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Socialism as a Life-Coherent Society

Jeff Noonan¹

All varieties of socialism share this trait in common: they are systematic alternatives to capitalism. But why should a systematic alternative to capitalism be necessary? Has it not proven to be the most productive economic system in history? Has it not created social conditions in which the powers of human imagination, creativity, and scientific understanding have grown to wider scope than in any previous society? Has it not enabled human beings to extend their life span and live healthier and more active lives than ever before? Has it not proven extraordinarily plastic, able to solve unforeseen problems in ways that its opponents continue to predict that it cannot, thus proving itself superior to any proposed alternative? These are difficult questions that anyone who claims that an alternative is necessary must take seriously.

There is little use in denying that one part of honest answers to the foregoing questions is “yes.” No system has proven as productive, has enabled the development of imagination, creativity, and science to as wide a compass, cured more diseases, or proven as adaptable and protean as capitalism. However, since capitalism is not on trial here, but under analysis, more than yes or no answers are permitted. When more complex answers to the questions are proffered, the grounds supporting the need for a systematic alternative which builds upon the real achievements of capitalism become clear.

Notwithstanding those real achievements, an alternative is ultimately necessary because the social processes through which capitalism reproduces and develops itself are ecologically unsustainable and socially, politically, and culturally contradictory. At

the root of capitalism’s unsustainable and contradictory nature is its ruling money-value system. The money-value system reduces the good

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across all dimensions of human life-activity to increasing the money-value available for appropriation by private market agents, rendering the system blind to any harms that it imposes on natural life-support and social life-development systems which are not measurable in money-value terms. Beneath the apparent freedom of interest and activity enabled by capitalism lies a structure of social dependence upon possession of money-value for the satisfaction of life's requirements.

Peering into this structure of dependence discloses the secret of capitalist unsustainability and contradiction: it systematically confuses life-value with money-value. Life-value is that which is instrumentally or intrinsically good for living things. All life-requirement satisfiers, i.e., those resources, institutions, relationships, and practices that enable life to survive, reproduce, and develop, have instrumental life-value (McMurtry, 1998, 164). The experiences and activities which living things are able to have and realise because life-requirements are satisfied are, in general, intrinsically life-valuable, the substance of the good life. Capitalism does indeed produce instrumental life-value and enable the expression of intrinsic life-value, but in systematically life-incoherent ways. Rather than "consistently enabling ecological and human life together," as a life-coherent society would, capitalism systematically degrades and depletes natural life-support systems at an accelerating pace, deprives those without the money to pay of the means of satisfying their natural and socio-cultural life-requirements, selects for expression and enjoyment only those experiences and activities which are money-valuable, and subjects even those experiences and activities to competitive zero sum games which ensures that the good of some people's lives is sacrificed for the sake of the good of other people's lives (McMurtry, 2011, 4). A socialist alternative to capitalism is necessary because capitalism generates life-crises in the natural and socio-cultural dimensions of life-support and life-development. The warrant and value of this alternative is determined by the extent to which socialism proves capable of solving capitalist life-crises in life-coherent ways. As will become clear, conceiving socialism as a life-coherent society requires important revisions to prevailing interpretations of its traditional justificatory values.

CAPITALIST LIFE-INCOHERENCE AND TRADITIONAL SOCIALIST VALUES

There is a large and growing body of socialist literature that focuses on the long-term unsustainability of capitalist society. The main conclusion of this literature is that capitalism is materially irrational because the expansion of money-value it demands contracts the natural system of life-support upon which its existence as a social system depends. As

