demonstrating the necessary foundation of particular interests, goals, and life-projects in the social satisfaction of the permanent life-interests of everyone. Clean air and water, comfortable shelter, education, institutions that cultivate our creative capabilities, participation in public affairs, and free time are not the exclusive interest of any class, sex, race, or geo-historical form of civilization (i.e. the 'West.'). If one objects to the life-grounded framework that, while it might identify a shared set of interests, it nevertheless rests upon an unacceptable paternalism that undermines people's primary need, that is, to choose their life freely, the defender of life-value has three responses.

First, there is no meaningful choice without the satisfaction of the material conditions responsible for there being options to choose between. By setting out the basic material (natural and social) conditions of there being options, the life-grounded account of the normative foundation of socialism promotes rather than denies the freedom of choice of life-activity.

Second, the understanding of human nature at work here does not reduce human interests to abstract biological needs but integrates the biological and the social, the material and the symbolic. As social beings humans always find themselves in contexts where decisions have to be made about resource production and distribution and the general principles of collective life-regulation. As these decisions can make people's lives better or worse, it follows from the life-grounded perspective that everyone has a need to participate in those decisions (since needs exist wherever a form of deprivation will cause objective harm). Hence there is no question of repeating the Stalinist mistake of establishing, in the words of Agnes Heller, Ferenc Feher, and Gyogy Marcus (1986), a 'dictatorship over needs.' Once essential needs have been identified by the application of the criterion explained above, democratic deliberation is required to identify concrete social priorities and the most acceptable means of satisfying them. That democratic approach to problems of social production is the very socio-economic heart of socialism and contrasts with the essentially undemocratic and need-depriving procedures and outcomes of global capitalism.

Finally, not even the most ardent neo-liberal rejects the difference between liberty and license. No social formation and its justifying ideologies permit people to do anything they want without regard for others. The life-grounded normative foundation for socialism

makes explicit the principle of legitimate life-activity implicit but only ever confusedly articulated in classical liberalism. This principle has two permutations, one negative and one positive. The negative permutation rules out forms of individual and collective activity that demonstrably harm the life-interests of others. The positive permutation affirms as of highest value those forms of individual and collective activity that enable the capabilities of others. Conceived in abstraction from contextual limits on its realization, the good life is a life that is maximally meaningful for the individual and maximally valuable for the society. As McMurtry argues:

> *The individual is not reducible to, but grounded on, this social life-host for self-articulation to be possible. The individual achieves individuality by expressing this social life-ground in some way - caring for or educating the next generation, speaking for the larger community what has not yet been heard, helping to produce goods needed by others as a unique contribution, and in general bridging the individual-social division by service to the larger community in some form to be an individual (1999: 90).*

That ideal can be approached to the extent that universally needed life-resources are collectively controlled, developed according to life-grounded principles, distributed according to the principle of 'each according to her or his needs', and utilised according to individual principles of life-governance freed from the irrational demands of consumer capitalism. To cite McMurtry again, "production and distribution for life need, and that, in turn, for life-capacity and experience in more comprehensive enjoyment and expression - this is the only *ultimate* value on earth– and any sane economy is there to serve it" (2002: 124).

Conclusion

The life-grounded conception of the normative foundation of socialism articulates at the highest level of generality the demands that different oppressed groups have made against the forms of exclusion and need-deprivation that have defined the history of capitalism. The institutionalization of the demands of those struggles has generated a history of social (as opposed to abstract political) democratization. In other words, whether one is talking about the enfranchisement of women and excluded racial minorities, legal limitations on the work day, public funding of education, libraries, art galleries, or redistributing income from profits to wages, the general trend of social development has been towards increased need-satisfaction on the three planes of life-requirement discussed above. As these levels of life-requirement are equally organic, social-symbolic, and temporal, there is no question here of reducing different histories of oppression to a single economistic explanation. Instead, oppression is understood according to a normatively universal model of life-requirement deprivation. The content of the histories of specific forms of

deprivation vary according to the real structure of experience of differently oppressed groups. Identity and difference in the history of oppression is dialectically united in such a way that autonomy in the articulation of particular experience is preserved within an overall framework of shared commitment to a new social reality. The satisfaction of all life-requirements - physical, symbolic, and temporal - is the agreed upon priority of all struggles leading to that new social reality.

The life-grounded foundation of socialism is not an anachronism, therefore, but in fact the general expression of a long-term trend of social development whose gains are currently being rolled back by global capitalism. Read at its most profound normative level, the theme of the story of social democratization links the manifold struggles of distinct oppressed groups to secure access to democratic control over the shared material and social conditions of human life. The life-grounded perspective does not deny that there are separate histories of struggle and oppression but maintains that different forms of oppression are concrete experiences of the same general form of systemic need-deprivation in the three dimensions of life-need discussed in the first section. Hence it also posits a universal goal of different political struggles against oppression: social and natural wealth is to be produced and distributed in order to satisfy the fundamental needs of human beings such that they are enabled to realize their capabilities through self-given projects. If that is not the general principle of socialism, it is not clear to me what is.

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