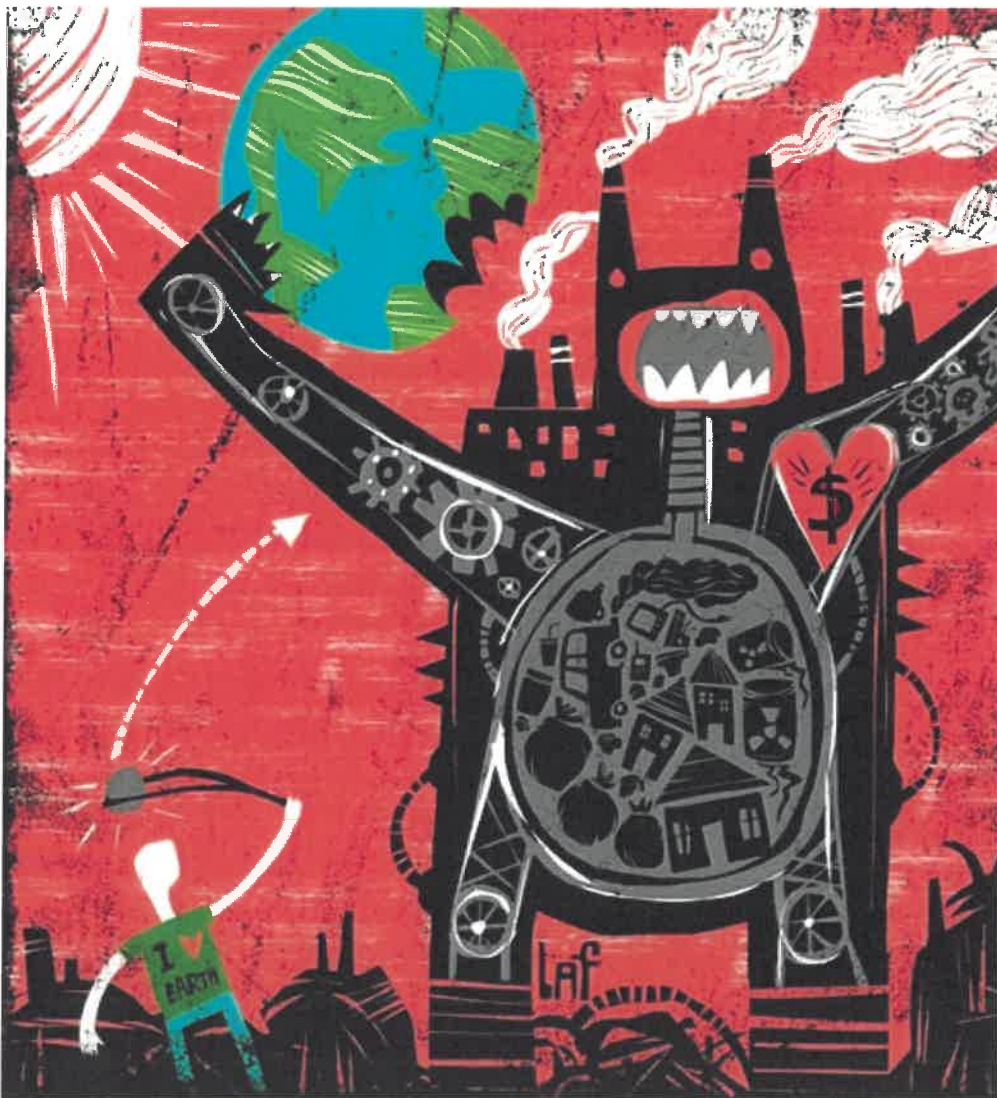


## Philosophers for Change

### The capitalist life crisis



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by Jeff Noonan

The failure of the Durban Conference on Climate Change, (December, 2011) to agree to anything more substantial than that all nations would work together to develop binding targets for reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 2015 is a metonym for the life-crisis besetting globalised capitalism.[1] Because global capitalism subordinates what John McMurtry calls “life-value” to the expansion and accumulation of money-value, it progressively undermines the conditions of planetary life-support, human life-requirement satisfaction, and meaningful human life-capacity development and enjoyment.[2] Resources, relationships, practices, norms, institutions, and forms of life-activity have life-value when they: a) satisfy objective requirements of human life-maintenance, reproduction, and development, b) thereby enabling the expression and enjoyment of the human life-capacities of sentience, imaginative and cognitive thought, and creative activity in ways which are, c) life-coherent. McMurtry’s principle of life-coherence asserts that in order to be good, expressions of life-capacity must not only follow from the free choices of the agents who enjoy them, but must also, “consistently enable ecological and human life-together.”[3] In other words, good forms of individual life-capacity expression must contribute to, rather than undermine, the natural field of life-support and the social field of life-development within which individual life-activity is grounded. The vaunted “liberties” of liberal-capitalist society are blind to the natural and social grounds upon which all good lives ultimately depend. Hence, capitalism is a system that necessarily generates crisis in all important dimensions of being alive. In the present essay I will explore the four most fundamental dimensions of capitalist life-crisis and the adequacy of egalitarian liberal, human rights-based cosmopolitan, and twenty-first century socialist responses to them.

### Capitalist Life-Crisis in Four Dimensions

The first dimension of capitalist life-crisis, clearly evidenced by the failure of the Durban Conference to set firm limits on greenhouse gas emissions, is the material irrationality of capitalism’s growth dynamic. Capitalist economies are driven by the system imperative to accumulate money-value in the hands of the owners of natural resources and productive wealth. Ultimately, this system-requirement for the growth of money-value requires growth of material output, which requires increased energy and scarce resource consumption on the one hand, and increased output of waste on the other. Unless regulated and limited by life-coherent standards, these processes will exhaust the resources of the earth upon which life depends. But such is the ruling value system of capitalism that it prioritises the accumulation of money-value over the preservation of the natural field of life-support upon which life and life-value depend. Hence the money-value system is materially irrational because the long-term operation of the growth dynamics which it legitimates as good for societies and individual selves undermines the material conditions for the existence of either.

The second dimension of life-crisis is the on-going economic crisis—now described by Paul Krugman as a depression—that has, since 2008, savaged the living standards and employment prospects of millions of people across the globe. [4] Lower growth rates in the economies of the Global North have provided the ideological cover that governments need to justify their continued ignoring of the systemic causal links connecting capitalist economic growth and the environmental crisis. For example, Canada’s withdrawal from its Kyoto Protocol commitments was justified by its ruling Conservative government as necessary to ensure the conditions for a return to economic health. While Canada is an egregious example, no nation in the current period of stagnant global growth rates is willing to impose serious environmental limits on the economy for fear of introducing further instability into the system. The main policy goal of the foreseeable future is to generate the conditions for renewed growth, even if it means intensifying the potentially planet-destroying long-term implications of capitalism’s materially irrational growth dynamic.

The reason why global ruling classes are desperate to find new means of accelerating economic growth at whatever ecological cost is because the last three years of economic crisis have generated pervasive political struggles. Hence, the third dimension of capitalist life-crisis is political. It takes the form of a nagging inability of liberal-democratic regimes and the dictatorships outside the Global North that have served as their allies to contain popular anger and maintain their own legitimacy. In the Arab World and the Middle East these struggles have become openly revolutionary. In the Global North, the Occupy Wall Street movement and its off-shoots are exposing the monstrous inequalities that neo-liberal “tax reforms” and coordinated assaults against organised labour have created. Perhaps more importantly, the Occupy movement has demonstrated the systematic way in which the widening chasm of inequality is correlated with the decline of democratic governance.

Durban again exemplifies the crisis of the global political system. Since the end of World War Two that system has depended upon liberal-democracy functioning as the guiding light of human historical development—that institutional structure towards which all nations must aspire. But in Durban governments did not do that which millions of their citizens have long-demanded: address the long-term environmental threats to the human future. Instead, they did that which they always do: allow their decisions to be dictated by the interests of “the Markets.” The interests of “the Markets”—accumulation of money-value in private hands—is antithetical to the environmental, economic, and political conditions required by the good of human beings—satisfaction of fundamental life-requirements and opportunities for the life-coherent expression and enjoyment of intrinsically valuable life-capacities. Liberal-democracy was supposed to be that set of institutions which best enabled the translation of capitalist productivity into equal opportunities for free self-development. It has turned out, on the contrary, to be just another set of institutions by which privileged classes ensure and perpetuate their rule over exploited and oppressed majorities. The anti-democratic essence of liberal-democracy has become even more overt in the wake of 9/11, as openly totalitarian ‘anti-terrorist’ legislation (now including the right of the President of the United States to order anyone, including American citizens, to be indefinitely imprisoned without trial) renders vaunted ‘civil liberties’ meaningless.

At the same time as the police function of the state has been reinforced, its democratic function—the governance of public life in the shared life-interest—has continued to recede. More and more public functions vital to democracy are off-loaded to the misnamed “private sector.” In reality this “private sector” is composed of massive money-driven corporations whose aim is to assume control over universally required life-resources and institutions. If democracy requires collective control over those institutions under which all must live and whose policies shape one’s life-horizons in decisive ways, then democracy is incompatible with the control of legislative agendas by corporate lobbyists, privatised public services, and the overall subservience of decision-making to the ruling mono-value of capitalist society: the growth and accumulation of money-capital in private hands.

This point returns us to Durban as metonym: despite mass support for collectively binding agreements to limit greenhouse gases, politicians could not agree. They could not agree because ultimately they do not serve the majority of people they are supposed to represent, but the corporate interest whose money-value holdings they must protect at all costs. This subordination of nominally democratic institutions to unaccountable market forces expresses the ultimate failure of liberal-democracy as a vital model of democratic life and an ultimately satisfying value by which future human development might be steered.

From the perspective of the Global North what has been most inspiring, invigorating, and animating

about the Arab spring is the beauty of people regaining a sense of the ultimate value of *public life*. When we contrast the joy generated by collective struggle with the morose solitary mall-wandering that typifies cultural life in the so-called “advanced” liberal-capitalist democracies the fourth and final dimension of capitalist life-crisis comes into focus. This dimension is the cultural and spiritual crisis of a mode of human life-organization that has lost its *raison d’être*, lost its connection with the deeper values —freedom, equality, justice—that it once affirmed in the face of the fixed hierarchies of the feudal societies it overthrew. The cultural and spiritual decadence of liberal-capitalist civilization is revealed above all by the complete collapse of meaningful public efforts to build solidarity around collective projects that might reinvest public life with meaning (e.g., a society-wide commitment to a shift to clean energy). In place of meaningful and inspiring collective projects of life-development are the endless exhortations to people as individuals to shop, to indebt themselves, to do whatever they must do to ensure that the ruling class makes more money— all under the watchful eye of surveillance cameras and the police. It is thus that a greying, gasping civilization staggers towards its end.

The historical fact that liberal-capitalist society has entered into a period of severe structural life-crisis in these four dimensions does not mean that all of the values which it has purported to serve over its three centuries of existence or all of the institutions of collective life-organization and governance that have evolved within that history cannot serve the shared human life-interests. The key to the solution of the life-crises in which the people of the world find themselves today depends upon understanding the traditional values of political thought, liberal and socialist, and institutions of collective life-organization and governance as life-values. The life-value perspective is implicit in the egalitarian liberal critique of unregulated market forces, in the cosmopolitan liberal defence of human rights as the moral foundation of global justice, and in the socialist critique of the economic and political contradictions of capitalism. But a complete solution to the four dimensions of capitalist life-crisis requires an integrated normative framework of which each of these arguments considered separately and in their own terms expresses only a part. In order to understand the integrated framework it is best to begin with its more familiar partial expressions in egalitarian liberalism, cosmopolitan globalist justice, and socialist critique. The need for the integrated alternatives emerges from the blind spots each of these arguments reveals when one tries to employ any one of them separately as the basis for complete understanding of the multidimensional life-crisis described above.



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### **Egalitarian Liberalism and Cosmopolitan Human Rights**

The dominant normative framework for evaluating the justice of liberal-capitalist society has been derived, for more than thirty years, from John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls shifted the study of justice from considerations of the dispositions, motivations, and actions of individuals towards the social institutions that shape and guide individual life-activity. Hence, with Rawls is born a proper conception of social justice. In contrast to the justice of individuals, social justice concerns the way in which major social institutions (the "basic structure of society") distribute what Rawls calls "primary goods." Primary goods are "things that every rational individual is presumed to want. These goods normally have a use whatever a person's plan of life. For simplicity's sake, assume that the chief primary goods at the disposition of society are rights, liberties and opportunities, and wealth and income" [5]

Primary goods are to be distributed according to two principles of social justice, both interpreted in light of the "difference principle". The two principles of justice are: "Each person is to have equal rights to the most extensive share of equal liberties compatible with a similar scheme for others. Second, social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and b) attached to positions and offices open to all." [6]

While Rawls and his followers believe these principles to be egalitarian in substance and spirit, the difference principle according to which their application is to be interpreted compromises this commitment to equality. It maintains that inequalities are permissible as incentives to the better off to act so as to ensure that the "economic process is more efficient, [and] innovation proceeds at a faster



pace,” and, in general, becomes more productive, creating more wealth overall, and therefore, a larger pool of resources for the poorer members of society to draw upon.[7] The material implication of the difference principle is that social institutions are to be harnessed to the goal of money-value growth above all else, a commitment which has, historically, served the interests of ruling classes, not the poor.

While it remains possible to derive from Rawls’ conception of justice a critique of existing distributions of wealth as unjust, it is not possible to derive from Rawls’s work a complete and integrated understanding of the prevailing life-crisis of capitalism in its four dimensions. A close investigation of the key terms of his theory reveals that it is neither critical nor egalitarian in a way that would make a comprehensive difference to the goodness of the lives of the least well off members of capitalist society. The crucial problem is that neither Rawls nor his supporters ever expose and criticise the ruling money-value system of the global capitalist market. Instead, the legitimacy of this value-system is presupposed, and debate confined to arguments over what amount of money should be redistributed from rich to poor, with the deeper problem of control over and use of life-sustaining and life-developing resources never even broached.

In illustration of this problem consider Rawls’s definition of primary goods. The problem with this definition encapsulates the problem of the subsequent “equality of what” debate. His definition does not touch upon goods that are primary to human life as such, but goods that are primary to life under liberal-capitalism. In liberal-capitalist society rights, liberty, and income appear primary, because they are the means by which this system reproduces and legitimates itself. Human life, by contrast, reproduces and organises itself through collective labour within the natural field of life-support and the social field of life-development. Judged from the ground of their life-value, different systems of collective labour are legitimate to the extent to which they enable everyone who lives under them to satisfy their real natural and social life-requirements and to express and enjoy their life-capacities in life-coherent ways. In sum, real primary goods are the resources, practices, relationships and institutions that support and enable meaningful and life-coherent forms of life-activity.

Contra Rawls, primary goods are not relative to particular social systems, and it is not rational to want them in ever-increasing amounts. Eating unlimited amounts of food is not more healthy than eating *required* amounts of food. The amount of primary goods that it is rational to want is the amount that is *sufficient* for purposes of life-requirement satisfaction and life-coherent capacity enjoyment. Unlimited demand for primary goods is materially *irrational* because appropriation of scarce life-goods at unsustainable levels undermines the possibility of on-going life. Rather than capture that which is fundamental to social justice, Rawls confuses the system-values of liberal-capitalism with primary life-values, and normalises the pathological demand for endless accumulation (the root of the first dimension of capitalist life-crisis) as “rational.” Instead of defining and explicating that which is actually primary to the life of embodied rational beings—the resources, relationships, institutions, and practices which support life and enable its defining capacities, Rawls assumes as primary the prevailing system-values, even though these are demonstrably destructive of the natural system of life-support. People’s lives are destroyed because the ecosystems upon which they depend are destroyed or because they cannot afford to pay the money-price attached to commodified life-requirement satisfiers. Yet, as the invocation of the difference principle proves, Rawls grounds the possibility of social justice on the unfettered growth of money-value—precisely the cause of the injustice his theory is supposed to address.

Nevertheless, Rawls’s work has been a vital stimulant to renewed critical interest amongst liberals in the justice of the socio-economic outcomes of global market forces. Arguably the most trenchant critic of

globalised capitalist patterns of distribution and deprivation has been Thomas Pogge. While Pogge's roots lie in Rawlsian justice theory, he goes significantly beyond Rawls in three respects: 1) he recognises the existence of a coercive global institutional structure which limits the range of policy options any particular nation state is able to pursue, thus affecting the life-horizons of individuals wherever they live; 2) he anchors his conception of global justice in a set of basic goods that all humans require as fundamental material conditions of life and autonomous activity; and 3) he justifies access to these goods on the basis of a conception of human rights that makes global institutions and those who benefit from them responsible for enduring the satisfaction of those rights.[8] To the extent that Pogge's conception of human rights as entitlements to live under social institutions that ensure the satisfaction of fundamental life-requirements, his argument is implicitly grounded in the idea of life-value. Read from the standpoint of its implicit life-value ground, Pogge exposes a profound moral gap between the standard of living required by human rights (access to those fundamental goods without which life cannot persist in human form) and the normal patterns of distribution produced by global market forces. As he famously and convincingly demonstrates, life for over 2 billion human beings on the globe is systematically deprived of even the most basic requirements of a decent human existence while a few (much less than the global 1 per cent) live in outrageous luxury that destroys human-hearted concern to alleviate the life-destroying poverty into which the others are sunk.

As powerful as Pogge's argument is, it nevertheless fails to systematically develop its implicit life-value critique of capitalism. He fails to do so because he does not work down to the ultimate causes of the systematic deprivation of basic life-goods that he exposes and decries. He eschews a "socialist" critique of globalised capitalism for a moral critique of the lassitude that allows people to ignore the plight of those exploited by the prevailing global structure. [9] While this moral critique is entirely appropriate, it fails to ask the deeper question: if the misery in which billions of people is so obviously caused by global capitalism, why does global capitalism remain legitimate?

