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Use Value, Life Value, and the Future of Socialism

Jeff Noonan

The paper argues that the future of socialism depends upon the category of use value being grounded in a wider and deeper conception of life value. Only as such can it serve as the regulating principle of a future democratic socialist society. Life value is anchored in an understanding of the human life's space-time continuum understood as a continuum of life requirements. The multiple life crises regularly generated by capitalism are crises of its incapacity to adequately satisfy these life requirements. The practical conclusion is that a democratic socialist economy must prioritize the production not of use values as such, but only of those use values that also have life value.

Key Words: Use Value, Life Value, Capacities, Life Requirements, Socialism

In a recent interview Walden Bello argues that “orthodox economics has long ceased to be of any help in understanding the crisis . . . From the progressive perspective, what we are seeing is the intensification of one of the central crises or contradictions of global capitalism: the crisis of overproduction, also known as overaccumulation or overcapacity. This is the tendency of capitalism to build up, in the context of heightened capitalist competition, tremendous productive capacity that outruns the population's capacity to consume owing to income inequalities that limit popular purchasing power” (Bello 2009, 1). On one level Bello is correct, but by speaking in aggregate terms like “overaccumulation” and “underconsumption” without specifying what is overaccumulated and what is underconsumed, Bello's own analysis replicates a key limitation of orthodox economic thought.

Let us assume that a more egalitarian distribution of income is achieved. Will this new purchasing power be spent on SUVs, Xboxes, pesticides, or alligator shoes? The problem of disaggregating demand is not a problem in neoclassical economics because it assumes, from a microeconomic perspective, that the satisfaction of consumer demand is always rational regardless of its content (see Brown 2008, 61–9). Likewise, disaggregation at the macroeconomic level is also irrelevant to a measure of economic health like gross domestic product. So long as GDP is rising, it does not matter whether the increase is due to the production of plutonium or pajamas nor does it matter how that income is distributed. A rising GDP is always good in neoclassical economics, and a falling GDP is always bad (Sen 1999, 290–2).

A socialist critique and alternative to neoclassical economics—especially one concerned, as any must be today, with the relationship between the natural environment and human economic systems—requires a normative foundation capable of disclosing what these aggregate terms conceal. What they conceal is the material irrationality of capitalism, by which I mean that capitalist money value (which is what the aggregate terms actually measure) is alienated from the fundamental bases of natural life support and social life development upon which it ultimately depends. Given this alienation, the system, its defenders, and its metrics of economic health are blind to the ways in which the growth of money value damages and destroys what I will call, following John McMurtry, natural and social life value. Capitalism is thus blind to the way in which it systematically wastes and despoils the very systems upon which its own existence depends.

I believe that the solution to the manifold life crises that capitalism generates is socialist. However, the traditional socialist alternative of prioritizing use value over monetary exchange value is an inadequate platform from which to grasp this material irrationality. While Marx's critique has the merit of exposing the life-destructive effects of capitalist growth dynamics as a whole, the simple prioritization of use value over exchange value in a future socialist economy is not able to consistently distinguish materially rational from materially irrational choices at the microeconomic level. The solution lies in making explicit what is only implied in Marx's critique: an underlying conception of life value as the necessary regulating value of production and distribution in a democratic and ecologically sound socialist life-economy.

My argument will be developed in three moments. In the first, I will explain the foundational concept of life value through a critique of Marx's conception of value and use value. In the second section I will employ the idea of life value to bring to light the deep structure of life crises caused by the way in which capitalism colonizes the three dimensions of the human life space and time continuum: its natural-biological foundations, its sociocultural expressions, and its temporal conditions of freedom. Given the complexity of these life crises, I cannot examine them in adequate empirical detail here. The main concern is to illustrate the reality of life requirements and the threats posed to their satisfaction by capitalism and its money value system. In the final section I will conclude that an effective socialist political response demands a solution to the contradiction between the future-oriented promises of socialist theory and the present reality of life crisis caused by the colonization of the life space-time continuum. This contradiction can be resolved by anchoring socialist politics in a constructive and transformationalist program that begins from existing prefigurative economic and political practices that prove, even if only to a limited extent, that the dependence of human life on labor and commodity markets is neither necessary nor ultimate. As with the second part, the complexity and context dependence of political practice limit the scope of what can be said in defense of my claims. A comprehensive political program is neither possible in this paper nor desirable given the need for situated reasoning and argument that all politics demands.

Money Value, Use Value, and Life Value

When we think of “economic rationality” in classical or neoclassical terms, we are taught to think in terms of utility-maximizing choices and Pareto optimality (see Brown 2008, 77–84; McMurtry 2009, 69–91). The problem, however, is that utility functions and the relations established between the agents who pursue them in a free market are abstractions that cannot tell us what the consequences are for the natural field of life support and the social field of life development which in reality the capitalist market presupposes. If a healthy economy is understood as one in which the ‘rational’ pursuit of self-maximizing gain generates Pareto-optimal equilibrium in which no one can gain any further satisfaction without imposing higher costs (less desire satisfaction) on at least one other agent, then global consequences can be materially irrational. Yet, this material irrationality cannot be seen as necessary because the classical and neoclassical measure of economic health abstracts the economic process from both its natural and social bases. Thus, a market in old-growth trees becomes Pareto-optimal when every firm that wants to produce lumber from the old-growth forest cannot increase its share without encroaching on the share of other firms; the aesthetic and life-supportive value of the resource being permanently consumed does not factor into the account. “Efficient” markets can thus destroy the natural and social bases of economic activity as such without orthodox economic science even having the tools to measure this destruction.