Meszaros argues, “The system is and must remain expansion oriented and driven by accumulation. Naturally, what is at issue in this regard is not a process designed for ensuring the satisfaction of human need. Rather, it is the expansion of capital as an end in itself, serving the preservation of a system which could not survive without consistently asserting its power as an extended mode of reproduction” (Meszaros, 2008, 65). This system-need to expand money-capital is the driver of capitalist life-incoherence. The good of the system, ever expanding production of money-capital, undermines, over the long term, the natural life-support system upon which the system itself depends. As Kovel argues, “the [capitalist] imperative to expand continually erodes the edges of ecologies along an ever expanding perimeter, overwhelming or displacing recuperative efforts, and accelerating a cascade of destabilization” (Kovel, 2007, p. 51, see also Meszaros, 2008, p. 99-100, Kovel and Lowy, 2011). It is no good to rejoin to worries about long-term consequences that in the long term we are all dead, as Keynes said, so that only short and medium term thinking in economics makes sense (Keynes, 1924, p. 88). The rejoinder commits a fallacy of composition. It is true that every human individual exists for a fixed period of time, but it does not follow that the species faces the same limits. The species can reproduce itself indefinitely into the future. To the extent that economics focuses on the life of individuals as moments of the open-ended life of the species, long term, life-coherent thinking is required.

However, the problem of life-incoherence has not always been recognised in the history of socialist thought. As Lebowitz has recently noted, the history of socialism is riven by a tension between productivist and humanist interpretations. “Rather than ... focus upon the full development of human potential, ... the dominant conception of socialism in the twentieth century tended to stress the development of the productive forces ... An important part of the socialist vision was lost—human beings at the centre” (Lebowitz, 2010, 21). This tension was not invented by twentieth century socialists. It can be found in Marx himself who understood the necessity of socialism as arising not from the long-term life-incoherence of capitalist productivity, but from the systematic blockage that capitalist relations of production imposed upon the ability of the productive forces to expand (Marx, 1970, 21, Marx and Engels, 1975, 54-58). While it is true, as John Bellamy Foster has demonstrated, that Marx did not ignore the natural foundations of human life but in fact understood labour as humanity’s metabolism with nature and criticised capitalism for imposing a “metabolic rift” between human beings

and their natural life-support system, it remains true that Marx understood an essential element of socialism to be the unlocking of productive potential suppressed by capitalism (Bellamy Foster, 2000, p. 141-177). While the historical context in which Marx wrote explains his belief that productive force expansion and socialism were essentially connected, in our changed circumstances the opposite relationship is demanded: socialism as a life-coherent society must end the hypertrophied growth of productive forces.

If today the viability of the socialist project depends upon rejecting the traditional belief that socialism will be a society of unbounded productivity in favour of the suppressed alternative, socialism as a society with human needs and human capacities at the centre, we must ask in what human needs consist and to what extent and in what directions it is good to develop human capacities. If we start, as materialists must, from the natural basis of human life, then human needs originate in those non-optional physical-organic life-requirements without which biological life is impossible. So much is clear from Marx in *The German Ideology* (Marx, 1975, p 37). But when we venture beyond the physical-organic bases of life the history of socialist thought loses sight of the essential connection between needs and the range of objective requirements of human life. Despite Marx's understanding of real wealth as lying in human needs and capacities, he nowhere provides a criterion to distinguish between social needs which are not directly organic and consumer demands, and in some cases directly conflates needs and consumer demands. The most egregious example of this failure to rigorously distinguish real needs (objective natural and social life-requirements) from consumer demands occurs in *Wage Labour and Capital*, where Marx argues that a house which meets a person's material need for shelter is enjoyed as such, so long as no one builds a bigger house next door. As soon as that happens, the owner of the smaller house now feels that his modest dwelling shows that "he has only very slight or no demands to make" (Marx, 1973, p. 163). Yet, this belief that one's happiness as a human being depends upon ever higher levels of consumption, as opposed to the sufficient satisfaction of one's real life-requirements, is just the psychology of consumer desire exploited by capitalist advertisers. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, Marx's failure to define needs as real life-requirements blinds him to the life-destructive implications of the equation of happiness with rising levels of consumption (Noonan, 2006, p. 121-130).