The answer to that question is that people have internalised the ruling value system of global capitalism and thus confuse the system good—private money-accumulation—with the human good—life-coherent capacity enjoyment. Thus, people who judge the legitimacy of the world by this standard just do not see the suffering the system causes so long as the system is producing higher levels of money-value. In this scenario poverty is understood either as a consequence of poor economic growth (a technical matter) or corruption (a moral matter, but one that cannot be corrected by the sort of re-distribution Pogge demands). Where poverty is understood in the first manner, as related to low economic growth, a different view of human rights is propounded as the solution—not human rights as enforceable entitlements to fundamental life-goods, but human rights as the legal moral framework for capitalist market penetration and social liberalisation. Hence, there is a deep political tension at the heart of human rights discourse that those, like Pogge, who see in human rights relatively uncontroversial means to advance a global justice agenda, tend to overlook, even as they assume one side of the opposition.

The source of this tension is the historical entwinement of human rights with the development of capitalist society. Human rights have evolved within the liberal-capitalist world order to justify a global developmental path determined by the goal of unlimited money-value growth. At the same time, because that ruling value-system also invokes ideas of equality and individual freedom, the idea of 'right' can form the basis of a critique of grossly inequalitarian and undemocratic consequences of the untrammelled operation of this system, without calling the legitimacy of the system itself into question. As principles which regulate and justify capitalist globalization, human rights are system-values, rules that serve to regulate and legitimate the class structure and wealth distributions of liberal-capitalist

society as well as to determine acceptable forms of geo-political relationship. As system-values human rights can be used to criticise *excessively one-sided manifestations* of capitalism's normal relationships and patterns of distribution, but never the ruling money-value system or class structure themselves. In so far as human rights are system-values, the solutions they recommend are the institutional and interactional and distributive norms of the developed liberal-capitalist societies of the Global North. Poverty is to be cured by economic growth as measured by standard capitalist metrics of Gross Domestic Product, democratic deficits are to be made good by stable liberal-democratic institutions, and ethnic conflict is to be resolved by the internalization of the norms of multiculturalist toleration of difference.

Nevertheless, it does not follow from the use of human rights as system-values that they are nothing more than ideological justifications of global capitalism. When human rights are understood as life-values they can form a comprehensive and internally coherent foundation for the radical critique of the existing injustices and material irrationality of globalised capitalism. Pogge's critique of the inhuman levels of poverty and life-good deprivation clearly rests on an implicit understanding of human rights as life-values. At the same time, the efficacy of his critique as a solution to capitalist life-crisis is limited by the lack of definition and concrete spelling out of the idea of life-value that subtends his argument. The full-realization of a life-coherent understanding of human rights points us beyond capitalist society towards its historic alternative: socialism. But the systematic failures of previous attempts at constructing a life-valuable, democratic socialism demand a clear re-thinking of the institutional structures and ruling value system that would allow socialism to solve capitalist life-crises. While there are many important re-thinkings of the socialist alternative to capitalism currently underway, each of which addresses one dimension of capitalist life-crisis, none fully grasps the need to reconstruct the socialist project in light of the principle of life-coherence.



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### Re-Thinkings of Socialism for the Twenty-first Century

Over the past decade or so socialist critics of capitalism have been engaged in a deep re-thinking of the normative foundations and political goals of socialism. Like Pogge's conception of human rights, the re-thinking of socialist theory and practice has been implicitly grounded in the conception of life-value discussed above. Each of the four dimensions of capitalist life-crisis has been recognized and addressed by key twenty-first century socialist thinkers. But also like Pogge, their failure to concretely spell out of



the idea of life-value leads to unrecognised tensions, limitations, and dangers in even the best of twenty-first century socialist arguments. I will explore the ways in which the four dimensions of life-crisis are addressed in twenty-first century socialist theory and then turn to its limitations and tensions.

The ecological dimension of capitalist life-crisis is addressed in the wide and growing body of literature that seeks to connect Marxism to the ecological critique of capitalist growth dynamics. As John Bellamy Foster argues, capitalism sees nature as “a mere instrument of world social domination. Hence, capital by its very logic imposes what is in effect a scorched earth strategy. The planetary ecological crisis is increasingly all-encompassing, a product of the destructive uncontrollability of a rapidly globalising capitalist economy, which knows no other law than its own drive to exponential expansion.”[10] Capitalism thus generates environmental life-crisis because its growth dynamic is unsustainable and its ruling value system is incapable of recognising this ultimately fatal problem.

Ecologically re-interpreted Marxism has thus grasped the need to expand the socialist understanding of value beyond the use-value/exchange-value relationship of capitalism. In this renewed vision, socialist production is not so much concerned with subordinating exchange-value to use-value, but with satisfying the material conditions for the enjoyment of what Joel Kovel calls “intrinsic values.” He associates intrinsic values with non-appropriative experiential and affective relations between human beings considered as a species and the natural world, and between human beings considered as individual members of communities and each other. “Clearly, use-value is necessary for human-life; and one might venture to say that a realized, ecologically integral life can be carried out through a rich interplay of use-value-as-utility with intrinsic value, through a combined transformative and receptive relation to nature.”[11] In other words, human beings will always have to appropriate resources from nature in order to live, but the essential value of life is not found in these appropriative relations, but in the non-destructive experiential relationships (beauty, love, etc ) for which the productive relations serve as the material and instrumental conditions.

The natural field of life-support is of ultimate value to human beings in so far as biological life cannot be sustained apart from it. However, the mere reproduction of life is not the defining goal of human society. The highest end of human society is to enable life-coherent forms of individual life-flourishing through the free development of life-capacities. If that goal is to be achieved, socio-cultural and not just biological life-requirements must be satisfied. The economic system must not only produce goods sufficient for life, it must produce opportunities for meaningful, life-valuable work that link together in overall life-coherent patterns of productive, creative activity. Correspondingly, the political system must not only allow people to vote for representatives, it must ensure that all institutions which shape individual life-horizons are democratically governed. Socialist critics have sought to address the economic and political forms of capitalist life-crisis by deepening their conceptions of the democratic character of socialist society.

The renewed conception of socialist democracy that is emerging is rooted in a distinction between democracy as a system-value whose function is to legitimate and reproduce liberal-capitalism, from democracy as a life-value. Life-valuable democratic social institutions are grounded in the universal life-interest in comprehensive life-requirement satisfaction and life-coherent capacity realization and enjoyment. Where social institutions are democratically governed, it is this interest that rules, transforming private system-interests of ruling classes and privileged strata and groups into growing consciousness of the collective life-interest that ultimately links all human beings. Thus, life-valuable democratic institutions are incompatible with structures of social power in which ruling classes use their control over the universal means of life-maintenance and development to dominate the public agenda.

The life-value of democratic institutions is their unique capacity to enable each to recognise the common life-interest they share with all, not as an abstraction, but as the concrete basis of justification of the practice of collective self-governance.

As I have demonstrated above, under capitalism the universal life-interest is subordinated to the ruling system-value of money-value growth. Hence the political dimension of capitalist life-crisis takes the form of systematic opposition between capitalist market forces and substantively democratic social institutions. Ellen Meiksins Wood's historical investigation of the opposition between capitalism and democracy concludes that "the market [plays] an unprecedented role in capitalist society, as not only a simple mechanism of exchange and distribution but the principle determinant and regulator of social reproduction." [12] By allocating labour and resources according to calculations of private profitability, not universal life-requirement satisfaction, capitalist markets dominate rather than liberate the people who are dependent upon them. Since economic institutions are absolutely essential to social life, the class that controls economic institutions can subvert the nominally democratic character of other major social institutions. As Erik Olin Wright argues, under capitalism, "the democratic collectivity has very limited power to ask the question: how should we allocate *the aggregate social surplus* to different priorities. The issue here is not simply that many of these decisions are made outside of democratic deliberation, but that because investments are made privately, the threat of disinvestment heavily constrains all other allocative decisions within democratic bodies." [13] Hence the socialist solution to capitalist political life-crisis is to democratise the major institutions of social life, and in particular, economic institutions.

If socialist society is to free individual life from this structure of dependence, it must not only overcome the structure of ownership that defines capitalism, it must create new institutions of economic democracy. A great deal of work has been done by theorists like David Schweickhart and Michael Albert to construct new models of democratic social organization, but I believe that it is in the work of Pat Devine that one finds the most coherent, rich and workable conception of a democratic socialist economy. [14] The essential principle of Devine's model of negotiated coordination is that a democratic socialist economy must abandon the metric of value of capitalist society—monetary profit and loss—and regulating dynamics—market forces—for values and regulations grounded in democratic deliberation. "In capitalism, the criterion in terms of which choices are made is the potential or actual private profitability of an innovation, enforced by the coercive pressure of market forces. In our model, a pluralistic set of criteria, discursively arrived at and revised, would inform a deliberative process for evaluating innovation in terms of its socially productive, unproductive, or destructive potential, paying due attention to the precautionary principle." [15] For Devine, the point of democratic economic planning is not—as it was under Stalinism—the development of the productive forces whatever the environmental and human cost, but rather the all-round development and freedom of human individuals. Hence the socialist attempt to solve the economic and political dimensions of capitalist life-crisis points towards the means of solving the fourth dimension of capitalist life-crisis, the cultural and spiritual dimension.

The solution to the increasing emptiness and pointlessness of existence under contemporary capitalism returns twenty-first century socialism to the moral well-springs of Marx's conception of the value of human life. The value of human life, Marx argued, was rooted in the meaning we derive from labour that simultaneously satisfies the needs of others with whom we share our world and stimulates the growth of those capacities that one as an individual finds intrinsically interesting and important. Marx integrates his conception of the value of human life with his model of alternative social structure in his understanding of the regulatory principle of a fully developed socialist society: "from each according to

his abilities, to each according to his needs.”[16] For Marx, the deepest value of socialism is the life-valuable use of resources to satisfy needs for the sake of enabling individuals to realize their capacities in ways that contribute to the satisfaction of others’ needs. The vision that underlies this principle is essentially ethical, focussed on a conception of the good for human beings as the individual contributions each can make to the lives of others with whom they share a society.

Recovery of this implicitly life-valuable understanding of the individual good in the face of the spiritual crisis of capitalism has been central to the revitalized socialist vision of the twenty-first century. This revitalized vision has, according to Michael Lebowitz, rejected “productivist” interpretations of socialism for a vision which places “human beings at the centre.”[17] For Lebowitz, placing human beings at centre of the socialist project means that the essential value served by socialism is “real human development.” Lebowitz conceives real human development in ethical terms as a community of people working with each other to satisfy each others’ needs, for the sake of enabling each to fully express and enjoy their human capacities. By “producing as members of a human family,” Lebowitz argues, “each produces consciously for the sake of satisfying the needs of others.”[18] Thus, one’s own work becomes valuable as a form of life-capacity expression that is enjoyed because it contributes to the maintenance and development of others’ lives. Individuals achieve meaning in their lives by realizing their life-capacities in ways that meet others’ needs. This theme of creating meaning through contributing to the social world recurs across the spectrum of twenty-first century reconstructions of the depth values of socialism.

It underlies David McNally’s defence of the possibility of a world other than that envisaged by capitalist globalization. This new world would be “a place in which people have escaped commodification to live as free beings, as ends in themselves, ... where nature is no longer destroyed, ... where people are celebrated in the richness of their diversity.”[19] It underlies the more systematically theoretical defence of the necessity of socialism undertaken by Istvan Meszaros. “The positive alternative” to capitalism, he argues, is “a social reproductive order consciously regulated by the associated individuals” on the basis of “values chosen by social individuals themselves, in accordance with their real needs.” [20] It is also ethically foundational in the analytic Marxist attempt to connect the socialist project to democratic egalitarianism. G.A. Cohen’s final defence of the socialist project grounded socialism in a principle of “communal reciprocity ... according to which I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so, but because you need or want my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me.”[21]

Implied in these socialist responses to the four dimensions of capitalist life-crisis is the idea of socialism as what I have called a democratic life-economy. However, nowhere is this idea fully spelled out, and this lack of explicit life-grounding generates potential problems which, if unaddressed, could impede the ability of socialism to resolve capitalist life-crises. There are two key limitations in the existing socialist response to capitalist life-crises: first, a lack of attention to the difference between needs as fundamental natural and socio-cultural life-requirements and needs as instrumental requirements of any project whatsoever, and second, absence of explicit connection of good forms of human flourishing to life-coherent limitations on the content of expressed life-capacities.

As central as needs and capacities have been to the ethical foundation of the democratic socialist project, a crucial distinction has never been made. [22] This distinction is between need as a demand for a something which satisfies an instrumental requirement of whatever project a person happens to conceive, and need as *a fundamental life-requirement for the fuller development and expression of human life-capacities*. The distinction is important because if need is identified with demand for the instrumental requirements for the successful realization of any project whatsoever, the aphorism, “to each according

to his need” fails to challenge the potentially limitless demand on resources which underlies the fundamental form of capitalist life-incoherence- limitless economic growth.

This oversight affects even the ecological re-interpretation of the socialist understanding of value. Thus Kovel argues that “every commodity is defined by its use-value, and this, too, is necessarily a function of need, which in turn is a function of want, which in turn is a function of desire.”[23] If need is the normative basis for legitimate claims on resources, but grounded in desires, rather than in that which life-valuable capacity expression objectively requires, then Kovel has no principled way of rejecting arguments of the form: I need whatever I happen to desire, therefore socialist society is obliged by its fundamental normative principle to satisfy all of my desires. Clearly, given Kovel’s arguments regarding the ultimate grounding of use-value in intrinsic value, he does not intend to affirm capitalist consumer psychology and its conflation of the distinction between need and desire. However, the only way to make his practical economic arguments consistent with his ultimate ethical and political goals is to make explicit the distinction between needs as demands rooted in desires and needs as life-requirements rooted in the natural and socio-cultural conditions of life-maintenance and development.

The same argument holds in relation to the idea that the expression of life-capacities is that which ultimately makes life meaningful and good. Here too the idea that a good human life involves the expression and enjoyment of its life-capacities must be explicitly life-grounded. If we assign intrinsic value to the enjoyed expression of life-capacities without qualification, then it becomes possible to lose sight of the essential link established between the good of capacity expression and the satisfaction of others’ needs. The reconstituted socialist vision asserts, as did Marx, the essential link between the intrinsic good of capacity realization and enjoyment and the instrumental good of satisfying others’ needs, but it does not explicate how this link is to be made life-coherent. At the extreme, socialist affirmations of capacity expression of the good veer off towards the liberal neutrality about forms of the good life that we saw operating in Rawls and Pogge’s arguments above.

Erik Olin Wright argues, for example, that “the idea of human flourishing is neutral with respect to the various ways of life that can be constructed around particular ways of flourishing.” It is of course true, as he notes, “that people have many potentials, and it is impossible in general that all of these potentials can be realized, regardless of access to material and social means.”[24] But Wright’s argument confuses this general existential condition of human being—the need to choose between different possibilities for self-realization—with a political principle—neutrality between ways of human flourishing. Clearly socialists, or anyone concerned with resolving capitalist life-crisis, cannot be neutral on the question of life-coherent limits to human flourishing. Neutrality would undermine anyone’s ability to mount a coherent critique of capitalist ways of flourishing through the maximization of personal money-value holdings. Thus, the socialist affirmation of capacity expression and enjoyment cannot mean: “do what you feel like regardless of its impact on nature and other people,” but rather: “individuate yourself as a socially self-conscious creative agent through projects that sustain the natural system of life-support and deepen the communal bonds that organize society as an ethical whole by making a real contribution to the satisfaction of others’ life-requirements.”

The solution to capitalist life-crises must address their cause—the subordination of life-value to money-value— in a manner that builds on the achievements of past social struggles. By starting from that which has already been achieved, the struggle to solve capitalist life-crisis avoids the argument that “there is no alternative” by demonstrating that the alternative already exists in embryo wherever social institutions recognise and satisfy people’s life-requirements and value their conscious contributions to the well-being of others. The construction of a socialist democratic life-economy as a systematic alternative to



capitalist life-crisis is thus not a creation *ex nihilo*, but an organic development out of achieved levels of social struggle. The throughline that connects the different elements of struggle is the life-coherence principle understood as the internal constitutive condition of human freedom.



### Life-Coherence and the Solution to Capitalist Life-Crisis

Capitalism generates life-crises because it recognises no internal limitations on the amount of money-value that it would be good for individual or corporate selves to accumulate. The production of money-value ultimately requires economic growth, which threatens long-term environmental sustainability by increasing the rate of natural resource consumption and waste production. This materially irrational growth dynamic is at the root of each dimension of life-crisis: it is environmentally unsustainable, it creates crises of overproduction leading to recession and depression, it subverts democracy, and empties life-activity of meaning and life-value. Each of these dimensions of life-crisis is connected by the fact that the ruling value system assumes that all constraints on self-maximizing activity are contrary to human freedom, and, in so far as they are contrary to human freedom, antithetical to the good life. If we examine the idea of human freedom and goodness from the standpoint of their natural and social

conditions we discover, by contrast, that there must be life-coherent internal limitations on human activity if there is to be any freedom at all. A democratic life-economy is built up on the basis of a concrete understanding of what those internal limitations are.

In order to understand this crucial point let us consider a simple example. I am an organism that must eat in order to have the energy required to fuel basic metabolic functions, which are in turn necessary material condition for the development and conscious expression and enjoyment of higher level creative activities. The fact that I must eat is not an external constraint on my freedom, but an internal limitation, a constitutive condition, of what it is to be a human being. As such, my need to eat does not constrain my freedom; its satisfaction is integral to the development of any materially real freedom. If I did not have to eat I would not be freer, I would no longer be an embodied human being, and the category 'human freedom' would have no application to my life. Recognition of internal constitutive conditions is identical to understanding the necessary conditions of a thing's being and doing that which it is and is capable of doing. *External constraints*, by contrast, impede the satisfaction of these internal constitutive conditions, thus negating the material possibility of the thing's doing or being that which it is and is capable of doing. Insisting that internal constitutive conditions be recognized and satisfied is the very opposite of imposing external constraints on freedom.