Going back to Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, ecological economics has understood quite well the irrationality involved in abstracting the economy from the natural field of life support upon which it depends (see Georgescu-Roegen 1971; Daly 1977; Daly and Farley 2004; Victor 2008; Brown 2008; Brown and Carver 2009). The problem with ecological economics, however, is that it fails to specify the concrete social dynamic that is responsible for this alienation in a capitalist society. If orthodox economics may be faulted for failing to understand the necessary anchoring of the economy in the natural field of life support, ecological economics may be faulted for failing to theorize the anchoring of specifically capitalist growth dynamics in class relations (in the traditional Marxist sense of class according to which classes are distinguished by their relationship to the means of production), property forms, and the competitive dynamics of capitalism (Marx 1986a, 885–6). Under capitalism, but contrary to ecological economics, growth is not pursued for its own sake but rather for the sake of money-value expansion under the competitive pressures generated by market forces and in the context of fundamental class division. Unless this specifically capitalist growth dynamic is challenged by challenging the class structure and the rule of money value that cause “economic growth,” no solution to the life crises that capitalism generates can reasonably be expected.

The problem of ecological economics is in large part due to its failure to seriously consider the depth principles of Marx’s critique of capitalism, which was the first to argue that the class relationships and competitive dynamics that structure specifically capitalist markets generate a long-term contradiction between the development of the capitalist economy and the health of natural and social life-support systems. No one has done more than John Bellamy Foster to uncover the hidden ecological

value of Marx's understanding of the labor process as a metabolic interchange between human beings and the natural world. If nature is a presupposition of all human labor, no socially organized labor process can be materially rational that destroys over the long term the most basic material presupposition of its own existence (Foster 2000, 155–77). Perhaps even more important, as Foster and Clark remind us, Marx always distinguished between economic value and “real wealth.” Real wealth, they argue, that “comes from nature and labour power is concerned with the satisfaction of genuine human needs” (Foster and Clark 2009, 13). This conception of real wealth is indeed life-grounded in the sense in which I employ the term here and a needed corrective to both neoclassical economics and narrow conceptions of labor as the source of all need-satisfying resources. Nevertheless Foster, like Marx, never attempts to systematically articulate what “genuine human needs” are nor does he consider the ranges of life value expressed and enjoyed through the expression of human capacities not comprehended under the category of productive labor. While I agree with Foster that the “productivist” critique of Marx overlooks his and Engels's ecological concerns with soil fertility, pollution, health conditions in factories, and the social conditions of urban working-class life, what remains unsaid in this valuable rereading is that Marx discloses the material irrationality of capitalism from the objective side of its processes, but leaves untouched the subjective side: that is, what it would be rational for people to demand in a socialist economy. Marx has little to say about the rationality of microeconomic choices because he does not question the material rationality of the category of “use value.” In my terms, he fails to perceive that materially rational demand, like materially rational production, must be limited to the consumption of use values that have life value rather than use values generally.

This problem is to some extent recognized and addressed in the work of ecosocialist David Schwartzman, who singles out the military-industrial complex for its profound waste of resources in the production of the means of death. Implicit in this critique is the recognition that any materially rational expenditure of resources and energy must be life-serving rather than life-negating (Schwartzman 2009, 6–33). However, Schwartzman does not develop this insight further into an analysis of the systematic derangement of the idea of “rational choice” under capitalism, but focuses instead on the scientific foundations of a democratic socialist economy based upon solar rather than fossil-fuel energy. While quite illuminating in its own right, the success of such an alternative cannot be predicated on scientific grounds alone, but must involve the wider and deeper rethinking of what one means by rationality and productivity in the context of a systematic explication of life value in its multiple dimensions.

In order to understand the full meaning of life value, we must begin from certain fundamental facts about life in general and human life in particular. Four key points stand out. First, life forms a continuum in which each life form depends in specific ways on the natural field of life support. Life forms have wider or narrower ranges of life capacities, but all depend ultimately upon their ability to satisfy their life requirements, which, at the most basic level, involves transforming energy from the environment to fuel their metabolic processes and life activities. Hence one can say that nature is the most basic form of what McMurtry calls the “life-ground of value”

(1998, 23). The life ground of value is the connection between living things and the material conditions that sustain them, allow them to grow, and act in their characteristic ways. Second, when we turn to specifically human life, it becomes clear that human beings depend not only on their metabolism with nature but also upon social interaction in order to consciously express and enjoy our basic organic capacities to sense, feel, move, think, imagine, and create. Hence, for human life, the life ground of value has a social as well as a natural form. Third, and restricting ourselves now to human life, it follows that humans, both in order to persist and in order to live meaningful and valuable lives, must live within natural fields of life support and social fields of life development that satisfy our natural and social life requirements. Where these natural and social life requirements are not met, human beings are harmed, either in their metabolic functioning or in their ability to express and enjoy their human capacities in meaningful and valuable ways. Life requirements, therefore, are natural inputs or social institutions and practices that human beings must satisfy if they are not to be objectively harmed in their natural organism and social being (McMurtry 1998, 267). Finally, and following from the third point, life is better or worse for human beings according to the degree to which our lives are able to freely express and enjoy life capabilities in more “inclusively coherent ranges” (McMurtry 2010, 73). The qualifier “inclusively coherent ranges” is necessary so as to avoid the problems of a measure of overall social health like Pareto optimality, which is blind not only to damage to the natural life-support system but also to exploitative and oppressive social relationships. The goal of maximally coherent ranges of life-capacity expression and enjoyment is contingent upon the degree to which the natural field of life support and the social field of life development satisfy or do not satisfy fundamental life requirements.