The required systematic alternative to capitalism can only solve the four dimensions of capitalist life-crisis if it is able to *impose life-coherent limitations on the freedom of capital to circulate in search of the highest profits*. If socialism really is the solution to capitalist life-crises, then its institutional structure must be organized by the life-coherence principle as the internal constitutive principle of the socialist democratic life-economy. This principle does not violate, but rather specifies, the necessary conditions, at the environmental, economic, political, and cultural-spiritual level, of meaningful, life-valuable, and free human experience and activity. Concretely, the principle of life-coherence mandates that economic activity be sustainable over an open ended future, that social institutions democratically satisfy the life-requirements that they have been developed to satisfy (e.g., health care institutions heal, educational institutions educate, etc) and that individuals create meaningful lives for themselves by making contributions to the health of the natural system of life-support and the life-value of others' lives within the social system of life-development. These are the very values central to the re-imagination of the socialist project described above. They are internally constitutive of socialism as the solution to capitalist life-crisis, but they also rule out many possibilities of choice and action as materially irrational.

If we conceive of the normative superiority of socialism as its ability to solve capitalist life-crises, then it cannot be oriented by the goal of developing the productive forces for their own sake, or understood as "workers' control" over production as a political value independent of the concrete results for human beings and the environment of this form of governance. Socialism is the solution to capitalist life-crisis only to the extent that it takes the form of comprehensively instituted life-coherence. "Comprehensively instituted life-coherence" means that the dynamics and institutions and relationship that define socialist society: a) are environmentally sustainable over an open-ended human future, b) cultivate non-exploitative and non-oppressive relationships between people, c) positively encourage genuine mutuality and care across individual and group differences, and d) enable each and all to develop across the full range of affective and creative human life-capacities through the free development of individual life-projects which do not violate a or b and promote c.

In order to develop the political forces necessary to advance this goal, socialists must de-link their arguments from the rhetoric of "smashing" and "destroying" capitalism and re-establish the idea of socialism as the progressively realised outcome of constructive, rather than destructive, social struggles.

Instead of treating the total destruction of capitalism as a necessary precondition of building socialism, socialists must instead concentrate on identifying those existing institutions which prefigure the institutions of a democratic socialist life-economy. These institutions can be treated as concrete plateaus from which higher levels of democratic life-value construction can proceed. In this vision, the systematic alternative to capitalist life-crises emerges as an organic process of social development, driven by democratic political struggle, from existing plateaus to higher levels of achievement. The arena is the existing array of “civil commons” institutions.

The “civil commons” is McMurtry’s term for all non-commodified social goods which enable human life-capacities to be developed and enjoyed in a life-coherent manner. [25] Civil commons goods range from language and love of children through to free education, public health care, and the democratic principle that all who must comply with law and policy should participate in its formulation. The universality of life-requirement provision that defines the civil commons contrasts with privacy of monetary benefit that defines the ruling money-value system of global capitalism. In all existing social institutions these contrasting value systems operate in contradiction with each other. For example, human beings have developed highly sophisticated understandings of the body which can be used to cure disease, but under capitalism the treatment of disease is either commodified or under threat of commodification. To take another example, human beings have advanced intellectually beyond belief in the invidious blood hierarchies of aristocratic society and have given birth on this basis to democratic institutions. These institutions are threatened, as we have seen, by the power of money and the ruling class which controls it.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/fair1-scaled10001.jpg>)

Nevertheless, not only the principles of need-governed public access and democracy, but also the institutions which could realise the full life-value of these principles, exist. They form an existing civil commons reality in tension with the ruling value system of capitalist society. The way beyond capitalist life-crises is to progressively resolve these contradictions in each institution in favour of the civil commons life-function. The end goal of this process is the systematic transformation of materially

irrational capitalist society. The means of achieving this global end goal are rooted in local and specific struggles that erupt within definite social institutions at definite moments in historical time and social space. The idea here is not to make a virtue of particularism or localism. On the contrary, the idea is to give material reality to universal and comprehensive struggles by identifying the real ground upon which they can stand as they work towards complete social transformation.

In order to motivate people to free themselves from their current social dependence upon market forces, socialists must offer more than abstract theoretical proofs of the possibility of another world. They must demonstrate that the values of the possible alternative world are already in operation in the existing world, even if only in partial, distorted, and contradictory fashion. By illuminating how the principle of distribution according to need for the sake of life-coherent capacity development already operates in existing civil commons institutions, socialists offer people searching for a way out of crisis concrete evidence that socialism can form the required alternative to capitalism. In this way a bridge between the contradictory present and the open-ended socialist future is established. Unless this sort of concrete evidence can be marshalled in support of a democratic socialist life-economy, social movements are most likely to remain fragmented and partial, and thus without the scope and power necessary to resolve the life-crises of our age.

### Notes:

[1] See the final official report for the details. "Draft Report of the Conference of the Parties On Its Seventeenth Session." (<http://unfccc.int/2860.php> (<http://unfccc.int/2860.php>))

[2] John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, (Toronto: Garamond), 1998, p. 164.

[3] John McMurtry, "Human Rights versus Corporate Rights: Life Value, the Civil Commons, and Social Justice", *Studies in Social Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2011, p. 14.

[4] Paul Krugman, "Depression and Democracy," *New York Times*, Sunday, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

[5] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1999, p. 54

[6] Ibid., p. 53.

[7] Ibid., p. 68.

[8] Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Second Edition, (Cambridge: Polity Press), 2008, pp. 43-45, 50-54.

[9] Ibid., p.31.

[10] John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution*, (New York: Monthly Review Press), 2009, p.46.

[11] Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*, (London: Zed Books), 2007, p. 213.

[12] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, (London: Verso), 2002, p. 97.

[13] Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, (London: Verso), 2010, p. 83.

[14] David Schweickart, *After Capitalism*, Second Edition, (Lanham: MD: Rowman and Littlefield), 2011; Michael Albert, *Parecon*, (London: Verso), 2003.



[15] Devine and Fikret Adaman, "Participatory Planning as a Deliberative Process: A Response to Hodgson's Critique", *Economy and Society*, Vol. 30. No. 2, May, 2001, p. 235. The complete explication of the model of democratic planning as negotiated coordination can be found in Pat Devine, *Democracy and Economic Planning*, (Cambridge: Polity Press), 1988.

[16] KarlMarx: "Critique of the Gotha Program, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert C.Tucker, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton) 1978, p. 531.

[17] Michael Lebowitz: *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, (New York: Monthly Review Press), 2010, p. 21.

[18] Ibid., p. 79.

[19] David McNally, *Another World is Possible*, (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Press), 2002, p. 275.

[20] Istvan Meszaros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, (New York: Monthly Review Press), 2008, p. 245.

[21] G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press), 2009, p. 39.

[22] This distinction is not made in even the most thorough and careful analyses of the meaning of need in Marx's work. See Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx*, (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1976; Ian Fraser, *Hegel and Marx: The Concept of Need*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press), 1998.

[23] Kovel, Ibid., p.112.

[24] Wright, Ibid., p. 14.

[25] John McMurtry, *Value Wars*, (London: Verso), 2002, p. 117.



[Thank you Jeff for coming through the barricades on time with this one]

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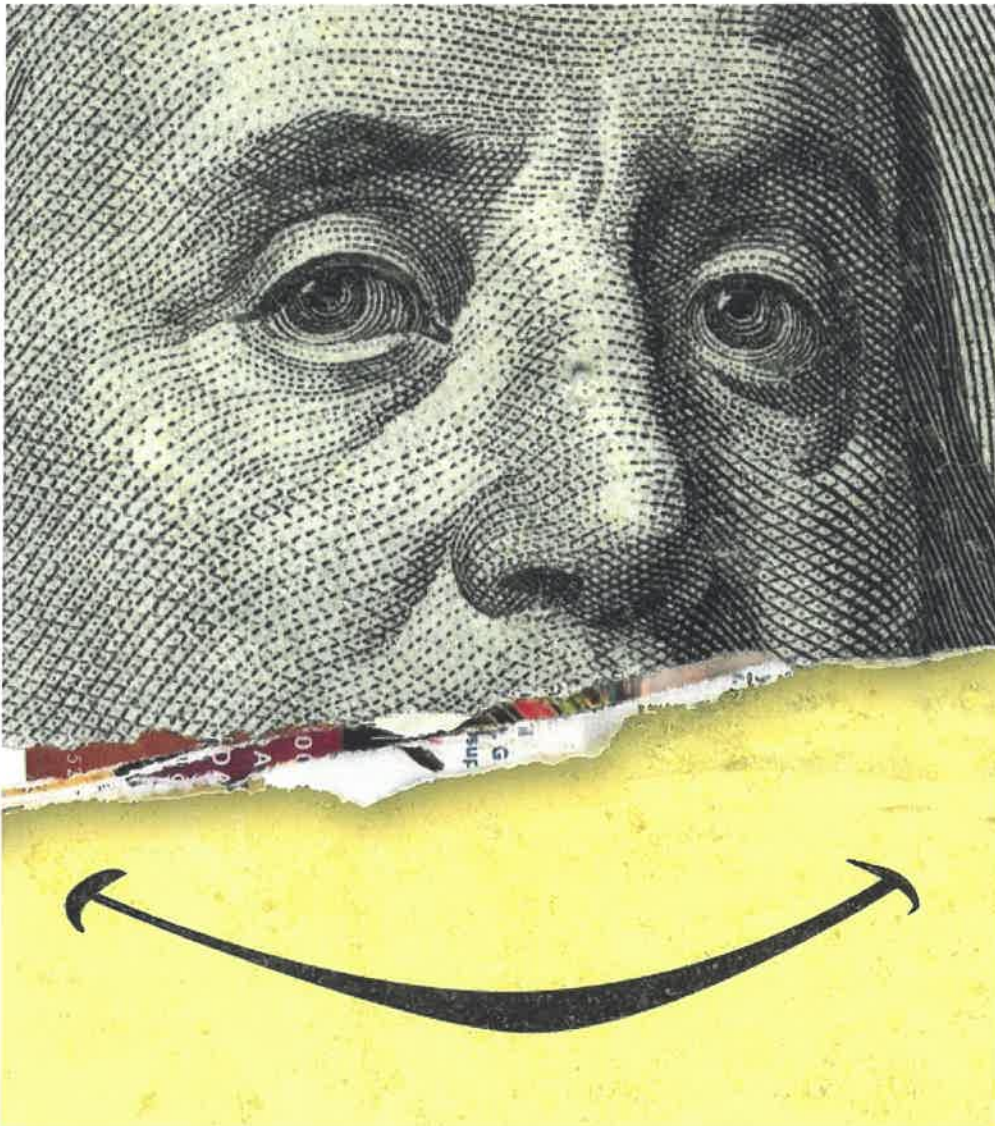


JANUARY 3, 2012MARCH 16, 2012 SANJAY PERERA# ANTI-CAPITALISM, # CAPITALISM,  
# CAPITALIST, # CAPITALIST LIFE CRISIS, # COLLAPSE OF CAPITALISM, # DIMENSIONS,  
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# JUSTICE, # MARXISM, # MICHAEL ALBERT, # MONEY VALUE, # MULTI-DIMENSIONAL,  
# NATURAL ECONOMY, # NEW SOCIETAL SYSTEMS, # PARTICIPATORY SOCIETY, # SOCIAL  
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## Philosophers for Change

### Economics, happiness, and life-coherent societies



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by Jeff Noonan

In a 2007 report on the environmental and economic impact of intensified exploitation of the Alberta Oil Sands, then Chief Economist of the Toronto Dominion Bank, Don Drummond, re-affirmed orthodox economics' faith in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of economic performance. "Gross Domestic Product," he wrote, is the best available indicator of the overall health of the ...economy, as it measures the market value of the goods and services produced." [1]

I begin with this example because the oil sands, at current global oil prices, are both hugely profitable and massively environmentally destructive. [2] GDP captures the money-value that production of crude from the oil sands generates, but cannot measure the life-value in spoiled habitats and poisoned watersheds it destroys. If we assume that the purpose of an economy is to maximise the production of money-value, then economic health is synonymous with money-value growth. If, along with orthodox economics, we make this assumption, then Drummond is correct, GDP is the best metric of economic health.

This orthodox understanding of the economy treats it as an infinitely expandable *sui generis* system of production and distribution abstracted from finite ecosystemic life-support systems. Since economic systems that produce and distribute goods presuppose the existence of human beings, and these human beings depend upon natural life-support systems, the abstraction upon which orthodox metrics of economic health depends are materially irrational. A material rational understanding of economic systems—one which properly understands their real conditions of existence and reproduction, must treat them as they really are: subsystems of the broader ecosystem. [3] Once we understand the dependence of economic systems on the broader ecosystem, then the fatal problem of GDP as a measure of economic health becomes clear: GDP can rise as a consequence of life-destructive economic activities. If all one focuses upon is money-value growth, seemingly "healthy" economies can destroy the natural life-support systems upon which our lives, and therefore the economy, really depend.



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## The Alienation of Orthodox Economic Metrics from Life-Value Systems

The disconnect between orthodox metrics of economic health and the health of wider natural systems of life-support is becoming more and more evident as environmental crises become more pronounced. But it is not only at the level of natural life-support systems that crises are becoming evident. Social institutions emerge out of natural systems of life-support as systems of life-development which allow our human capacities to flourish. Here too GDP as the sole metric of economic health can miss life-crises caused by the erosion of public services and the consequent undermining of solidaristic, mutualistic, and reciprocal relationships upon which human life-development depends but which have no essential role in competitive capitalist markets. But the crises generated by rising inequality, unemployment, and increasingly undemocratic tactics designed to suppress dissent and alternatives to austerity are now so extensive that they cannot be ignored, even by thinkers whose intellectual roots lie in orthodox economic science. In response to these growing life-crises, economists like Noble Prize winners Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz, as well as social scientists, philosophers and politicians have begun to specify all those features of economic systems that are relevant to planetary and human life but which GDP cannot capture: income distribution and the degree of inequality, the differential ability of different groups of people (women and men, for example) to convert income into valuable human experiences and activities, the meaningfulness of available work opportunities, the extent of free time, and the impact of economic growth on global life-support systems.[4] Underlying this expanding criticism of GDP as a measure of economic health is a deep normative principle: money-value is at best an instrument of life-value; life-value, however, is not reducible to money-income.

Life-value is found in those resources, relationships and institutions that enable life to survive and develop, and those experiences and activities through which human sentient, cognitive-imaginative, and creative capacities are developed, expressed, and enjoyed.[5] If we think of an economy as a system that produces and distributes life-value (using money-value as an instrument as appropriate), then a healthy economy is an economy that sustainably satisfies our real-life-requirements and enables the expression and enjoyment of human capacities in meaningful and life-affirmative ways. Once we abandon the abstraction of the economy from the wider fields of natural life-support and social life-development, we must also abandon the abstract metric of economic health that governs orthodox economic science and normal capitalist practice. We need new metrics of economic health that emerge out of concrete understanding of real human life-requirements and life-capacities.

Over the past three decades increasingly life-grounded metrics of economic health have emerged. Since 1990 the United Nations has published an annual Human Development Report. The goal of these reports was to “go beyond income to assess the level of people’s long-term well-being.” [6] Since 2005, the government of Bhutan has applied the Gross National Happiness index to try to assess the well-being of its citizens. [7]. The pioneer of life-value philosophy, John McMurtry, has developed a Well-Being Index which attempts to capture the extent to which economic performance is producing instrumental and intrinsic life-value. [8] In 2011 a major Canadian effort to develop a comprehensive measure of quality of life resulted in the Canadian Index of Well-Being. Contrary to the expectations of orthodox economics, it found that there was no strong correlation between income growth and Canadians’ sense of well-being, because income growth increased inequalities, generated new time pressures, and failed to strengthen community relations and democratic institutions.[9] While the number of variables measured and the degree of complexity between these different indices varies, they are all efforts, Mark Anielski, author of *The Economics of Happiness*, argues, to remind orthodox economics that wealth really refers to “the conditions of well-being,” and not money-income. [10]

In the most general terms, the conditions for human well-being must be derived from an understanding of human life-requirements. Gross Domestic Product does not tell us anything about what human beings require to live, survive, reproduce, develop, and enjoy their lifetime, but only what the capitalist system requires in order for its exclusive measure of value – money – to grow. Gross Domestic Product is thus a metric of economic health which is alienated from the “life-ground of value,” while the various indicators of “genuine progress” noted above are all striving to reconnect the measure of economic health to the life-ground of value. The life-ground of value is “the connection of life to life’s resources as a felt bond of being.” [11]

The life-ground embraces both the objective and subjective moments of Anielski’s ‘real wealth.’ Life’s conditions, both natural and social for human beings, are the objective content of real wealth. They are comprised by the natural resources like healthy food and clean water and air, social relationships like caring and mutual concern, and social institutions like accessible public health care and education systems which all human beings anywhere require if they are to survive, live healthily, and freely unfold their life-capacities in meaningful and valuable ways. But the life-ground is not simply objective conditions in abstraction from subjective dispositions towards them. It is a felt bond of being flowing from the subject to the objective conditions that sustain it. In its subjective dimension the life-ground is experienced as the drive to appropriate life-goods for the sake of creating more life-value. Instead of self-interested action whose aim is to produce more money returns for self, *life-grounded* action seeks to create more life-value: “life means organic movement, sentience, and thought ... to reproduce life-value is to hold these capacities at their established scope. To increase life-value is to widen or deepen them to a more comprehensive range.” [12] Hence, in an economic system that is life-grounded, both its system parameters and the motivating desires of the people whose action and interaction sustain it are oriented towards the growth of life-value. Such a system would select against forms of enterprise which demonstrably impair or despoil the natural and social conditions of life and modes of collective and individual action which maintain or widen the scope of access to life-goods.

The idea of the life-ground of value is essential to the project of reconceptualising the dominant measures of economic health in a way that captures their contribution to human happiness, because of the ambiguity of the idea of “happiness.” While Aristotle, for example, links happiness to the realization of higher human capacities, reserving the term “happiness” for the experience of virtuous, or excellent, accomplishments, other traditions, most notably the traditions of classical utilitarianism which still inform orthodox economics, equate happiness with the transitory experience of pleasure, whatever the source of that pleasure might be. [13] Thus, if people feel affirmed by driving an outsized, polluting automobile when they could use a well-developed public transit system or a bicycle to meet their transportation needs, orthodox economics accepts this subjective report and allows that driving such a vehicle is one form of happiness. The cumulative damage such feelings of subjective happiness might cause to the natural life-support system are regarded as externalities that have no bearing on the quality of the subjective feeling. A life-grounded metric of happiness, by contrast, asks people to reflect upon the implications of their actions for the systems of life-support and life-development they themselves depend upon along with everyone else. They are not imperiously told what to feel happy about, they themselves discover the difference between transitory pleasures induced in them by the prevailing economic system and the deeper satisfactions that are afforded people through the contributions they make to the growth of life-value. As McMurtry argues, in a life-grounded economy “the individual achieves individuality by expressing the social life-ground in some way particular to personal capacity and choice.” [14] Happiness is the feeling of achievement that arises in the individual when she becomes conscious of the life-value of the *individual* contribution she has made to the well-being of others.

As I noted above, the research for the Canadian Index of Well-Being revealed that the growth of money value is not strongly correlated with growth of happiness. This reflection on the relationship between life-value and subjective happiness uncovers the deepest reason why there is no strong correlation. Not only do the stresses of life in capitalist society, the difficulties it places in the way of people accessing the natural and social conditions of life-support and life-development, conspire against happiness, so too does the paucity of opportunities to contribute meaningfully to social well-being through available forms of work. Even a well-paying job (increasingly rare as working people are made to pay for the economic crisis with severe cuts to their wages and) can be unbearably boring if it is routinized and the worker subjected to authoritarian discipline. Currently, work is not allocated according to 'personal capacity and choice' under a capitalist system, but according to whether or not and how labour can be *profitably* exploited. There is no necessary identity between the profitable exploitation of labour and the objectively and subjectively life-valuable employment of labour. If one only looks at labour from a money-value standpoint, these deeper problems do not appear.

However, these problems are not simply problems of measurement. While it is true that one cannot find that which one does not have the proper tools to look for, it does not follow that the major social problems missed by metrics like GDP are caused by the informational poverty of the metric. The major problems that GDP cannot disclose: environmental crisis, unemployment, rising inequality, substantively undemocratic social systems, and the increasing moral and spiritual bankruptcy of our age, are problems caused by the class structure, growth dynamics, and legitimating value system of capitalism. These problems can be *disclosed* by more life-grounded measures of well-being and genuine progress, but they are not *solved* by being disclosed to critical consciousness. GDP is the preferred metric of orthodox economics because money-value is the life-blood of capitalism. But this life-blood of capitalism is produced by draining life-support capacity from the natural life-support system at unsustainable rates and exploiting the life-requirements and life-capacities of human beings by setting them in competition for ultimately meaningless system-rewards. The real value of life-grounded metrics of economic health is not that they provide new measures to evaluate capitalism, but rather that they can disclose the *systemic* barriers that capitalism puts in the way of building life-valuable economies. The solution to this problem is not, as Anielski maintains, "virtuous action and genuine capitalism," but a life-coherent alternative to capitalist life-destruction. [15]

Virtuous action in this context presumably means individual efforts to push existing institutions in the direction of prioritising the production of real wealth. The problem is not with these efforts, but with the institutional dynamics and ruling value system within which they are undertaken. "*Genuine capitalism*," is defined by these institutional dynamics and ruling value system. *Genuine capitalism* is not a Platonic Form awaiting realization, but actual capitalist society as it has developed historically. That society does produce genuine wealth, but not as its defining goal. The defining goal of genuine capitalism is the realization of profit on investment and the reinvestment of that profit in order to realise even higher returns through the next cycle, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Real capitalist wealth is thus distinct from real wealth in the life-value sense. Nevertheless, real capitalist wealth is real in capitalism, and the dynamics generated by pursuit of that goal generate the fundamental social problems disclosed by life-grounded metrics. If the goal of the metrics is not only to disclose the problems, but to solve them, they must become part of social struggles against capitalism, not for a genuine capitalism, since the goal of genuine capitalism is the cause of, not the solution to, the contemporary crisis of human and planetary well-being. Capitalism is in its governing dynamics and legitimating value-system *life-incoherent*. This life-incoherence must be solved at the institutional level if the real value of life-grounded metrics is to be realized.



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### Life-Incoherence and Life-Coherence: The Real Way Forward

To understand what “life-incoherence” means in the context of capitalist growth dynamics, let us consider more fully what Anielski means by “genuine capitalism.” Anielski’s economics of happiness identifies five types of capital: human, social, natural, built, and financial. Genuine capitalism is achieved when “all five core capital assets are in harmony and in a resilient and flourishing state.”[16] There are two essential problems with this conception, each of which is a manifestation of life-incoherence. First is the reduction of human, natural, and social reality to forms of ‘capital.’ Human



beings, the natural world, and social relationships have intrinsic value which is foreign to the nature of capital. No sort of capital is ever intrinsically valuable, but only valuable for the returns that it brings. To treat human beings as human capital, for example, is to treat them as a factor of production, as mental or manual labour, as entrepreneurial risk taker, or as manager. In all cases the human being is not valued as an unrepeatable bearer of life-value, but for whatever function they fulfil in the economic process. If one wants to insist that to be in a “resilient” and “flourishing” state this intrinsic value must be recognised, one is no longer treating human beings as human capital. Movement away from the human capital model would indeed count as genuine progress towards a life-value economy, but it would also be a move away from genuine capitalism.

This conclusion leads straightaway to the second problem. Genuine capitalism *is* as Anielski argues a system that values everything as capital. But that means that to be in a “flourishing” state, everything must ultimately be productive of money-capital for private appropriation and reinvestment, for that is the very essence of capitalist economic dynamics. Natural capital, for example, would be judged in a flourishing state, from the capitalist perspective, when it is being profitably exploited. Anielski would no doubt rejoin that his genuine capitalism rejects the unsustainable exploitation of natural capital. Again, to reject the unsustainability is indeed genuine progress, but not towards genuine capitalism, but away from and beyond it.

Capital and capitalism are life-incoherent just because they are incapable of recognizing the intrinsic life-value of anything. In other words, capitalism can only see things as actual or potential money-value. Since money-value can in principle expand without limit, the capitalist believes that scarce resources can expand without limit as well, even though, as Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, a forefather of ecological economics pointed out, to believe so is to ignore the second law of thermodynamics. [17] It is this relentless drive of capital to transcend every material limit on money-value accumulation, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that life-support systems are finite, that makes capitalism materially irrational (destructive of its own conditions of existence) and therefore life-incoherent. One might go so far as to say that the more genuine capitalism is, the more life-incoherent it becomes, because the more quickly it uses up scarce natural life-values: the more ruthlessly it exploits the intrinsic life-value of human beings.

Capitalism can proceed along this self-destructive path because people are dependent upon its growth dynamics for their livelihoods, even as those same growth dynamics undermine the natural and social conditions of their lives and well-being. Capitalism is rooted in the private and exclusive control over universally required life-resources. People who are deprived of need-based access to that which they require to live become dependent upon labour markets for their survival. But labour markets are not governed in their operation by the goal of ensuring the survival of labourers, but the accumulation of money-capital through the profitable exploitation of labour. Official metrics of economic health like GDP report back to policy makers that the economy is healthy when money-value is expanding, but blind those same policy makers to the despoliation of natural life-support systems. “The reigning system is governed by private money-sequence growth as determining good ... [this] ruling principle of value gain cumulatively violates life-requirements at organic, civil, and environmental levels. [18] Recognition of this problem at the level of evaluative measurements is not sufficient to correct it, however, because people remain dependent on labour markets for their survival even when they can see the catastrophe looming on the horizon. Life-value metrics disclose the life-incoherence of capitalism, but they do not solve it on their own. Only transformed social dynamics, relationships, and value systems can accomplish the necessary goal: the construction of a *life-coherent* economic system.

The life-coherence principle is a general epistemic principle formulated by McMurtry in order to reconnect the scientific enterprise — which meant, in its origins, understanding of the universal systems within which humanity exists—to service the health of life-support systems. At present, science, like the ruling money-value system it typically serves, is alienated from the life-ground of value. Its formalistic conceptions of scientific truth — consistency of conclusions with experimental evidence and logical coherence—exclude the most important criterion of all— coherence of conclusions with the health of life-support systems. Hence, it may be ‘true’ in abstraction from broader considerations of life-support that steam at a certain temperature and pressure can separate oil from oil sands, but it is not ‘true’ to the deeper vocation of science to understand life’s conditions and requirements to put itself at the service of the oil industry, come what may for the environmental health of regions subjected to oil sands exploitation.

If science’s goal is to understand reality, it must grasp the real conditions of existence of the organic-social beings whose thinking carries out the enterprise of science. To exclude the impact of science on life-support systems from its criterion of truth is to exclude from consideration the most essential aspect of reality for living beings, namely, those elements and processes within it that sustain life. For science to contribute to processes whose cumulative impact is to undermine life-support systems is to contribute in a materially irrational way to the destruction of its own conditions of existence. “The unseen flaw of scientific method is that it has no internal principle of consistency with universal life-support systems—to be in accord with reality in the deepest sense. Partial science and rationality blinkers out the ultimate plane of coherence. What most distinguishes scientific method—openness to disconfirming evidence and resolute attention to anomalous outcomes—has been abdicated where these standards reach furthest and cut most. Science cannot be in accord with reality until it takes this excluded baseline into account. More exactly, scientific conclusions are not rational until tested against common life-support standards.” [19] The truth and rationality of science thus depends upon consistency of scientific practices with maintenance of the real life-support systems that underlie its own continued existence as a human practice. Consistency with the ultimate vocation of science to comprehend and serve life-support systems means rejecting the seductions of money and power in favour of resolute commitment to objectivity in the understanding of the real conditions of life.

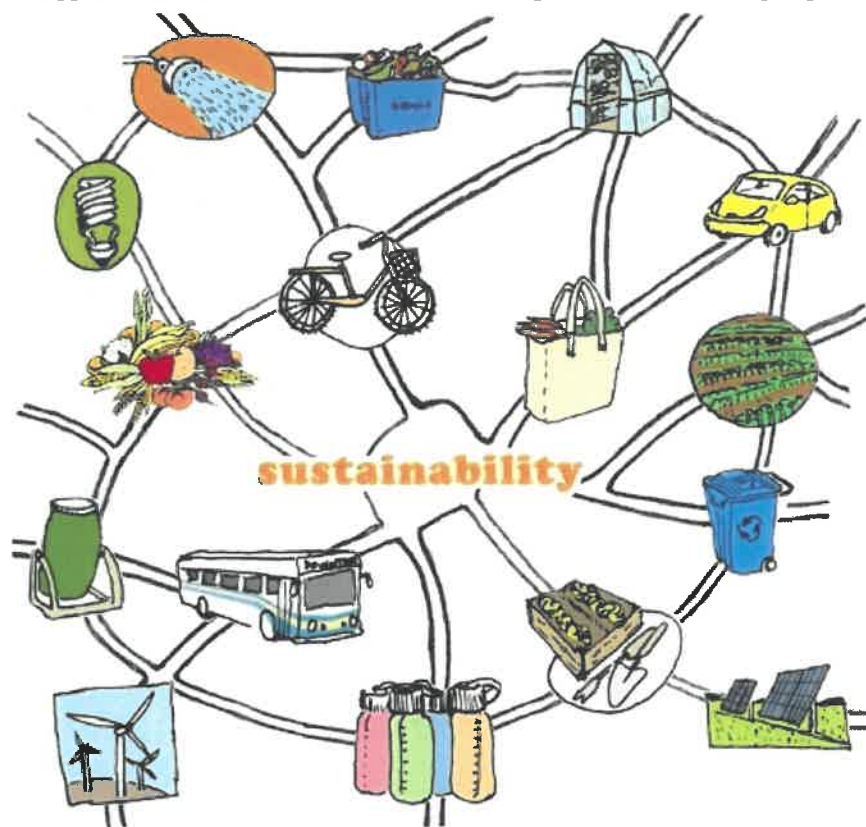
Gross Domestic Product is a paradigm instance of one-sided science becoming systematically blind to the life-conditions that sustain the people who practice it. As we have seen, GDP cannot distinguish economic growth that increases the health of life-support systems by better enabling the development and expression of life-value, and economic growth that undermines life-support systems and diminishes life-value. Despite this fatal weakness, orthodox economics, as Drummond’s report on the economics of the oil sand noted, regards GDP as the best overall measure of economic health. This conclusion simply proves how life-blind orthodox economics has become. This science, which often purports to be a science of rational choice under conditions of scarcity, cannot distinguish the most rational from the most irrational of choices: choices which destroy the material conditions of the lives of the choosers from the material conditions that enable the lives of the choosers. All the various metrics of genuine wealth, progress, and well-being discussed above are efforts to overcome this life-blindness with life-coherent standards of economic evaluation.

On their own, separated from social movements powerful enough to effect deep institutional and value-system change, they will be incapable of doing anything more than providing evidence of capitalism’s life-incoherence and material irrationality. While the accumulation of evidence that exposes a systemic problem is itself a good, in so far as it can help to legitimate the social movements demanding solutions, it is not in itself a solution. In addition to measuring the degree to which capitalism is not satisfying

fundamental life-requirements and enabling the enjoyed expression of life-capacities, these metrics need a new object — new, life-grounded economic practices, relationships, institutions, and value-systems. The real value of life-grounded standards of measurement would be to provide positive evidence of the superiority of an economic system steered by the goal of maximising life-value and governed democratically by all citizens. Such a system is not an abstract Idea awaiting perfect realization through pure force of political will; it exists in embryo and in tension with existing capitalist practices. We can find its real structure wherever we find economic practices that *sustainably and comprehensively* satisfy the *universal* life-requirements of all. When people's life-requirements are comprehensively satisfied they are freed to express their vital life-capacities in ways which contribute to enhancing the health of the sustaining natural and social fields of life-support and development.

If we want concrete examples of life-coherent institutions, let us think of public institutions like hospitals and schools (where these are real public institutions) which are open to all on the basis of need and interest, not ability to pay, and whose purpose is restoration and wider development of life-capacities. The purpose of a hospital is not to make money for private owners, but to cure disease and restore full life-function. The purpose of a school is not to extract maximum tuition from its students, but to develop their cognitive and imaginative capacities. The public nature of these institutions means that they are open and available to any and all who need them, to the extent that their lives can benefit from them. Their goal is not to return money-value to private investors but to increase the life-value of society as a whole, by ensuring the health and cultivating the intelligence of its individual members.

These public institutions serve as embryonic models of the global structure of a life-value economy. In a life-value economy, money (or an analogous coordinating function) serves the higher purpose of ensuring the sustainable free development of life-capacities. Since sustainability over an open-ended future is the regulating principle, a life-value economy is by definition life-coherent and materially rational. That is, it does not exploit natural resources for the sake of maximizing profitable returns, regardless of the consequences for the life-support capacities of the globe, but ensures that comprehensive satisfaction of human life-requirements is compatible with the long term health of the sustaining environment. It does not treat social institutions as servants and protectors of the private appropriation of money-value, but as cultivators and co-ordinators of human capacities and self-governing abilities. Within a life-economy people consciously govern their individual and collective life-activity in ways that ensure its long-term survival and open-ended development.



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If a life-economy is by definition life-coherent and materially rational, then it follows that the means of struggle by which its principle is more widely and deeply embodied in actual institutions must also be life-coherent and materially rational. Since a life-economy is not an abstraction or a blue print for a society to be created *ex nihilo*, but rooted in existing public institutions and sustainable economic practices, the means of struggling to extend its institutions cannot be vanguard revolutions, but patient, organic mass struggles that take the existing level of development as a plateau from which to build higher. The life-value metrics examined above should become vital conceptual tools of the struggle, providing evidence to social movements of the success (or failure) of new experiments in extending the institutions and practices of the life-value economy. In this way the new metrics serve the interests of the construction of a better world. This better world realises the vocation of humanity to make the world rational—i.e., not the outcome of blind mechanical forces, but the wisdom and intelligence of people guided by the unified goal of ensuring fairness and reciprocity in the achievement of universal well-being.