Life value, it follows, is the most general form of value possible and human life value is its highest known expression. For human beings, that which has life value is any resource, institution, or practice that satisfies a life requirement or is an expressed and enjoyed capacity enabled by the satisfaction of a life requirement whose expression and enjoyment contributes positively to the life value of others (McMurtry 2002, 155). It is the life value of resources, institutions, and practices that explains why people ought to and are justified in caring and concerning themselves with changing social relationships when those social relationships deprive them of one or more life requirements.

Human life value is thus limited to the range of life requirements and the constellations of life-capacity expression and enjoyment that make a positive contribution to the natural field of life support and the social field of life development. At the same time, though subject to objective limits, life value is not an external standard imposed from on high upon subjective consciousness. Note that anything that has life value as an expression of human capacities must also be enjoyed by the consciousness that expresses it. Where consciousness is not alienated from the life ground of value, it is capable on its own of discovering for itself those forms of capacity expression that have and those that do not have life value and thus choosing, without imposition from above, modes of individuation and action that are both subjectively satisfying and objectively beneficial to the fields of life support and life development of which one is a member.

The evidence for this claim not only comes from life-value philosophy, but is corroborated in much humanistic psychological research, such as that undertaken by Tim Kasser. Kasser notes the richer quality of experienced happiness in activities he calls “intrinsically motivating” as opposed to those actions (like shopping for superfluities) that are compelled by an external reward system. In such cases, subjects who reflectively attend to their own feelings discover that the intrinsically motivated activities produce richer and more lasting feelings of happiness while behaviors compelled by an external reward system produce only fleeting feelings of satisfying an urge which reappears no sooner has it been satisfied (Kasser 2002, 77).

The field of expressed and enjoyed life value is open and not predetermined by philosophical argument. It excludes nothing of what human life really requires for its existence and goodness but includes nothing that, when produced, consumed, or appropriated, destroys life value or contributes nothing to it. Thus, producing armaments is ultimately life-destructive since their primary use is to threaten, wound, or kill other human beings. The routinized consumption of status commodities with no link back to the development of our human capacities for feeling, thought, imagination, or creation contributes nothing of real life value to human life, since by this compelled behavior, nothing of life value for self or others is produced. In order to understand life value more fully, it is necessary to examine in more detail how it is anchored in the three dimensions of human life.

Each dimension of the human life space-time continuum is unique but exists only in relation to the other two. The natural dimension of human life is grounded in our biology and gives rise to a set of obvious natural life requirements. The sociocultural dimension of human life is grounded in our biological nature (we can survive only through social interaction), but is expressed through the emergent properties of conscious and intentional action in institutionally and symbolically mediated contexts. Consciousness gives rise to irreducible social life requirements such as love and care, especially while young, education through which the imaginative and cognitive capacities of conscious may be developed, a political system in which we can participate in the production of the laws we will have to obey, a cultural system that preserves and creates natural and artistic beauty, and a democratically planned economic system that is steered by the goal of creating social space for individuals to make real positive contributions through their work to the well-being of others. The third dimension links the natural and social. Because human beings are natural beings, we are mortal. Our lifetime is finite, and the goodness and badness of our lives thus depends upon what we are able to become over the limited course of a human life. Thus, in addition to natural and social life requirements, there is also a temporal life requirement to experience time as an open matrix of possibilities for free activity rather than a closed structure of routine with which we must comply.¹

While none of these particular life requirements is foreign to Marx’s work, Marx nowhere makes explicit the underlying idea of life value that links them together in a

1. Space prevents a complete analysis and defense of these life requirements. For a more detailed historical and philosophical examination and defense, see Noonan (2006).

continuum. Nor have subsequent generations of Marxists done so.² Part of the reason he does not, I will suggest, is because his systematic critique of capitalism is conducted in terms of a concept of value that is, like the classical conception of value from which it derives, exclusively focused on the value of commodities. In the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx defines value in general as “not only the exchangeability of this commodity in general, but its specific exchangeability. It is at once the indicator of the ratio in which the commodity exchanges for others and the indication of the ratio in which it has already been exchanged for others (materialised labor time) in the process of production. Value is a commodity’s quantitatively determined exchangeability” (1986b, 78). In volume 1 of *Capital*, the definition is further refined. “Once we have abstracted from the determining qualities of commodities,” Marx argues, “there is nothing left but what is common to them all . . . human labour in the abstract . . . all that these things can tell us is that human labour power has been expended in their production, that human labour is embodied in them. When looked at as crystals of their social substance, common to them all, they are—Values” (1986c, 46).