## End Notes

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[Thank you Jeff for contributing happily as always]

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### The Economics of Happiness - Official Trailer

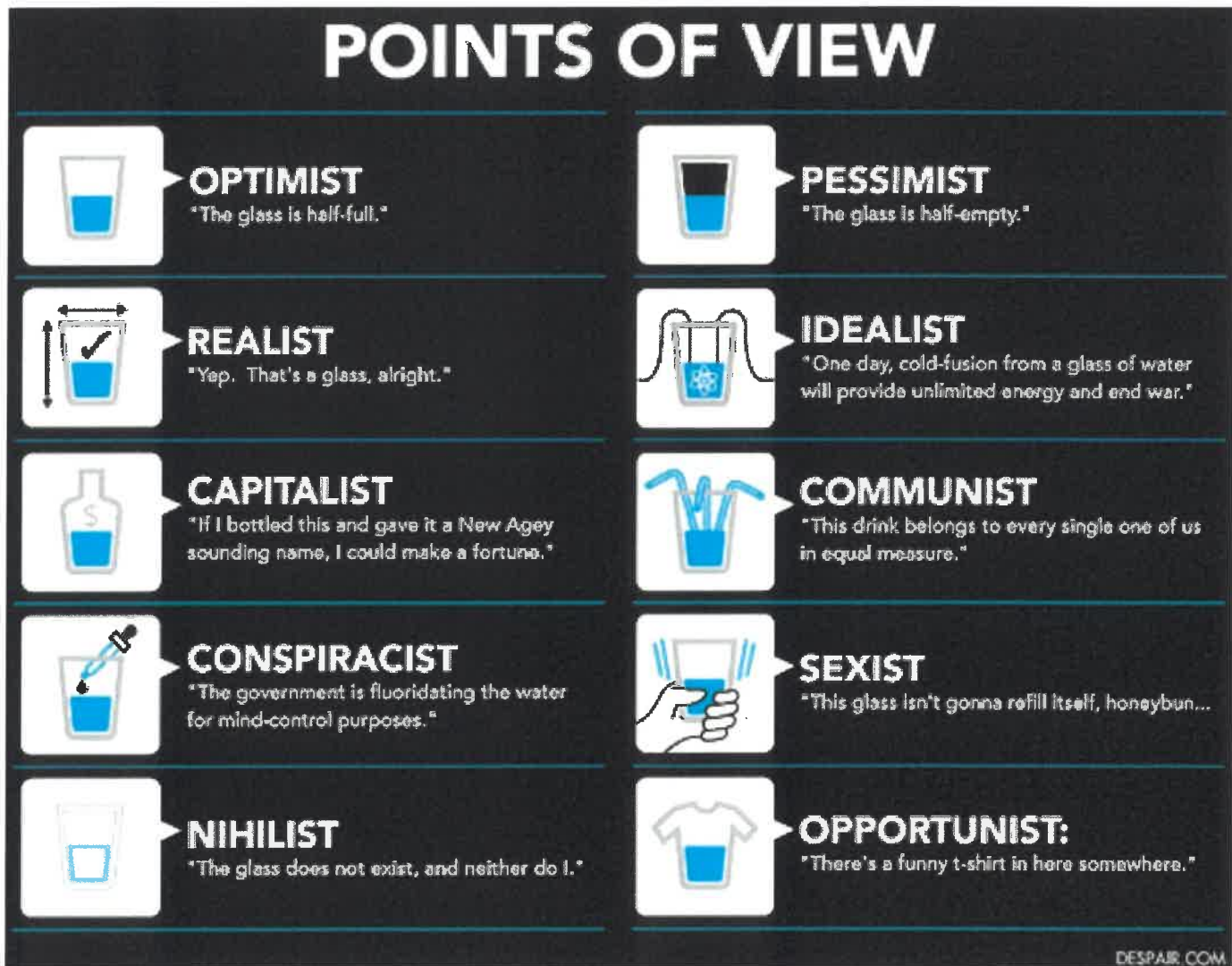


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# Philosophers for Change

## Philosophy as critique and ideology



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by Jeff Noonan

From its beginnings, philosophy has existed in a state of tension with the given world, the world as it immediately presents itself to human consciousness. There would be no need for philosophy were the truth inscribed on the surface of things, but experience teaches that appearances can be deceiving. Philosophy arises out of reflection upon this experience of a failure of identity between appearances and

reality. Beneath its disciplinary divisions, philosophy is the search for a unified method of inquiry, argument, and communication capable of discovering, proving, and disseminating the truth. Philosophy must therefore be, as a condition of its own existence, critical of naive and unreflective assertions of the identity of truth and appearances. If there is a truth to the matter, philosophy demands argument, evidence, and reasons.

Philosophy as refusal to accept the truth of the given in the form in which it immediately appears is the opposite of dogmatism, which is the refusal to accept the possibility that the given is not true in the form in which it is given. If philosophy as criticism refuses to immediately identify the true with that which presents itself immediately to consciousness, then dogmatism is the refusal to give up this identification, no matter how strong the reasons or evidence which tell against it. Dogmatism becomes ideological when the object of judgement is a social form, a determinate way of organizing and ruling human life. When critical philosophy turns its attention to dogmatic ideologies, its goal is to undermine people's confidence in the truth of the ideology and the society it justifies by exposing contradictions. The contradictions that it aims to expose hold either between ideological ideals and social reality, or between the ideological conception of the ideals and more comprehensive or inclusive formulations of those ideals.

Take for example the common liberal ideal of equality. Liberal society may be criticised for failing to live up to this ideal (by permitting massive income inequality), or the liberal formulation of the ideal itself might be criticised as merely formal equality that abstracts from substantive life-conditions. In either case, philosophy as critique is initially negative: not a project for an alternative society, but an demonstration of the structural contradictions of the society whose ideals it questions.

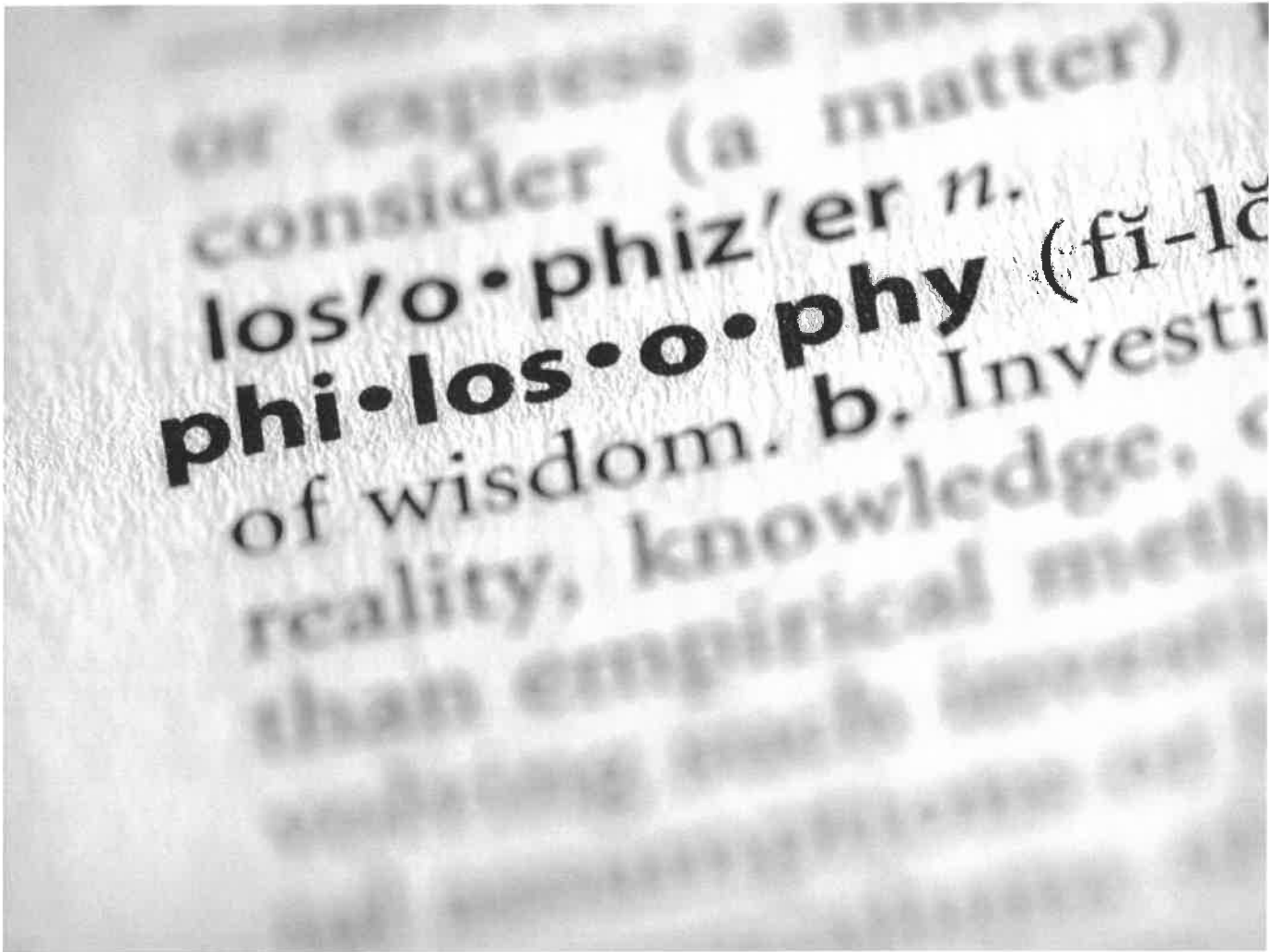
My concern in this essay is with the general question of whether and how social philosophy can unite negative critique and support for definite positive strategies for overcoming existing political, economic, and cultural crises without succumbing to dogmatism. I will develop this answer with the example of Marxism in mind. I choose Marxism as my example because of the self-conscious way in which Marx struggled to unite a negative critique of existing society with a determinate, positive goal of criticism — a new society that had overcome the contradictions of the old — without succumbing to dogmatism. In my estimation, Marx was not wholly successful, but his efforts yield the key to a solution to the decisive problem of a coherent, non-dogmatic reconciliation of negative critique and positive demands.

My attempt at a solution to this most difficult problem will be to argue that social philosophy can coherently unite a positive project for social change and the vitality of negative criticism if:

- 1) the goals it defends avoid becoming overly concrete and particular, but instead remain general enough to permit adaptation to changing realities on the ground; and
- 2) it retains a willingness to listen to and learn from all groups whose lives are damaged in different ways — ways not necessarily contemplated in traditional conceptions of critical social philosophy — by the dynamics and contradictions of the given society.

A social philosophy that successful united one and two would provide a non-dogmatic but unified and universal goal for political struggle against contemporary life-crises. At the same time, it could remain socially and self-critical, thus avoiding the danger of dogmatic fixity and self-enclosure. I will begin with a brief discussion of the emergence of Marxism from the critique of Hegelian philosophy in order to concretise the methodological issues in play in my argument. I will then proceed to explain the

philosophical and political implications of points (1) and (2), using Marxism as a foil against which my own conceptions can take shape. I will conclude with a concise sketch of what such a social philosophy would look like and what I take its most pressing contemporary tasks to be.



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## I: Marxism and Critical Social Philosophy

Marxism is perhaps the paradigmatic form of a critical social philosophy struggling to unite negative critique and a determinate, positive goal of social revolution. It was born out of Marx's critique of the Hegelian philosophy grown stale and dogmatic in the hands of both right and left wing Hegelians. Neither group could overcome the most fatal weakness of Hegel's philosophy: its tendency to force contingent historical processes into the terms of an abstract set of ideas obeying their own logic. In this way open-ended historical developments were made to serve a closed conceptual system that sanctifies that which *has* happened as that which *had to have happened* given the logical sequence of concepts demanded by the philosophy. Marx's critique of Bruno Bauer dissects this essential problem shared by the entire Hegelian movement: "For Herr Bauer, as for Hegel, truth is an automaton that proves itself. Man must *follow* it. As in Hegel, the result of real development is nothing but the truth proven, i.e., brought to consciousness." [1] Philosophical idealism is thus paradigmatically dogmatic and ideological. It attempts to sanctify the given social world by making it appear as the logically necessary outcome of a universal developmental process. What it proves, however, is not the truth of history, but only that which it has presupposed in the categories of its metaphysics.



At the same time as he was exposing its latent dogmatism, Marx was also seeking to free a deeper critical dynamic of dialectical philosophy from Hegel's conservative politics. Hegel *claimed* not to be imposing an alien conceptual logic upon history. In his explanation of his method he argued that the goals of historical development emerged out of contingent past events. He explicitly rejected a mechanical understanding of dialectics which "goes around applying this single inert form to whatever it encounters...which only arrives at the differentiation of its material since this has been already provided and is by now familiar." [2] Marx from the beginning understood this tension within Hegelian dialects, between its critical form and its conservative conclusions. In his most important reflection upon Hegel, he argued that "the outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle is... that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process... as the outcome of man's own labour." [3] Thus, for Marx, philosophical critique depends upon its capacity to dissolve the legitimacy of the given social world, to undercut its appearance of naturalness. So long as philosophy remains negative, it remains critical. When it becomes positive, as in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, when it turns its task from dissolving the legitimacy of a given social form to legitimating an alternative, it runs the risk of becoming conservative and ideological.

This risk is one that Marxism had to be willing to take, however, since its goal was never to simply interpret or criticise the world, but change it. [4] As Marx's thinking developed it became increasingly shaped by the trajectory of the growing workers' movement until its initial, humanistic philosophical goal — human emancipation — became grounded in the success of a specific event: working class revolution. Marx ultimately regarded working class revolution as the necessary social condition for the creation of a communist society and human emancipation. Once a critical, negative philosophy criticises a given reality, not in order to expose its contradictions, but in the name of a different reality which it regards as in all respects as of superior value, it assumes the risk of itself becoming ideologically closed to empirical disconfirmation and thus dogmatic. The historical record abounds with examples of Marxisms that have failed to avoid this temptation. I will not trace those well-known histories here. I do want to argue, however, that the danger of dogmatism can be avoided by returning to the earlier, more general idea of "human emancipation" suitably reinterpreted for the twenty-first century.



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## II: Human Emancipation and Working Class Revolution

Before Marx linked socialism to a particular class project, the universal interests of human beings with the class interests of the proletariat, and supported that link with what he regarded as an empirically adequate scientific understanding of socio-historical development, he spoke simply of “human emancipation.” He contrasted human emancipation with the political emancipation offered by the great liberal revolutions of the eighteenth century and concluded that liberal society did not emancipate the human being, because it presupposed the subordination of human interests in free self-development to the rule of alien, reified social forces, and especially the power of money.[5] The rule of money over human life damaged human beings in two ways. First, it subordinated the ability of human beings to satisfy even their most basic needs, with the result that for those without sufficient money, life reverted towards a bestial state in which mere survival was the sole goal. Second, less remarked upon but ultimately perhaps more important, it divorced character, social standing, and achievements from the real life-activity of human beings.

Where money-value rules, it determines one’s social standing and the value of one’s achievements quite independently of the type of person one actually is. Virtuous character and talent count for nothing where professional and intimate relations can be bought and the rich are worshipped as paradigms of human success. Marx contrasts this rule of monetary illusion with an emancipated human reality in which “man” is assumed to “be man, and his relationship to the world a human one.” Then “you can exchange only trust for trust and love for love,” because “every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression corresponding to the object of your will, of your real individual life.*”[6] *Human oppression* is here anchored more deeply than in the rule of a specific class, which is but one of the effects of reified power. The deepest problem is reification itself: the collective human power to

create and democratically organize social life appears as an external natural force ruling over existing social relations making them appear fixed and unalterable.

If the problem that human beings face is domination by social-symbolic forces, and especially money, that their own cooperative labour has created, then the general solution to this problem must be a comprehensive transformation of the form of that cooperative labour. For Marx labour referred to any form of self-objectifying activity, to any “specific expression” of one’s “real individual life.” Cognitive and imaginative mental activity, artistic expression, and emotional expression can all be considered labour in this sense. Understood as such, the category labour embraces the entire range of expressions of human cognitive and practical life-capacities and mediates every human relationship with nature and other human beings in society. Human emancipation is not identical to a change in the form of government, but nor can it be identical simply to a change in the form of class relations, although it may require such a change as a necessary condition. But the sufficient conditions of human emancipation would be much more general than overcoming the power of the given ruling class.

If the fundamental problem of society is understood, as Marx initially understands it, as alienated labour, but labour is understood not as paid work (its alienated form) but all the specific ways in which human beings relate to nature and to each other, then the solution — human emancipation — must involve a complete transformation of these relationships. Clearly, this properly universal goal cannot be identified — as Marx and subsequent Marxists proceeded to do — with the interests of the working class. While it might be true that workers suffer most directly from the particular structure of alienated labour typical of capitalism, it does not follow that a revolution capable of emancipating humanity essentially concerns “the social character of government.”[7] The social character of government might change, workers might replace the bourgeoisie, without the problems other oppressed groups face being solved. Nor is a workers’ government alone any guarantee that new society can consolidate itself in a democratic way. Problems of the form and content of law, the role of the constitution, the division of power, not to mention wider problems of the sexual and racial division of labour, problems of spirituality, individual motivation, and the meaning of life, the proper role of science and technology, the form and content of art, and the value-status of non-human living and non-living nature are not solved — even in principle — just because workers or their representatives have Communist party rule.

Marxism ceases to be critical and becomes a closed ideology whenever and wherever it conflates human emancipation — which today must take the form of practical solutions to the fundamental life-crises of our time — with working class revolution under the leadership of a vanguard communist party.[8] Here universal emancipation is reduced to the goals of a socially specific group, the working class, whose general interests must be brought into focus by a party of experts. Turning a necessary condition of human emancipation (ending alienated labour) into *the* necessary *and* sufficient condition could not but set up a new form of political alienation, the alienation of every other oppressed group from the working class and vanguardist politics. As soon as other groups of oppressed human beings, be they women, or racialised subaltern groups, or sexual minorities, or the disabled attain political self-consciousness, they begin to articulate their own narratives of the history of their subordination, narratives which *may intersect with*, but *are not reducible* to the history of the exploitation and alienation of labour. It is true that class and gender and race and ability all intersect with class, but it is the nature of an intersection that the crossing roads continue on, *in their own direction*.

There has been much theoretically and practically fruitful exploration of the intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality, but no synthetic, coherent, and comprehensive theoretical and practical resolution of the tensions has been achieved. Nor can a solution be found, I argue, so long as one

amongst these different grounds of oppression and exploitation is regarded as, or regards itself as, the most fundamental. The only solution is to regard them all as different manifestations of the same fundamental form of oppression: subordination of shared life-interests to the reproduction and growth of exclusionary systems which elevate the growth of some non-living value like money above the free development of life-value.

Every historically significant form of oppression is marked by variation around a common theme with both theoretical and practical sides. Theoretically, every oppressed group is subjected to some form of invidious contrast with the ruling group in which the oppressed group appears “inferior” in some respect said to be, by the ruling group, essential to human beings — intelligence, good judgement, self-discipline, initiative, beauty. These ideologies of invidious hierarchy then justify the practical denial to the oppressed of access to the resources and participation in the institutions which their freedom as self-determining agents would require. Access to the resources without which human life cannot survive and reproduce — oxygen, potable water, climate-appropriate shelter, clothing, and preventative and restorative medicine — and participation in the institutions and relationships without which the creative, social self-conscious agency definitive of *human* life are stifled — that is, caring mutualistic relationships, education, productive and creative activity, systems of governance and collective planning, time free of imposed routine — all that constitute a *shared life-interest* that links human beings as humans across our differences.[9]

This shared life-interest defines the life-ground of our shared humanity.[10] “Humanity” however, is not a generic abstraction, a mannequin-like sexless, cultureless, voiceless, sameness, but the capacity to create multiple ways of speaking, expressing, living, loving and identifying. These differences cannot freely develop, however, unless the shared life-interest is satisfied. Wherever one finds a history of oppression, one will find *different ways and different reasons* for denying that there is a shared life-interest linking oppressor and oppressed. Once this shared life-interest has been denied, social institutions proceed to impose upon the oppressed a life deprived of that which they require to live and develop their differences freely.

Oppression can therefore be understood as denial to the oppressed group of access to and participation in the universal conditions of free reproduction, development, and enjoyment of differences. If the universal form of human oppression is systematic deprivation of the resources and institutions that define the shared life-interest, then it follows that human emancipation requires universal and comprehensive access to the natural resources of life-support and participation in the institutions and relationships that the free development of human capacities through which valuable human differences are created and developed requires. While it is the case that human emancipation presupposes as its fundamental material condition collective democratic control over universally required life-resources for the sake of satisfying the shared life-interest — a condition incompatible with the class structure and ruling money-value system of capitalism — it does not follow that a socialist revolution on the early twentieth century model is sufficient for human emancipation. *Human emancipation* requires as its principled basis a coherent means of universally valuing human differences which nevertheless retains a critical capacity to reject certain interests and forms of life as illegitimate. This principle can be found in the life-value philosophy of John McMurtry.

McMurtry’s primary axiom of value states that “x is of value to the extent that x is productive of more coherently inclusive ranges of life-value expression and enjoyment.”[11] In other words, any resources, practice, relationship, or institution that enables life to survive and develop its capacities is good, up to the point where it begins to reduce the ranges of life-value expression and enjoyment. Nutritious food is



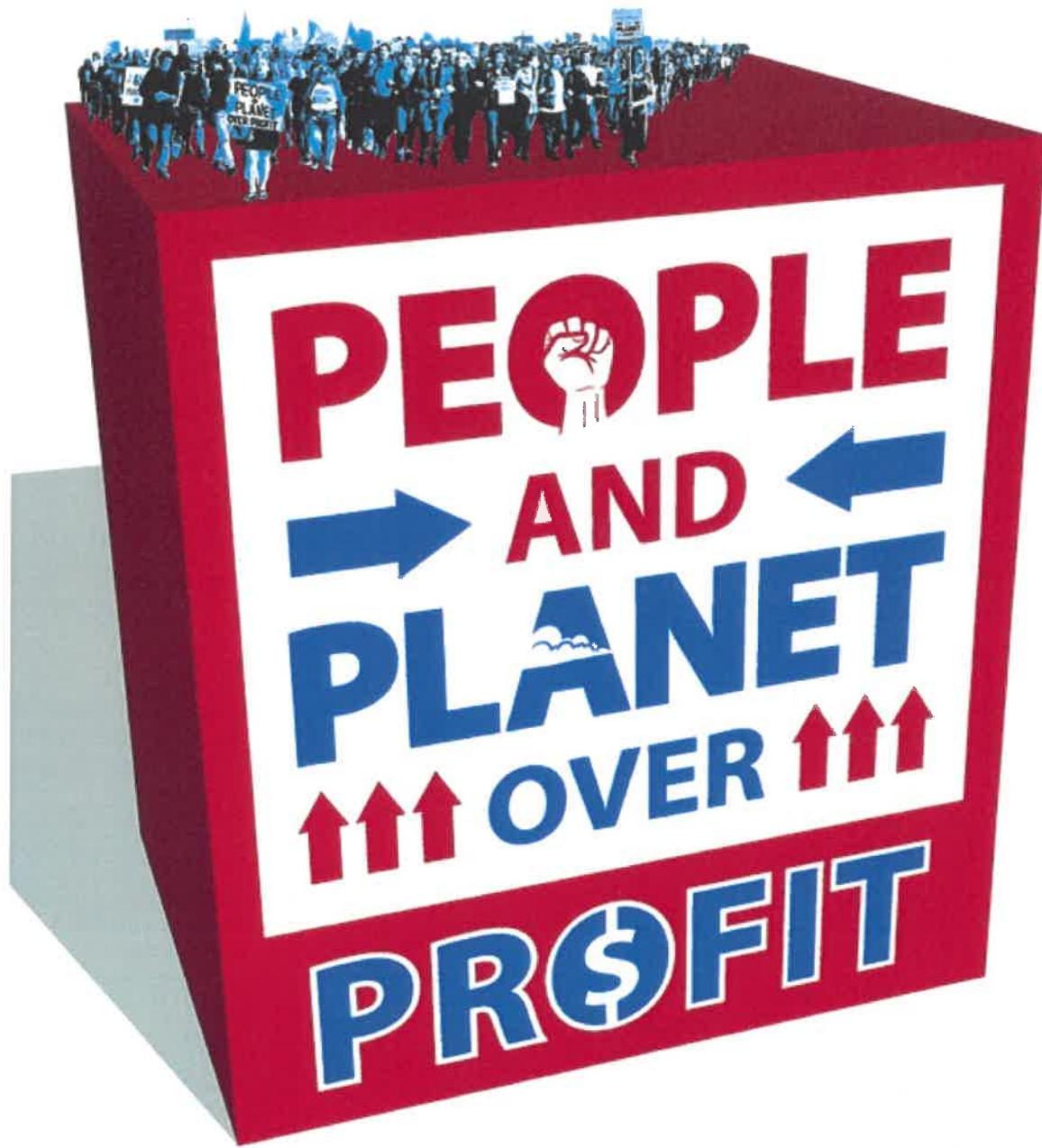
of value by this criterion, but only in healthy amounts. As applied to the struggle for human emancipation, this axiom implies that a movement for human emancipation must: 1) include all groups whose life-value is reduced under current political, economic, and cultural conditions because they are deprived of some or all of what human life requires to survive, develop and be enjoyed; 2) and work against those conditions, the ruling value systems that legitimate them, and the ruling groups that benefit from them; 3) include for the sake of new forms of resource development and use — new forms of social relationship and individual goals which enable rather than disable the development of those human differences that enrich the lives of each and all.

Oppressive practices and life-destructive goals are ruled out as necessarily disvaluable, because they are exclusive and destructive of the life-value of others, and therefore are not coherently inclusive. Thus, although the cultural practices of a racist society give expression to beliefs that are valuable to the racists who rule it, those practices are not consistent with the primary axiom of value, because they reduce the overall range of cultural expressions by impeding the free development of the culture of the oppressed group. Overcoming the racist aspect of society would create the conditions for the wider and deeper development of the culture of the formerly oppressed, while still permitting the former oppressors to develop new, non-racist forms of their own culture. Overall, society becomes more coherently inclusive of life-valuable differences as it eliminates the barriers to the satisfaction of the universal life-interest.

The project of human emancipation thus disagrees with Nietzsche that history is a never-ending series of displacements, struggles, and dominations.[13] At the same time, it does not impose an ideological, dogmatic solution on these struggles since it does not define the specific institutional forms according to which free human societies must organize themselves. It also does not subordinate the particular narratives and self-understandings of particular oppressed groups to another particular narrative falsely inflated into universal truth, or infer the shared life-interest from dubitable philosophical conceptions of human nature. As Marx said of the human essence, the shared life-interest is no abstraction inherent in each individual, it is the ensemble of conditions without which human life cannot survive and develop those general life-capacities from which all meaningful constellations of human experience and activity are assembled.

Human emancipation does not dictate from on high which particular ways of life are meaningful. Instead, it identifies, on the basis of studies of human biology, psychology, social organization, cultural systems, histories of political struggle, and through dialogues with different groups of oppressed people common demands: for the physical requirements of life, for the social and political conditions of dignified, social self-conscious agency, for the time to explore and unfold life-capacities freely.





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### III. Listening, Learning, Opening

As argued above, critical social philosophy degenerates into dogmatic ideology when it confuses a necessary but particular condition of human emancipation with the comprehensive, universal, necessary and sufficient conditions of human emancipation. To put that point in less metaphysical terms, critical social philosophy becomes ideology when it becomes closed to other voices and distinctive narratives just because they articulate their oppression in a language other than the one spoken by the critical social philosophy (which has become dogmatic). As soon as critical social philosophy ceases to listen and learn from other voices, it ceases to be open to seeing the partiality and limitations of its theoretical starting points. It then becomes incapable of self-criticism and self-transformation in light of changed circumstances or novel arguments and perspectives on key problems. Instead of exposing the strategies

by which ruling value systems impede the development of new solutions to systematic problems, it fixates on old ideas and old solutions, impeding the development of new forms of communication and organization across differences. By impeding the development of new forms of communication and organization, it prevents the development of an emergent unity in struggle against common threats to life and well-being.

Yet, might one not object that a movement for human emancipation repeats the very error that leads criticism into dogmatism, namely, defining *for* distinct groups what their real life-interests are? If group differences truly are valuable, is it not because different groups value *different* experiences and activities? And if these experiences and activities really are different from group to group, will not the requirements that must be satisfied if those experiences and activities are to be realized be different too? If the answer to these questions is yes, then it would seem that the vaunted idea of 'shared life-interest' is lost in the very effort to articulate it as *shared by different* groups. If differences are real and valuable then the interests that must be satisfied if they are to develop seem also to be different, in which case there is no shared life-interest, save what a dogmatic and ideological philosophy might impose. On the other hand, if there is a real shared life-interest then differences are merely superficial and of no deep value.

This objection raises a profoundly important danger which, if it cannot be avoided, will prove fatal to the project of rescuing critical social philosophy from dogmatism. Yet I believe that the danger can be avoided by distinguishing between universal forms of life-requirements and particular *contents* those forms can take on. For example, human beings need protein, but they do not need to eat meat. While vegetarians might regard meat eating as morally disgraceful, they should be able to tolerate meat eaters, because, although offensive to their beliefs, it is not a completely morally arbitrary choice, having real grounds in the natural history of human beings. A coherently inclusive society can embrace both without contradiction.

Likewise, human cognition and imagination require education, but both the structure of educational institutions and the way in which material is taught can vary. For example, a coherently inclusive society can contain Afro-centric schools, multi-cultural public schools, and religious schools, to the extent that all three function to enable the growth of the cognitive and imaginative capacities of the students (the meaning of 'education'). That which critical social philosophy exposes and opposes is indoctrination — programming of thought to repel perspectives that differ from the ruling perspectives as untrue because different — but not alternative practices of genuine education. If a community of people emerges all of whom can agree about the fundamental value of enabling through education the cognitive and imaginative capacities of its members, and prove that they value education by enabling their students to be articulate, intelligent, reflective, and self-critical members of society, then the particular perspectives they bring to bear on education are parts of a more coherently inclusive society.

One can extend this reasoning to the global level. If the world's remaining indigenous societies, for example, choose to value their traditional life-ways over modern techno-scientific systems, there is no reason why their educational systems should not ignore contemporary natural science, so long as community members who disagree are allowed to pursue their interests elsewhere. At the same time as the goal of globally coherent inclusion rules out preventing those who seek modern techno-scientific knowledge from attaining it, it also enables others outside the traditional community to respectfully learn from traditional life ways the value of a slower life more deeply integrated with the natural rhythms of earth, sky, and sea. In general, there is nothing uniquely valuable about any one form of expressing cognitive and imaginative capacities. Local knowledge of medicinal plants is neither

superior nor inferior to scientific medicine if it cures the ailments community members commonly face. Poetry is neither superior nor inferior to music. Being a carpenter is neither superior nor inferior to being an architect. That which makes any form of knowledge or practice valuable or disvaluable is whether its development and enjoyment contributes to or detracts from the health and sustainability of the natural field of life-support and the life and well-being of others with whom one shares a society and a planet.

The same general point applies to the values that govern the overall conduct of life. Here too critical social philosophy rooted in the idea of shared life-interest does not *impose* particular contents on anyone's life-goals, but rather demands the comprehensive satisfaction of the universal conditions of anyone's freely developing the projects through which substance and meaning is produced in their lives. It does not impose arbitrary constraints on life-projects but instead reveals an internal limitation on their legitimate content. Since any particular life-project requires the appropriation of resources from nature and society, projects must contribute back to those resources, for two reasons. Materially, it is irrational to allow patterns of life to emerge (and capitalism is an example of this pattern) which unsustainably exploit resources, i.e., which withdraw without giving back.

The future of the species is open ended, and sustainability requires thinking of one's projects (and the social patterns that emerge from the interaction of these projects) in terms of the life of the species. Otherwise, the very conditions of the survival of the species and its individual members are undermined. From this material irrationality of unsustainable resource exploitation follows a social and ethical reason to contribute back. Individual life is, as Marx argued, social.[14] We achieve whatever it is we achieve always in interaction with others, on the basis of their past and present labour. We draw on social resources in a way analogous to how we draw on natural resources. To take from others without returning anything is the paradigm form of selfish egocentrism. A society of truly selfish egocentrists could not last long as a society, and, even if it could, it would be devoid of the values that makes living in society worthwhile: love, friendship, joy at others' success, sorrow at their failures, and grief at their loss.

Again, the project of human emancipation does not impose alien demands on anyone's interests by virtue of this argument in favour of reciprocity between extraction and contribution. There can be different ways of concretely organizing reciprocity, but without it, society is not possible, and even if it were, it would hardly be worth living in, as it would be, as I argued above, devoid of the intrinsically valuable emotional relationships that elevate human life beyond mere survival and reproduction. That which critical social philosophy criticises is not different ways of expressing and enjoying life, but ways of expressing and enjoying life that undermine the natural conditions of the lives of everyone, and the social conditions required for the free pursuit of different life-projects. The critical core of the idea of human emancipation exposes the false universality in which the private, exclusionary, oppressive, and exploitative practices of privileged ruling groups cloak their power. It can engage in this criticism non-dogmatically if it does not presuppose its own truth, but regularly allows it to be exposed to refutation by stronger counter-arguments or historical changes. Here too it learns from the legacy of Marx as the critical social philosopher *par excellence*.

The project of human emancipation is not rooted in a philosophy of history whose "greatest advantage lies in being beyond history." [15] The core theoretical claim upon which it is based, that there is a shared life-interest defined by universal natural and social requirements of survival and life-capacity development and enjoyment, are subject to discussion, dialogue, and test. If there is some group of human beings somewhere who is not harmed by deprivation of basic material inputs, or by deprivation

of education, or participation in the institutions that determine the rules of collective life, then the project of human emancipation would be forced to reconsider the inclusion in the set of human life-requirements of the resource or practice which that group of humans seemed happily to do without. Human life-requirements are anchored in the fact that we are not invulnerable beings, but require inputs from nature and relationships with others if we are to survive and flourish. But knowledge of these requirements is not in-born with us, but requires learning, and since there are many different cultures and identities within the human species, this learning requires learning about others as much as about ourselves.

The same openness to disconfirmation obtains at the level of the criticism of existing society on the basis of which critical social philosophy proposes its concrete projects for human emancipation. If it can be shown that the capitalist money-value system is compatible with comprehensive and universal satisfaction of everyone's life-interest, that it can reproduce itself without systematically impoverishing people and despoiling the planet, if it can demonstrate that it can organize labour markets so as to make meaningful work available to everyone, and generate the conditions for peace, within and between societies and cultures, then the arguments that critical social philosophy makes against it would have to be dropped. The arguments would have to drop, however, just in case the counter-arguments were shown to be true. Thus we return to the all important theme of the relationship between philosophy, critical social philosophy, and truth.

What matters most to a genuinely critical social philosophy oriented by the goal of advancing the project of human emancipation is the truth of the moral claims that orient it. If it is not true that human beings are liable to objective harm when they are deprived of certain resources and relationships, if it is not true that a good society is coherently inclusive of different identities and life-projects, if it is not true that the quality of life is an essential object of care and concern for all people, then none of the particular political prescriptions for change critical social philosophy makes are of any importance, because life would be of no importance. While I cannot establish with knock-down certainty the truth of these principles here, human history and activity provide strong evidence in their favour.[16] Across history we can observe multiple forms of struggle over access to the natural resources required to live. We see multiple struggles in all manner of different cultures for democracy.

Within politically democratic societies we observe struggles to ensure that the democratic principle is consistently upheld against the countervailing forces of economic power and status hierarchy. We also observe struggles to extend the democratic principle into the governance of all major social institutions, and especially economic institutions. We also observe a tremendous variety of struggles against all manner of invidious hierarchies that impede different groups from fully participating in those social institutions in which our cognitive and imaginative and practical-creative capacities are developed. If human beings were *nothing but culturally constructed differences*, or worse, *genetically determined meat* with no moral significance, it would be difficult to explain the common goals of struggle observable across cultures. Indeed, it would be difficult to explain struggles that go beyond demands for anything more than survival and reproduction.

I believe that the historical record demonstrates far more, but in order to be true to the principles of critical social philosophy I have defended, I leave it to each reader to explore that record of struggle, and draw their own honest conclusions. Ultimately, philosophy depends upon people's capacity to honestly accept the truth, even if it contradicts their pre-reflective beliefs, the claims of tradition, or the demands of power. Ultimately, philosophy is incompatible with a politically motivated skepticism which pretends to rigour but is really designed to impede social change. One can split statistical hairs about

the modelling of global warming, for example, but the ice caps continue to melt, polar bear habitats continue to shrink, the life ways of First Nations people around the Arctic region are threatened, sea levels continue to rise. The philosophical commitment to truth demands criticism of any social conditions in which the life-blind interests of class or ruling status group power can overrule the evident and the observable. That same commitment to truth, however, also urges humility and openness in the development of social alternatives. Social criticism does not aim at proving itself right for the sake of proving others wrong — that is the epistemic hallmark of dogmatic ideology. Its goal is to contribute constructively to human emancipation. Like the development of human understanding and creativity, the project of human emancipation is open ended. Radicality should not be confused with impatience.