I contend that Marx conflates the general form of value with the general form of the value of commodities. If we stick with his general definition of value, then anything that is not inside the production and distribution process of capitalism literally has no value. His conception of “real wealth” allows us to bring the life value of nature into account, but remains too narrow, as I noted above, to comprehend the full scope of life value. While one might rejoin that my argument rests on an equivocation, that I am using value in a wide, normative sense and Marx is using it in a narrow, economic sense for contextual reasons that I ignore, I think that such a rejoinder misses the deeper philosophical and political point. The point is that the fields of life value are much wider than the field of economic value and real wealth, and both are embedded in and depend upon the wider fields of life value that Marx’s critique of capitalism presupposes but does not explicate.³ The dynamics of capitalist markets are such that they are driven to colonize all fields of life value: that is, to subordinate them to the money-value system that rules the capitalist economy. The problem here is not just that, as Marx would have it, the capitalist colonization of life space and time interposes exchange value between human beings and the use values of the commodities they now must purchase, but more profoundly, that the capitalist exchange-value/use-value relation obscures the life value both presuppose. If socialism restricts its arguments to the formula that socialism will free use values from the rule of exchange value, without first asking whether the use values it will liberate from the commodity form will have life value, then it risks repeating the same underlying alienation of its economy from the life ground of value and thus potentially repeating the same materially irrational goal of endless growth and the

2. In the broad Marxist tradition, Marcuse comes closest to an explicit idea of life value. See especially Marcuse (1969, 7–22, 46).

3. Istvan Mészáros approaches this sort of argument in his most recent work insofar as he grounds his argument against capitalist “antivalue” in a universal conception of human moral value linked to our mortality and creativity, but again an explicit and explicitly defended conception of life value is absent (see Mészáros 2008, 35–43).

same leveling utilitarianism of life purpose that its critique of capitalism ought to overcome.⁴ Yet Marx does not issue this challenge, instead defining use value in relation to any and all human purposes without any anchor in the satisfaction of real life requirements. For Marx, a use value is “a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they stem from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (1986c, 43).

The key point may be restated and deepened as follows. While any use value produced in a democratic socialist life economy must have life value, not everything that has life value is exclusively a use value. The emotional labor that parents expend in loving their children has use value to children in so far as they require it. Its life value, however, is not exhausted in its instrumental usefulness to children. Without love and care, children can fail to thrive and tend to develop psychosocial pathologies which impede their ability to love and care for others in turn, but with it they grow into caring adults who care about others in turn (Fraad 2008, 270–83; more generally, see Noddings 1984, 59–64; Kasser 2002, 88–9). The full life value of emotional labor includes the growth of self beyond egocentric concern for self-maximization toward recognition of the equal life value of others. It embraces both subject and object of this labor in a higher unity of shared life purpose. The care expressed and received in emotional labor is itself life-affirming insofar as through it one grows and enriches one’s own life by creating the conditions in which another’s life grows and is enriched. That which is life-valuable always opens the interests of the self to the interests of others in this way. To understand life value is thus to understand that there is no ultimate conflict between self and other and self and world, but rather that one’s own good is always bound up with the good of others and the world to which one belongs. This recognition is valuable in itself and not simply as a means of life-requirement satisfaction.

The limitations of the idea of use value are even more evident if we think of the human life requirement for free time. Free time, as I said, is not simply a given quantity of time outside paid and unpaid employment which the agent in question can use however he or she feels like using it. The life value of free time is not that it enables us to do what we feel like without regard for others, but that it frees us to imagine and project how we might individuate ourselves through those capacities we choose to express and enjoy in ways that give back to the natural and social fields of life support that have borne us to the point where we are capable of thinking and acting as individual agents.

Thus, while the life value of anything is always damaged by its commodification, it does not follow that this damage can be undone by conceiving of every life value as a use value and grounding a democratic socialist life economy in the production of use values. Let us consider this crucial point from the perspective of Marx’s aphorism that a socialist society will be based on the principle, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (1978, 531). In the context of worldwide

4. Perhaps surprisingly, ecological economics, too, fails to anchor use value and human needs in the life ground of value as well. For representative examples of the problem, see Victor 2008, 132, and Brown and Carver 2009, 56–7.

ecological crisis, the task for socialists is to be able to specify exactly what we mean by needs. Marx is of little help in this regard. As both Heller and Fraser have shown, Marx uses the term, if not loosely, at least in many different senses that he never organizes systematically (see Heller 1976; Fraser 1998). The lack of systematicity becomes a problem when we focus on the category of “luxury needs.” For Marx, the category of luxury needs is historically variable. With rising productivity, that which was once a luxury becomes an object of mass consumption. However, once an object becomes an object of mass consumption, it begins to recode people’s feeling of self-esteem (Fraser 1998, 134). To lack that which everyone else has is to feel diminished in the eyes of one’s fellow citizens. If it is true that former luxury needs retain their being as needs, and if a socialist society must distribute according to needs, then there is potentially no limit to what people may demand of a socialist economy. Marx does not challenge the psychology of consumer demand as a capitalist pathology, but appears to regard it as normal. As he argues in relation to housing, “a house may be large or small, as long as the surrounding houses are equally small it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut. The little house now shows that its owner has only very slight or no demands to make . . . the owner of the small house will feel more and more uncomfortable” (1973, 163). Yet this feeling is materially irrational. As Marx himself notes, the little house satisfies the owner’s life requirement for a house. The proper socialist conclusion, it seems to me, is not to accept the owner’s feelings, but to work to change them by pointing out their materially irrational implications.