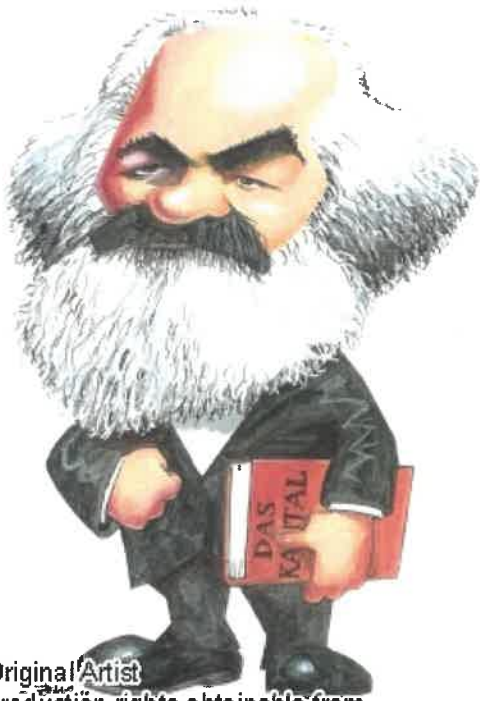
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- [16] See Jeff Noonan, *Democratic Society and Human Needs*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2006; Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*.



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*[Thank you indeed Jeff for this much needed essay]*

Jeff Noonan is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. His most recent book is *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, (McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012. More of his work can be found at his website: <http://www.jeffnoonan.org> (<http://www.jeffnoonan.org/>)

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**JUNE 5, 2012 JUNE 5, 2012 SANJAY PERERA # CAPITALIST LIFE CRISIS, # CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH, # CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE, # CRITICAL SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY, # CRITIQUE, # DOGMATISM, # HEGEL, # HUMAN EMANCIPATION, # IDEOLOGY, # JEFF NOONAN, # LIFE-COHERENT, # LIFE-VALUE, # MARX, # MARXIAN INTERPRETATION, # MARXIST DIALECTICS, # NATURAL LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEMS, # POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, # REVOLUTION**

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## Philosophers for Change

### The spiritual crisis of capitalist civilization

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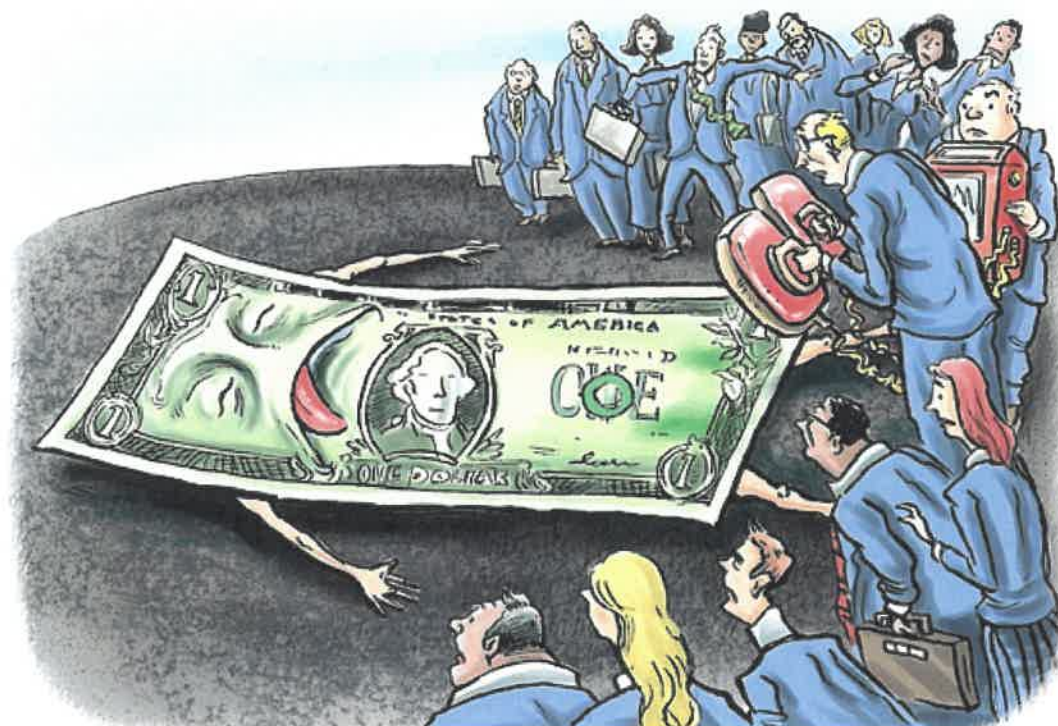
by Jeff Noonan

Human beings are integrally natural and social creatures, dependent upon natural life-support systems for their physical existence and socio-cultural life-development systems for the nurturing and realization of their emotional, cognitive, and practical-creative capacities. Societies whose developmental dynamics become alienated from their natural conditions of existence face inevitable doom. Oblivious to the ways in which their reproductive dynamics undermining the physical foundations of social life, they collapse the very basis upon which their institutions and value systems depend. Let us say that any society which unsustainably converts scarce natural resources into tokens of social power (as, for example, capitalism converts natural systems and elements into money) faces a material crisis of life-reproduction. The manifold environmental crises unleashed by capitalism, crises which persist even in the midst of on-going economic stagnation, are evidence that capitalism will ultimately face a problem of material life-reproduction. Yet, this material crisis is not the only crisis that capitalist civilization



faces. Since human beings require not only life, but meaningful, purposive life, societies can also fall into what I will call spiritual crises of life-development.

Spiritual crises arise when the ruling value system and institutional structure of a society becomes alienated from citizens' need to feel that they belong to a socio-cultural whole which values their contributions to its reproduction and development. More precisely, spiritual crises arise when the ruling value system and institutional structure of a society *actively alienate* citizens by treating them as mere tools of its material reproduction. When people are treated as mere tools of system-reproduction, their moral being as intrinsically life-valuable centres of experience, action, and interaction, cognizant of the social conditions of their freedom and well-being, and desirous of enhancing the social foundations of their individuality, are attacked. In these alienated circumstances social problems are presented to the populace as technical problems to be solved by political and economic experts working in the service of the established asymmetries of wealth and power. Spiritual crises thus arise when ruling classes attempt to solve a material crisis of social reproduction by treating subaltern groups not as participating members of a social whole, but as passive objects whose life-interests must be sacrificed to the health of the system understood as a reified whole indifferent to the life-requirements of the people who live under it.



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It is in a moment of spiritual crisis that the material reality of class privilege and power becomes apparent to the subaltern citizens. Demonized and excluded from the social conversation about solutions to problems which affect their life-horizons most decisively, they cannot but realize that “we” are not all in the same boat. Instead, they come to see that the boat is going to be kept afloat by pitching as many of them as necessary overboard. The spiritual crisis is just this realization on the part of the subaltern that their lives are not regarded as intrinsically valuable by the ruling class, but that they are fungible and expendable tools of system and privilege reproduction. A spiritual crisis is thus very much of this world. It has nothing to do with our relationship to a transcendent otherworld but rather to the meaning, purpose, and value of the institutions through which our lives as socially self-conscious agents



are led. I will argue that once a society has fallen into spiritual crisis, as I will contend that capitalism has, it has ceased to function as a civilization, i.e., as a cultivator of higher human capacity to think of ourselves as members of wholes that are greater than our abstract individuality which provide direction, purpose, and meaning to our transitory existence on the planet. Spiritual crises can only be resolved by the construction of a new form of civilization through political practices which marshal the democratic energy and creativity of the subaltern groups spurned by the prevailing ruling class.

Let me develop this argument in three steps. In the first, I will unpack fully the idea of spiritual crisis, drawing on Hegel's conception of Spirit to emphasise the this-worldly, social nature of spiritual crisis. In the second, I will support the philosophical arguments of the first by examining the self-understanding of contemporary democratic resistance movements. As will become clear, movements like the Arab Spring, or Occupy Wall Street, or Syriza are not simply trying to change economic or political institutions. They are reacting not only to declining living standards, but more equally to the expulsion of their members from participation in the political and social life of the nation. Another way of putting this point is to say that they are reacting to the death of democracy as the idea of a social whole whose members solve their shared problems together. In the concluding section I will argue that the only solution to the spiritual crisis of capitalism is success in the positive, constructive program of these oppositional movements.



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## I: Spirit, Sociality, and the Value of Felt Belonging

Hegel defines Spirit as a definite form of social relationship between human beings. Spirit is "this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousness, which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'." [1] Spirit is the object of social self-consciousness. Social self-consciousness is consciousness of the other not as a piece of meat or a mammal, but a being like oneself, one defined by its proper goals, possibilities, and capacities

for free activity. When we relate to each other in this way, we value ourselves and one another as intrinsically valuable centres of experience and activity. Spirit is thus the name of that in social relationships which cannot be reduced to the materiality of the elements of life or the physicality of the objects of biological need, that in them which satisfies a socio-cultural need for shared meaning, purpose, and felt belonging which elevate human existence above the biological imperative to survive and reproduce. Spirit does not refer to transcendent substance, a heavenly otherworld of gods, grace, and salvation, but to that which makes this earthly world worthwhile. That which makes earthly, mortal life worthwhile is the contributions each person can make to the building of communities that sustain and enable the lives and capacities of others, in the present and into the future. H.S. Harris brings out the social meaning of “spirit” clearly in his epic commentary on the *Phenomenology*. Spirit, he comments, “is the passive medium for all our self-positing efforts...the supposedly ‘supersensible’ world is the real present world that we live in;...‘the spirit’ is the real substantiality of our sense-experience.”[2] This explanation requires further unpacking if the importance of Hegel’s conception of spirit for understanding the crisis of capitalist civilization is to be properly grasped.

When Harris says that spirit is the real substantiality of our sense-experience, he means by “real” not “physically fundamental” but “constitutive of the meaning of the object of human sense experience.” *Human* experience of the world is not that of mere environmental surrounding or elemental forces, but rather of meaningful natural and social objects. Marx understood this point well. In a capitalist society the senses are degraded to instruments of money-value seeking, capable of grasping things only in so far as they are commodities. A socialist world would emancipate “all human senses and qualities... because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, *human*. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object – an object made by man for man.... [The senses] relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man.”[3] The true reality of things is not exhausted by their elemental properties, but must be completed by a grasp of their life-value for human beings. In other words, the things of the world impact us emotionally and aesthetically, they are grasped as helps or hindrances to our projects, they feel congenial or threatening, they elicit our love or our hatred. An orange is not simply a source of Vitamin C, it is also “delicious” or a “treat” or a “reward” for hard work. The physical and the symbolic are united in human sense and cognition. The real substantiality of the world, that which we grasp when we experience it through *human* senses, is the world as the natural and social contexts in which we try to realize our capacities and find fulfilment as creative, socially self-conscious individuals.

That which is true of the relationship between human senses and objects in general is especially true when the object of the senses is another human being. The real substantiality of the *human* being is neither the physical elements that compose his or her body nor the genetic code that gives human form and possibility to that body, but his or her meaningful relationships to others in narrower or wider circles of association: father, brother, friend, lover, co-citizen, fellow human being. Each of these relationships contains possibilities for fulfillment, but also dangers of disappointment. There is no option but to seek fulfillment through these relationships, since human life in its origins and in its conditions of life-valuable development is social. The general sociality of human life does not entail that any particular instance of social relationship will satisfy the life-requirements that draw people into it. If we treat society in general as the condition of *human* life-capacity development, then its life-value is determined by the extent to which its institutions and ruling value system recognise and comprehensively and universally satisfy its members’ socio-cultural life-requirements. Our socio-cultural life-requirements are those relationships and institutions through which our social self-conscious agency, our capacity to define ourselves as individuals in ways that support rather than



destroy the fields of cooperative interaction upon which we depend, is developed. The life-value of social institutions and relationships as the matrix within which meaningful lives become possible is their real substantiality, their spiritual nature.[4]



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The life-value of social institutions and relationships is distinct from the forms of power exercised within them. Economic institutions are life-valuable when they produce and distribute scarce life-goods and provide opportunities for contributing to the well-being of others through productive labour. Political institutions are life-valuable when they provide opportunities for public deliberation about matters of shared concern and rules for collective decision making binding on all members of the association. In both cases, individuals are recognised as in a shared need of the life-goods these institutions provide, and social life as a whole is regarded as a series of cooperative interactions governed by the goal of providing those shared life-goods in as universal and comprehensive a form as possible. The shared interest in cooperative effort to provide life-goods does not mean that there is a social interest apart from the interlinked individual interests. The spirit of society is not a reified whole apart which may sacrifice the good of individuals to preserve itself. "The individual is not reducible to, but grounded on, this social life-host for self-articulation to be possible," McMurtry explains. "The individual achieves individuality by expressing this social life-ground in some way particular to personal capacity and choice." [5] The spirit of society is an emergent property of relationships between individuals whose social interactions are governed by the goal of making a meaningful contribution to the whole, and not simply his or her own survival and pleasure as an abstract desire-machine.

Individuals are made the sacrificial victims of reified powers not when society is understood as the ground and basis of individual self-development, but rather when all social action is reduced to competitive zero sum games. Institutions are no longer recognised as the expression of a truly collective project, but as distributors of power, with the winners entitled to rule over the losers. Spiritual crisis can be avoided so long as the losers regard the game as fair. As soon as the real class structure that organizes the game becomes apparent, spiritual crisis sets in. The real class structure becomes apparent whenever ruling classes need to act decisively to preserve and extend their rule. The fictitious nature of the existing “we” becomes apparent when it bifurcates into the “we” that decides and the “we” that is forced to obey the decision without having had any role in making it.

Well-governed societies not only ensure that people are able to survive and (if they choose) reproduce, they elicit, encourage, and ensure the participation of their members in the governance of all its major social institutions. In so doing, they ensure that human beings live life as social self-conscious agents, concerned as much about the integrity of those social institutions and the well-being of all who live within them as their own good as individuals. When individuals feel as though they belong to a whole which needs and values their participation and contribution, they develop the corresponding desire to so contribute. When this felt belonging is absent, individuals become alienated from the social whole and other people. Emile Durkheim called this feeling of alienation from the social whole, “anomie,” and he traced it to a division of labour which failed to recognise individual talents, interests, and goals.[6] Life in such conditions is reduced to the repetition of meaningless tasks with no shared, substantial value set to provide purpose. When even those meaningless but remunerative tasks are not available to people, when, because of a crisis of material reproduction people can find no way to contribute to society because there is not even pointless work available, and when peoples’ efforts to contribute to solutions are spurned by the ruling class, at that point society has ceased to deserve the allegiance of its members. A spiritual crisis can only be solved, therefore, by the constitution of a new “we” formed of the dispossessed, the despised, the expelled, and their supporters. The identity of the new “we” emerges from the consciousness of the alienation of each of its members from the prevailing social institutions and value system. It overcomes this alienation not through demands for inclusion in a decadent civilization, but from collective efforts to invent a new ascendant world anchored by the goal of satisfying those life-values the dying world ignores.



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## II: The Felt Need to Contribute and the Spiritual Crisis of Capitalism

Among the most ancient and basic moral dispositions of human beings is the sense of reciprocity. Chirot and McCauley explain that "the most primitive [i.e., basic and universal] sense of fairness is the reciprocity principle. If someone helps...you, then you owe that person help." [7] This principle can be extended to the institutions and ruling value systems through and within which social life is organized and out of which the spiritual dimension of social life emerges. Individuals identify with those institutions and value systems that demonstrably satisfy their natural and socio-cultural life-requirements, enabling them to become contributing, socially self-conscious agents. In such contexts, people connect their private good with the good of the institutions and value systems that enable them to pursue their projects. To contribute back to the good of those institutions and value systems is recognised as an essential component of the individual's own good. The result is an expanded sense of self and what is good for it. Spiritual crisis compromises this expanded sense of self because it severs the sense of felt belonging out of which the drive to contribute grows. The sense of felt belonging is severed because the institutions and ruling value systems not only cease to satisfy important social and natural life-requirements, they refuse the contributions to constructive solutions that affected individuals are willing to make. Instead of getting back from society what the principle of reciprocity would encourage people to expect — a welcome acknowledgement of their willingness to help — their offers are spurned, their political demands demonized, their demonstrations attacked by the police.



Nevertheless, because human beings are integrally social and natural beings, because we require felt belonging as well as physical nourishment to live and develop as human beings, the excluded and oppressed do not fester in spiritual crisis, but seek to build new communities and solidarities that will satisfy their unmet socio-cultural life-requirements. Even a brief survey of the manifestos and principles of solidarity and programs that democratic opposition groups around the world have written over the past 5 years turns up two consistent themes: frustration at the violation of the principle of reciprocity by the ruling class and the institutions it controls, and the demand for a new democratic ethos rooted in solidaristic and mutualistic relationships between people. In other words, movements like Occupy and the Arab Spring were not simply responding to a material crisis of social reproduction, they were equally responding to a spiritual crisis of the collapse of the possibility of felt belonging in the societies against which they mobilized. I will support this interpretation by examining key elements of some of the more important declarations and manifestos.