This sort of questioning of individual motivations seems to invite the rejoinder that it depends upon an imperious use of philosophy that is unlikely to be efficacious given people’s propensity to live happily with conflicted motivations. “Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes),” wrote Walt Whitman (1998, 78). Simply pointing out the irrationality of demands for more than is life-sufficient may sound like mere moralizing from the perspective of the person criticized. The psychology of political change is no doubt complex and beyond the scope of my competence and this paper. Nevertheless, self-transformation seems closely bound up with recognition of the reality of initially unnoticed harms. To simply hector people about their choices generally (and appropriately) produces a defensive reaction that hardens the problematic behaviour. But to work with a person in order to help them see the unnoticed harms that unreflective choices cause can prove an aid to self-transformation. A doctor who simply lectures a patient about the ill effects of smoking will not likely be as successful in promoting healthier choices as the one who accepts the patient’s choice, but then demonstrates what the real but unobserved effects on the patient’s lungs are. The point is that the social critique of individual choices must avoid pontificating and instead concentrate on building a dialogue through which the person him- or herself begins to be self-reflective and self-critical.

One could further rejoin that my critique of Marx is anachronistic—that Marx could in no way have anticipated the social damage that the psychology of consumer society normalized and rationalized by the assumptions of orthodox microeconomics helps to cause and reproduce. There is some merit in this argument. However, it cannot be used to obviate the force of the criticism in relation to contemporary socialists, and

especially those who call themselves ecosocialists. It is true that ecosocialists are aware that an unrestricted conception of needs as anything for which anyone has a use risks making socialist society potentially as ecocidal as capitalism. As Kovel, arguing against McNally, maintains, “Are workers—not just in the industrial West, but also in China, India, Indonesia, etc., as required by the internationalist ethos of socialism—to have more cars ... without further deterioration of ecosystems? Questions like these scarcely arise in socialist discourse, which ... has significant trouble going beyond capitalism’s fatal addiction to growth” (Kovel 2007, 228). Kovel’s solution, which I fully endorse, is to replace the capitalist addiction to growth with an ideal of sufficiency linked to the value of deeper self-realization in all dimensions of human life (228). Where I disagree with him is in his conception of needs.

Here, like Marx, he concedes too much to capitalist consumer psychology when he grants that the addictions that people develop under capitalism actually rank as needs. “As capitalism penetrates life worlds, it alters them in ways that foster its accumulation, chiefly by introducing a sense of dissatisfaction or lack ... In this way, children develop such a craving for caffeine-laced, sugar-loaded, or artificially sweetened soft drinks that it may be said that they positively need them” (Kovel 2007, 53; cf. Kovel and Lowy 2001). If one defines needs, as I do here, as life requirements, then it can never be the case that our addictions are actual, positive needs. Needs as life requirements are not simply wants for use values that we lack. They are our actual, positive connection to the natural and social fields of life support; they are our essential guide to the fundamentally practical question of what goods a democratic socialist life economy ought to produce and how. If we allow that consumer addictions are needs, then we use need in a purely descriptive sense, which then undermines the normative force of the difference between a need and consumer demand (for a non-Marxist appreciation of this point, see Braybrooke 1987, 8). If we allow that my addiction to smoking is a need and also that my thirst for water is a need, then the moral logic of satisfying either is the same. If “need” implies necessity of satisfaction, and necessity of satisfaction imposes a moral duty on others to satisfy it, then it would follow that there is a moral equivalence between satisfying my addiction to nicotine and satisfying my thirst for water. Yet clearly there cannot be a moral equivalence since the outcomes are opposed to each other: life in one case, speedier death and ill health for others in the vicinity of the secondhand smoke in the other.

Thus, the slogan of a democratic socialist society cannot be “from each according to his or her abilities, to each according to his or her needs,” but rather, “from each according to his or her capabilities to make a life-valuable contribution to the natural and social fields of life support, to each according to his or her life requirements in the three dimensions of being alive as a human being.” Without these qualifications there can be no guarantee that socialism will not prove as materially irrational as capitalism in its use of the natural field of life support, or that it will not prove as culturally, ethically, and spiritually empty as capitalism in the social field of life support. A democratic socialist society must be a life-grounded society, and a life-grounded society must operate with a life economy in which “production and distribution [are] for life need, and that in turn for life capacity and experience in

more comprehensive enjoyment and expression [for] this is the only ultimate value on earth. Any sane [materially rational] economy is these to serve it in opening horizons of life-worth” (McMurtry 2002, 124). It is only with the fundamental idea of life value in mind that we can fully understand the causes of the fundamental forms of life crisis that currently rage across the globe.

Life Requirements, Life Capacities, and Capitalist Life Crisis

As I argued in the first section, the fundamental concepts of classical and neoclassical economics are incapable of understanding the life crises caused by the colonization of life space and time by capitalist commodity and labor markets. This is the case because, unlike Marx, who regards the productive life of the species as “life-engendering life,” the orthodox economic understanding of productivity is life-blind (Marx 1975, 276). Any process is productive (in the capitalist sense of the term) which produces a product or service that can be sold at a profit. The costs to life are not normally factored into the measure of productivity. Thus, when oil was at \$147 a barrel, production in the Alberta oil sands was booming, employment was being created at breathtaking speed, and Canada as a result had the highest growth rates in the G-8 group of nations. What was not factored into the equation was the damage caused to the Athabasca River watershed and the health of the people of the First Nations who live on its shores, or the fact that it requires nearly as much energy in the form of burning natural gas to produce the steam that separates the heavy crude from the sand as is produced in the form of usable oil (Hatch and Price 2008). The “economically” and environmentally rational courses of action contradict each other.

These problems are obvious once they have been separated out from orthodox economic concepts. What is less obvious, but even more important from the standpoint of constructing an alternative, is that because capitalism is a total system insofar as it is impelled constantly to expand, it necessarily colonizes human-life space and time, and through this colonization it creates a contradictory form of total dependence of each individual on its growth dynamics. My use of “colonization” here must be distinguished from that of Habermas because, for Habermas, the life-world is the world of symbolic communication only (Habermas 1987, 119–27). Actual biological life and its natural life-support system has no place in his conception of the life-world. Yet it is just because capitalism colonizes the natural life-support system and turns it to the purpose of producing money value rather than life value that it is able to colonize the sociocultural life-support system (Meiksins Wood 2002, 95–142). There develops a life crisis wherever the actual life requirements or life capabilities of human beings are made dependent upon capitalist labor and commodity markets for their satisfaction or expression and enjoyment. The natural, sociocultural, and temporal crises of human life are thus expressed as the loss of life value of natural life-requirement satisfiers, sociocultural institutions and interactions, and the human experience of time consequent upon their subordination to the money-value system that rules human activity in a capitalist society.

I cannot examine in particular detail each manifestation of life crisis. Instead, I want to concentrate on the contradictory nature of market dependence as the key to understanding why life crises persist even when, as in the case of the crisis of the natural field of life support, their reality is undeniable. To begin we need to focus on the moment of real dependence. Where even the basic means of life are priced commodities, people become dependent upon money and therefore labor markets in order to survive. Moreover, where the rule of money is universal, the “true social bond,” as Marx says—not only people’s lives but also their sense of well-being or their ability to pursue what each calls a good life—depends upon accumulating surplus money with which one can participate in commodity markets and can afford to enjoy free time, travel, and so forth (Marx 1975, 306). As Foster argues, “caught up in this unrelenting process of accumulation and creative destruction, the system runs roughshod over each and every thing that stands in its path: all human and natural requirements that interfere with the accumulation of capital are considered barriers to be overcome” (Foster 2008, 5).

The contradiction lies in the fact that, at the same time as dependence on labor and commodity markets is absolutely real, it is equally absolutely illusory. As natural organisms, human beings do not depend upon access to money but access to clean air, potable water, nutritious food, protection from violent traumas, and health care. As sociocultural beings considered from the perspective of what our conscious organism is capable of doing, we are not dependent upon access to commodity markets for our well-being, but rather on each other as mediated through social institutions through which we cultivate our cognitive and imaginative capacities and which create real opportunities for life-valuable work and political participation. Finally, considered as finite or mortal beings, the experience of time is, as the existential frame of our lives, ultimately not a matter of how much free time we can purchase, but of how we are able to dispose ourselves to own future: that is, whether time is experienced as an open matrix of possibilities for action or a closed structure of routine that we will escape only at death.

Even though people might admit in the abstract that there is a life crisis where the natural field of life support is systematically degraded, or where social institutions are used to reproduce existing structures of inequality, or where culture becomes vacuous and disposable, or where time is a closed structure of routine, the systematic solution to these life crises cannot be easily seen from within the capitalist system itself. More precisely, because the moment of absolute dependence is real, it is extremely difficult for anyone whose livelihood depends week to week on wages to see through to the illusory moment. The consequence is that when crises are recognized, they are not recognized as crises internal to the system but seem to be immediate individual or family crises for which a solution must be found in the near present. Thus, for a worker laid off from the oil sands industry, the crisis does not appear to be the looming environmental disaster predicted by environmentalists, but the worker’s own unemployment, to be solved by stimulating demand for oil, increasing its price, and making investment in oil sands profitable once again. The wider and deeper forms of life crisis, the leveling of all human life requirements and life capacities to their money value, and the determination of the content of good and bad lives by the monetary returns different life ways are expected to bring,

sound platitudinous when the money runs out. The British prime minister Gordon Brown aimed to be reassuring to workers when he told the U.S. Congress that “while today people are anxious and feel insecure, over the next two decades billions of people in other countries are going to move from being simply producers of goods to being consumers of our goods, and in this way our world economy will double in size” (Olive and Walkom 2009, IN4). Even assuming such growth is theoretically possible, its energy demands and the waste that it will necessarily produce would greatly exacerbate rather than solve the natural life crisis that underlies all forms of capitalist life crisis. Given the real moment of market dependence, however, people quite understandably demand that governments take whatever steps are necessary to restart the cycles of money value growth. The damage these cycles cause to the other forms of life value cannot be seen when the immediate form of life crisis affecting the majority of people is an economic crisis, not of the general human capacity to produce sufficient life-requirement satisfiers but of the system-specific requirement of capitalism to do so profitably.