Next, I will begin with the movement that garnered the most attention in the global north, the Occupy Movement. Occupy was inspired by the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in Egypt, but focussed its attention on the massive and increasing inequality produced by three decades of neo-liberal economic policy. It began at the epicentre of neo-liberalism, Wall Street, home to the banks who were the primary beneficiaries of these policies.[8] In their declaration of principles, the occupiers asserted that “on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011,... we as individuals rose up against *political disenfranchisement* and social and economic injustice. We spoke out, resisted, and successfully occupied Wall Street... *constituting ourselves* as autonomous political beings engaged in non-violent civil disobedience and *building solidarity based on mutual respect, acceptance, and love.*” [emphases added].[9] The principles clearly articulate both moments of the spiritual crisis: expression of the pain of being rejected by the institutions of existing society, constructive activity to build a new community of felt belonging amongst the rejected. These themes recur again and again, across the globe.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/crisis11.jpg>)

Amongst the many groups inspired by Occupy Wall Street were the students of Quebec, more than 100

000 of whom, in the winter and spring of 2012, staged the largest and longest student strike in Canadian history. Not only did they strike, they mobilised the union movement and a broad cross-section of Quebecois in support. Their determination resulted in the defeat of the Liberal government and victory for their primary demand — the rescinding of a large tuition hike. It was the most significant and the most successful left-wing mobilisation in Canada in more than two decades. The most militant wing of the leadership of the movement was the *Coalition Large de l'Association pour une Solidarite Syndicale Etudiante*, or CLASSE (Large Coalition of the Association for Union and Student Solidarity). While the immediate demands of the movement were monetary and defensive — repeal of the threatened tuition hike — the underlying principles were positive, constructive, and oriented towards fundamental solutions to the pervasive spiritual crisis of capitalism, evidenced in this instance by the attempt of the government to impose the tuition hike against the students' declared democratic, economic, and educational interests. Their manifesto thus declares that "*direct democracy* should be experienced every moment of every day. *Our own voices* ought to be heard in assemblies, in schools, at work, in our neighbourhoods...Our view is that truly democratic decisions arise from *a shared space*, where women and men *are valued*. As equals, in these spaces, women and men can work together to build a society that is dedicated to the *public good*." [emphases added].[10] The expressed need to reclaim democratic power from the financial-corporate elite whose narrow private interests have undermined public institutions (parliaments, legislatures) resonates strongly across the Atlantic, in a variety of anti-austerity, pro-democracy movements.

Let me next begin with the Spanish group Real Democracy Now. Their platform contends that "it is necessary to build a political discourse capable of *rebuilding the social fabric* systematically rendered vulnerable through years of lies and corruption. *We citizens have lost respect* for the majoritarian political parties, but this is not the same as losing our critical faculties. On the contrary, we do not fear politics, to stand up and speak is politics....To seek alternatives of *citizen participation* is politics...we insist that citizens here make up a *transgenerational movement* condemned by an *intolerable loss of participation* in the political decisions that shape their daily lives and their future." [emphases added] [11] The crisis in their view is thus not only the scourge of unemployment (20 % overall, 50 % amongst youth) but the refusal of the Spanish state to allow them to participate as socially self-conscious agents in the political decisions that will shape their future. Excluded from the prevailing institutional distribution of power, they have acted to reconstitute themselves as a new community of struggle.



(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/crisis12.jpg>)

As dire a situation as Spain finds itself in, the problems in Greece are more severe. Here too one finds replicated the same dialectic of an elite acting to exclude those most affected by the crisis from participating in its solution and the excluded responding by reconstituting themselves as an emergent democratic public bent on creating new social relations and a new value system. The coalition of the far left Syriza's program thus argues that "for us, program means a set of values, principles, straight-out orientations, and diligent positions. Our program is based on the values of solidarity, freedom, equality, and environmental responsibility." [12] These normative bases also support the program of the far left opposition in Germany, centre of the neo-liberal financial assault upon Greece. In a speech to the Bundestag, *Die Linke's* co-leader, Sahra Wagenknecht, denounced the European Fiscal Pact for being antithetical to the core values upon which a united Europe was grounded: "Europe, may I remind you, was once supposed to be a project for peace, democracy, and social welfare, a lesson from the centuries of brutal war and a conscious alternative to crude capitalism that brought forth the bloody fascist dictatorships. To be true to its heirs, Europe must embrace a new humanism as a stronghold of human dignity and social justice, Richard von Wissecker once said." [13] These values are no longer compatible with the conditions of renewed profitability required by contemporary capitalism. In the conflict between the conditions for the solution of the reproductive crisis of the capitalist economy and the spiritual crisis of capitalist civilization, the values that once defined the latter are abandoned. The only alternative for those who demand not only life as a paid servant of capital but a meaningful life in unity with others is to construct a new civilization. As Tommaso Fatori observes, "democracy is in death agony and we are witnessing post-democratic processes taking over at the national and supranational level. EU leaders have further concentrated decision-making power on public and fiscal policies in the hands of oligarchical governments, technocrats, and the European Central Bank, which are subject to the dictates of the financial markets" [14] This oligarchy and the reified financial power it serves have demonized the capacities of the majority of the population to contribute usefully to a solution. Once elites openly repudiate the capacity of the masses to contribute usefully to the governance of social life, democracy truly is, as Fatori argues, in its death-throes.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, in North Africa, the peoples of Europe and North America are reminded that democracy is not in essence a Potemkin Village papering over a collapsed civilization but a still-potent mobilizer of civic energy and hope. While the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have, for the moment, been captured by the better organized Islamist organizations, and the situations in Libya and, more so, Syria, are unsettled (and in many respects unsettling): the positive lesson that people working together can overturn violent dictatorship has not been destroyed. Mahmood Mamdani sums up the achievement of the young revolutionaries of Tahrir Square movingly: "The significance of Egypt is three-fold: First is the moral force of non-violence of the many, not just the few...Second, non-violence of the multitude makes possible a new politics of inclusion. And finally, it makes possible a different sense of self-worth. Unlike violence, non-violence does not just resist and exclude. It also embraces and includes." [15] It is precisely the need for social relationships that embrace and include that binds together the mostly young activists of Montreal, New York, Madrid, Athens, and Cairo. And the embryonic forms of new social relationships their struggles have activated at the same time cultivate, as Mamdani says, a new sense of self-worth. Their self-worth is rooted in the multiplicity of relationships they form with one another — positive, mutually affirming, solidaristic, loving — in contrast to the bank balances and childish toys that inflate the egos of the one percenters. The valorization of things over people and egos over relationships is another sign of the crisis of capitalist civilization. Recovery, at both the material and the spiritual level, can only be achieved in a new democratic socialist world.





(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/crisis7.jpg>)

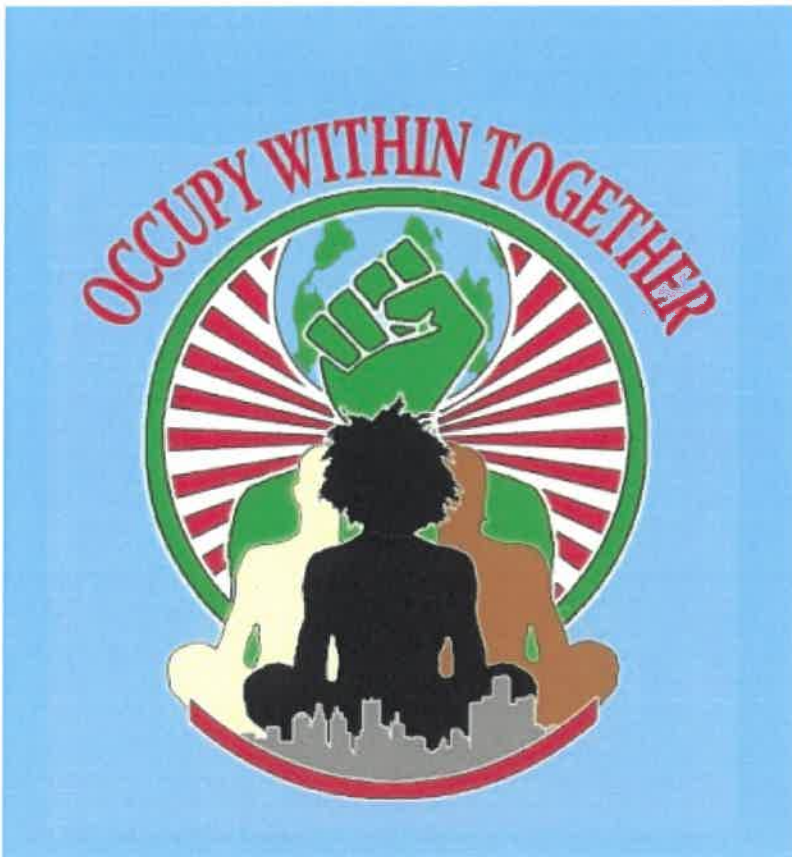
### III: From Nostalgia to Hope: Creativity and Democratic Socialism

With the exception of the program of Syriza, the documents I have cited are not detailed plans for the construction of a new society. Indeed, most do not name or criticise capitalism in any specific way. They read more like laments for a world that has lost its way and abandoned the generic values that it once claimed to stand for — democracy, equality, justice, inclusion — and which made people feel as if they were part of a whole that provided meaning to their individual lives. Although there is lament for what has passed, there is also hope that solidarity and mutual care can rebuild social relations, that a new, morally substantial “we” can be constructed. Unlike the austerity programs being imposed upon them, the people who wrote these documents have confidence in the collective capacity of members of the movements to understand and resolve the challenges that face them. The spirit of these movements is not rooted in nostalgia for a golden age, but in hope for a future social order whose institutions and ruling value system meet the unmet material and socio-cultural life-requirements of its members.



The success of such a project lies in the degree to which peoples' self-understandings, their goals, and their purposes can overcome the narrow, acquisitive, competitive ego-centrism of capitalist society. Writing in 1969, in the midst of the last major global system crisis, Marcuse argued that "the Form of freedom is not merely self-determination and self-realization, but rather the determination of goals which enhance, protect, and unite life on earth." [16] A free society is not only a society in which people's individual lives are functions of their choices, it is, more importantly, a society in which those choices steer projects that sustain and develop the life-supportive natural and social worlds without which there can be neither human organisms nor free social self-conscious agents. Individual freedom requires strong social bonds, for outside of them not only can we not produce the range of goods our complex biological nature requires, we cannot establish the mutual relationships and caring connections upon which our own sense of meaning and purposive existence depend.

Implied but unexpressed in Marcuse's understanding of the relationship between individual freedom and life-supportive projects is what McMurtry calls the human ecology of vocation. As an organism can only survive in its proper ecosystem, so too a human being can only find purpose in a meaning-supportive social world. The human ecology of vocation exists wherever "each person does what he or she can that is of life-value to others and of life-interest to self. For none to shirk the duty of giving back in to what enables the humanity of each... is the human ordering of social justice." [17] To be obliged to give back to the social substance that sustains and enables is a "burden" only in a deranged mindset ignorant of its real conditions of existence. In a healthy, life-grounded self-understanding, to give back is not only rational (for without contribution back, the common stock of natural and social resources will eventually be used up completely) but the meaning-enabling goal of every life worth living. This contribution back to the common wealth of life-sustaining and life-developing natural and social wealth is the good of each individual.



([https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com](https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/occupy3.jpg)

[/2012/10/occupy3.jpg](#))

What, more precisely, does it mean to say that the good of each *individual* is constituted by the contributions he or she makes back to *society*? According to the ruling value system of capitalism, the good of each is identified with consumer demand, such that a good life is a life in which as many desires as possible are satisfied. Making contributions back to the social whole is not a constitutive element of the good of individuals, but is typically regarded as exceptional — morally laudatory if it follows from individual choice, but not a necessary element of a good life. Contrary to what a supporter of the capitalist value system would argue, the conception of the good for individuals I defend does not impose obligations to contribute on individuals as burdens external to people's own projects. Rather, it understands a good society as one which cultivates in citizens a *felt need* to contribute, and, more importantly, utilises its resources to ensure that there are multiple and varied real opportunities for people to individuate themselves in ways that are satisfying to the person and life-valuable to others.

The problem with contemporary capitalist society is not that people do not want to live their lives in ways that are valuable for others and the social whole, it is that the primary way in which we make our individual contributions to the social whole — through paid labour — is typically meaningless to self and often productive of junk commodities that good lives do not really require, but which are consumed mechanically as substitute satisfactions. Worse, when people actually organize to try to contribute as a collective democratic agent, they are ignored or attacked, relative to the strength of the movement. Hence, they are doubly cut off from making the sorts of active, voluntary contributions to society that their own experience of themselves confirms are real, constitutive components of a human good life as a social self-agent.



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This understanding of individual good as life-valuable contributions to the social and natural whole that supports and enables life-capacity development animates the movements I have examined. Animating the movements and linking them at the level of principle across the different social spaces in which they have erupted is a shared commitment to reconstituting society as a collective democratic project, as the co-creation of all of its members. Democracy is not reduced in their vision to periodic elections of aloof, technocratic program managers or tools of financial markets, but a set of new social relations in which collective wealth is utilised for the comprehensive and universal satisfaction of real life-requirements. Universal and comprehensive satisfaction of real natural and socio-cultural life-requirements are the material condition for the development of free individuality which the capitalist value system claims to value in theory but undermines by the reality of unemployment, precarious and meaningless wage labour, and soulless consumer culture. Real individuality requires collective commitment to instituted forms of life-requirements satisfaction. As Baruchello and Johnstone rightly argue, “we cannot live, not to mention prosper, without nourishing food, shelter, and several hours of sleep... Upon such needs and their prolonged and secure satisfaction rests everything else that may be regarded as valuable: art, sport, conversation, commerce, scientific research, sexual experimentation, political activism, philosophical meditation, etc.”[18] The spiritual life of society, its being a whole that people identify with and feel affirmed and elevated by, is an outgrowth of success in this foundational material-social process.

That the comprehensive and universal satisfaction of life-requirements requires institutionalized forms of coordinating individual activity, planning, and the governance of economic life by explicit social goals does not mean that the solution to the spiritual crisis of capitalism is bureaucratic state control over all facets of life. On the contrary, since the spiritual crisis of capitalism is identical to the expulsion of the democratic energies of ordinary citizens from the centre of collective life, the solution can only be re-constitution of the social through democratic practice. As Jacques Ranciere argues, “democracy, far from being the form of life of individuals devoted to their private pleasures, is a process of struggle against this privatization [and the] ... two-fold domination of the oligarchy in the state and in society.”[19] Democracy is the practice of publically and collectively securing the universal conditions of meaningful and enjoyable and life-valuable development of human sentient, cognitive, imaginative, and practical capacities. *Socialist* democracy is the extension of this practice of public and collective life-security to the governance of economic life. It is animated not by a desire to control form above and outside the choices that guide individual life-projects. Rather, as Marx and Engels wrote more than 150 years ago, in the midst of an earlier global crisis, it is animated by the principle that a good society is one in which “the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all.”[20] Under that umbrella principle all manner of institutional experiments are possible. Socialism, we could say, can be defined by workers’ control or democratic economic planning or anything else you like, socialism itself is the emergent response and solution to the environmental, economic, socio-cultural, and spiritual crises of capitalist society, in the concretely different shapes they take on in different socio-historical contexts.



Even if you're the president of a corporation,  
you're still just the president of a corporation.

(<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/corp1-1.jpg>)

#### End notes:

[1] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1977, p. 110.

[2] H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder: Volume One: The Pilgrimage of Reason*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 197, p. 335.

[3] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 3, 1843-1844*, (New York: International Publishers), 1975, p. 300.

[4] For present purposes the important point about socio-cultural life-requirements is just their function as conditions of the development of properly human forms of action. Elaborating on the content of the different life-requirements would take me too far beyond the aim of this essay, which is not to define life-requirements, but to explore the spiritual crisis of capitalist civilization. I provide detailed accounts of the content of the set of socio-cultural life-requirements and defend the claim that these are objective, cross-cultural requirements of human life in Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012.

[5] John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, (London: Pluto Press), 1999, p. 89.

[6] Emile Durkheim, *Selected Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1972, pp. 173-188.

[7] Daniel Chirot and Clark MacCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All?*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ) 2006, p.53.

[8] I cannot provide an overview and explanation of neo-liberal policy here. It arose as a response to the economic crisis of the early to mid-1970's, and sought to restore profitability to the system by reducing



real wages, through attacks on labour, reducing the tax 'burden' on business and the wealthy, as well as through increasing the mobility of capital so that it could seek out those social conditions most conducive to profitable investment. For a more detailed history and critique see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2005.

[9] Occupy Wall Street, Principles of Solidarity, <http://www.nycga.net/resources/principles-of-solidarity/> (<http://www.nycga.net/resources/principles-of-solidarity/>) (accessed, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

[10] CLASSE Manifesto, <http://occupywallstreet.org/article/share-our-future-classe-manifesto/> (<http://occupywallstreet.org/article/share-our-future-classe-manifesto/>) (accessed, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

[11] Jerome Roos, "Manifesto — Spain's Real Democracy Now! <http://roarmag.org/2011/05/m-15-manifesto-real-democracy-now-spanish-revolution-protests/> (<http://roarmag.org/2011/05/m-15-manifesto-real-democracy-now-spanish-revolution-protests/>) (accessed, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

[12] "The Economic Program of SYRIZA-EKM", *The Bullet*, No. 653. <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/653.php> (<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/653.php>) (accessed, Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

[13] Sahra Wagenknecht, "The Euro Crisis and the European Fiscal Pact," *The Bullet*, No. 663. <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/663.php> (<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/663.php>) (accessed, Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

[14] Tommaso Fatori, "Joining Forces for Another Europe," *The Bullet*, No. 707. <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/707.php> (<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/707.php>) (accessed, October 6th, 2012).

[15] Mahmood Mamdani, "An African Reflection on Tahrir Square," *African Awakening: the Emerging Revolutions*, (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press), 2012, p. 209.

[16] Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press), 1969, p. 46.

[17] John McMurtry, "Human Rights versus Corporate Rights: Life Value, the Civil Commons and Social Justice," *Studies in Social Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2011, p. 35.

[18] Giorgio Baruchello and Rachel Lorna Johnstone, "Rights and Value: Construing the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as Civil Commons." *Studies in Social Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2011, p. 96.

[19] Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*, (London: Verso), 2006, p. 55.

[20] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers), 1986, p. 54.





"Intriguing theory, Dr. Kleinhertz,  
but the fact that the Universe is  
expanding doesn't necessarily  
mean that God is a capitalist."

[/2012/10/fic1-1.jpg](https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com) (<https://philoforchange.files.wordpress.com>

[Thank you Jeff for this groundbreaking piece]

Jeff Noonan is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. His most recent book is *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, (2012). More of his work can be found at his website: <http://www.jeffnoonan.org> (<http://www.jeffnoonan.org>)

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