Where life-requirement satisfaction and life-capacity expression and enjoyment depend on market access, social life activity becomes structured as a series of zero sum competitions over the rewards the existing social structure provides. That which has real life value—healthy children and adults, the free development of cognitive and imaginative capabilities across educational levels, meaningful and life-valuable work, beauty open to the experience of all, democratic political systems, free time experienced as an open matrix of possibilities for life-valuable self-expression—none of which ultimately requires more than the satisfaction of natural and social life requirements through conscious, cooperative human interaction in the natural field of life support and the social field of life development, appears to depend completely upon the state of market forces. The blindness of capitalism to the destruction of natural life value is replicated socially to the extent that people accept capitalist appearances for ultimate and unchanging reality: namely, that the good life means success in zero sum competitions for maximum monetary returns to self.

On the other hand, there are encouraging signs emerging over the past year that economic crisis is catalyzing a renewal of mass oppositional politics. There were the mass demonstrations against the government in Greece, the forcing out of office of the government of Iceland in the wake of the country’s bankruptcy, factory occupations in the United States and Canada, a series of general strikes in France, and the overthrow through mass action of the government of Martinique. In the short term in the OECD countries these emerging movements are not likely to converge around a democratic socialist alternative.⁵ Nor would it be reasonable to expect them to do so in the short term. Theorists who argue that the only solution to capitalist life crises is a democratic-socialist life economy face a contradiction between the futurity of their promises and the immediate reality of life crisis that workers and others face. If this contradiction is to be solved, it must be possible to supplement the negative critique of capitalism with positive examples of at least partially

5. The Web site *Radical Perspectives on the Crisis* provides daily updates from correspondents around the globe on the many struggles that have and continue to break out: <http://www.google.sites.radicalperspectives.org> (accessed 9 March and 11 April 2009).

decolonized life spaces and times. These real working alternatives, what Kovel calls “prefigurative practices,” are zones in which life requirements are met through self-organizing, democratic, non-market-based production (Kovel 2007, 207–41). In a prefigurative practice, another world is not only possible; it is actual and thus aids in the struggle against the illusory side of market dependence by partially negating its real side. To conclude, I will focus on three such prefigurative practices: nonstate self-organizing collectives, the democratic moment of existing liberal-democratic political institutions, and Venezuela’s ongoing experiment with “twenty-first century socialism.”

Reclaiming the Life Space-Time Continuum

If one looks for them, prefigurative practices of the first type appear everywhere. They range in size from the very small (a community garden in an inner-city neighborhood producing food for local use) to communities in their own right (like the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil, which currently involves more than 500,000 members building a cooperative democratic society on land for which the capitalist agricultural economy has no use). These prefigurative movements are not limited to agriculture. In the wake of the Argentinian fiscal crisis of 2001, workers not only occupied their workplaces, but took them over and continued production under workers’ control. We should also include among this type of prefigurative practice workers’ cooperatives that, while they compete in the market, are not organized for the sake of market success but to meet members’ life requirements.

What all have in common is that they have succeeded in decolonizing life space that has been deemed “waste” by the capitalist economy. For capitalism, “waste” is anything that it cannot exploit for a profit (not anything that has no life value). Hence much of what capitalism wastes, especially the fallow productive capabilities of workers and farmers who cannot find remunerative employment, is actually life-valuable. The realization of life value, however, is impossible so long as unemployed workers continue to search for work in labor markets. The genius of each of these prefigurative movements is that the organizers have understood that nothing prevented the occupation and life-valuable use of spaces (fields, factories, etc.) that capitalism had abandoned. Through the simple decision to use what capitalism had no use for, life value, both in the form of life-requirement satisfiers and the wider and deeper expression and enjoyment of life capabilities in new democratic institutions and modes of work, is created. Thus to the objection, all too common, that it is impossible to build a noncapitalist economy, these prefigurative practices offer a partial but objective rejoinder. The work of J. K. Gibson-Graham has done much to explicate the life-reclaiming logic of non-market-based, self-organizing, democratic, local economic practices. Gibson-Graham explains that “alternative cooperative and intentional economic activities ... provide a ‘click’ moment that has released non-capitalist imaginaries from the iron-clad imperative of ... capitalist modernization” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 75–6). This “click” moment is exactly what is required if socialists are to convince people that they are capable of building a new

world. The alternative is not a paper-and-pencil sketch; it is an incipient reality replicated almost anywhere one chooses to look.

At the same time, however, these experiments are not without well-known limitations. The most important is that they leave the question of challenging for political power unaddressed (Mészáros 2008, 257). By occupying an abandoned niche, local experiments in democratic self-organization succeed to some extent by flying under the radar. If they grow too large and begin to run up against life space that capitalism still finds it profitable to exploit, they risk suffering defeat at the hands of state power arrayed so as to defend the capitalist colonization of life space. It does not follow from this argument that any preset limitation to how far these local experiments can succeed can be established. It only sounds a caution that at some point their success will be challenged not only by competitive forces from the market, but by political forces from the state. If the first type of prefigurative movement is to become the basis for an alternative democratic socialist society, therefore, they must address the problem of how to contend with organized state violence. Yet here, too, there are prefigurative institutions whose life-value potential has been generally neglected by Marxists (including myself). Those institutions are the existing democratic institutions of liberal-democratic capitalist society.

Marxists have generally been loath to attempt to exploit the transformative possibilities of existing liberal-democratic institutions because they have, correctly, understood that these institutions have coevolved with the capitalist economy so as to ensure, through both hegemonic practices and outright violence when necessary, its reproduction and growth (see Meiksins Wood 1995, 19–48, 181–237). What has been ignored by this historically correct analysis, however, is that to the extent that these institutions depend upon their democratic credentials for their legitimacy, they create spaces that can be exploited by a determined political movement for radically transformational ends. Concretely, no law of which I am aware would make a democratic-socialist party illegal, no law prevents such a party from contesting elections, and no law could prevent such a party, properly organized and determined, from winning. Any party holding political power has tremendous latitude to begin to change laws and even constitutions. Hence one can imagine a gradual, step-by-step recolonization of life space and time by a legal democratic-socialist party working with the social movements involved in the local practices of reclaiming the life space-time continuum and together wielding the existing democratically legitimate powers of the state to internally transform it.

If life value really is better served by a democratic-socialist economy, then it must be possible to convince the majority of people through open, public deliberation and argument to mobilize for that future through a legal democratic party capable of winning state power. We have seen the disasters that have followed upon vanguard attempts to overcome capitalism at one blow; Marxists, who claim to understand history, ought to be the first to learn from it. The first lesson that we should have learned is that it is not possible for a small collective of minds to master the immense complexity of social institutions that have evolved over hundreds of years. Rather than heroic, immediate transformation, we should instead struggle to build new democratic-socialist parties, to win the democratic struggle for state power on the basis of an open program of progressive institutional change that will accelerate the

social logic of progressive decolonization of life space and time by using the law to take back for life-value production the resources and institutions currently exploited for money-value production.

This point leads to the third prefigurative practice, which can be interpreted as a synthesis of the first two. It is the societywide set of experiments in democratic social and economic organization currently under way in Venezuela and Bolivia. Given the need for brevity, I will focus on the former. Venezuela teaches three important lessons. First, it is exceedingly difficult to delegitimize duly elected governments backed by real mass movements. The Venezuelan right has been forced to rely on failed coup attempts because it has not been able to defeat the Chávez movement at the polls. Second, Venezuela provides concrete evidence that the historical enmeshment of liberal-democratic forms with capitalist society establishes no concrete limits on what popularly backed state power can be used to accomplish. That the Venezuelan state has been, for most of its history, used to oppress the majority of people at the behest of imperialism has not prevented Chávez from transforming state institutions from within. This internal transformation has been accomplished by changing the constitution through constitutional means, backed each step of the way by clear supportive majorities. Finally, and this is perhaps the most important lesson, Chávez, despite his rhetorical bluster, has actually been cautious and deliberate in his efforts to decolonize life space and time. In other words, he has recognized the problem that social complexity and globalization pose to the problem of fundamental socioeconomic transformation and has met this challenge by adopting an evolutionary model of social change. By “evolutionary model” I mean that his governments have given one set of reforms time to stabilize before deepening and extending them. In this way the insuperable problems of centralized planning are avoided while, at the same time, real practices and institutions of democratic self-organization and life requirement-based production and distribution are developing. I concur with Greg Wilpert’s assessment that “the creation of a social economy clearly represents one of the Chavez government’s most dramatic efforts to move away from capitalism towards self-management . . . It is not a frontal assault against capitalism, as socialist parties used to advocate, but a much subtler assault, where self-managed enterprises co-exist with traditional capitalist enterprises . . . The much slower substitution of the capitalist economy by the social economy reduces the level of resistance from domestic and international capital . . . thus making the success of such a transition greater” (Wilpert 2007, 191). The key to this transformationalist and constructive approach to building socialism lies in its ability to generate and sustain a progressive social momentum that solves problems on a case-by-case basis. The existence of real social momentum plus a properly modest approach to problem solving has so far enabled the Venezuelan experiment to proceed democratically, without coercion save in cases of open assaults upon democracy by the right wing, and, most important, successfully as measured by real improvements in the ability of Venezuelans to meet their life requirements across the human life space-time continuum and to develop their life capabilities in concert with others in a virtuous social circle of widening and deepening democratic self-development.

There can be no denying the reality of multiple life crises today. If it is true that these life crises are systematically caused by the normal dynamics of capitalism, then it follows that solutions require fundamental social change. Social change, however, does not occur as a consequence of logical inference, but only through political struggles. The history of Stalinism provides abundant empirical evidence about how not to attempt political change. The emerging history of transformationalist and constructive attempts at decolonizing life space and time offers a much more promising route. In North America and Europe, the consolidation and deepening of existing small-scale experiments in life space and time reclamation demand the creation of a new political movement capable of both winning arguments and winning power and, beyond that plateau, of using power to initiate a series of step-by-step changes that build support because they work. As Marx argued, humans must prove the truth in practice. Such complex truths as the superiority of a democratic socialist society can only be proven over large and indefinite periods of time. The open-ended character of socialist transformation should not be seen as a cause of despair, but rather as cause for excitement, for the time and space of change is any point at which we decide to start working together for it.

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