For the most part this elision has not been challenged by subsequent Marxists. Neither Agnes Heller nor Ian Fraser, who have provided the most detailed studies of Marx's conception of human needs, exposed this conflation of needs and consumer demands (Heller, 1976; Fraser, 1998). Alan Gilbert, who grounds his Marxist theory of moral realism in human needs, likewise provides no explicit criterion by which objective human life-requirements can be rigorously distinguished from stimulated consumer demands (Gilbert, 1982; Gilbert, 1986). In the midst of ecological crisis today, this conceptual lacuna can no longer be accepted, as the failure to limit needs to what is universally required by human life to survive and socially develop impedes the formulation of a life-coherent conception of socialism.

Sympathetic critics of my position might point to the work of Marcuse or, more recently, the work of eco-socialists like Joel Kovel as having already filled in this lacuna. It is true that Marcuse's conception of "true" and "false" needs in *One Dimensional Man* implies that the differentia specifica of true needs is that they are objective life-requirements, but he does not state this criterion explicitly and he provides no systematic account of the limits of our needs (Marcuse, 1964, p. 4-5). This failure to distinguish needs as life-requirements from consumer demands persists in the thought even of those socialists who have gone the furthest towards making the implicit life-coherence of the socialist alternative explicit. Thus Kovel contrasts the capitalist prioritisation of exchange value to the socialist alternative of prioritization of use-value, without noting the obvious, that there are life-destructive use-values that socialism ought not waste resources producing (Kovel, 2007, p. 39). Kovel does, it is true, argue that a socialist economy ought to produce only those use-values that satisfy human needs, but provides no criterion by which to distinguish need and consumer demand, and at one point conflates needs with advertising-induced addictions. "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, p. 53). If one defines needs as life-requirements, then it can never be the case that our addictions are needs. Life-requirements are not simply demands for use-values that we lack, they are our actual, positive connection to the natural field of life-support and the social field of life-development. As such they are our essential guide to the fundamentally practical question of what a life-coherent socialism must produce. 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 life-requirement and consumer-demand.

An analogous problem applies to the human potential or human capacities that socialism is supposed to better enable. Lebowitz's most recent defence of socialism contends that "real wealth is the development of human capacities, the development of human potential." (Lebowitz, 2010, p. 43). Stated in this unqualified way this position has no answer to the objection that capitalism has developed human potential and capacities better than any alternative, because it again lacks a criterion by which to distinguish life-valuable and life-disvaluable capacities and potentials. Surely the capacities of human beings to instrumentally exploit nature have been developed under capitalism, and the potential to invent destructive weapons has been realized to an exquisite degree. Are these the potentials and the capacities that Lebowitz thinks socialism ought to better develop? Clearly not. But when we ask "why not? we do not find the conceptual grounds for a principled answer, even though that answer is vital to explaining and defending the socialist alternative that Lebowitz is attempting to construct. The conceptual basis of that principled answer lies in the idea of life-value, to a more nuanced explanation of which I now turn.

SOCIALISM, LIFE-VALUE, AND LIFE-COHERENCE

I noted in the introduction that life-values are either instrumental or intrinsic. Instrumental life-values are defined by the range of life-requirements that a given organism must satisfy if it is to survive, develop, and express its vital capacities. Human beings share with all other life-forms physical-organic requirements of survival, but our much richer cognitive, imaginative, and practical-creative capacities entail socio-cultural and temporal requirements for which we know of no real analogues in the rest of nature. The free expression and enjoyment of our capacities for social self-consciousness and intentional agency require definite forms of loving and caring interpersonal relationships, education, cultural spaces and institutions in which creative self and collective expression can be developed and enjoyed, political institutions in which collective rules of social life can be decided, opportunities for meaningful creation and contribution through productive work, and time experienced as an open matrix of possibilities for action. Thus human beings share three sets of life-requirements corresponding to the three dimensions of human life:

physical-organic requirements of biological life, socio-cultural requirements of human life as a socially self-conscious agent, and temporal requirements of free human life.

In all three cases we can apply a test to distinguish between resources, practices, relationships, and institutional structures which have instrumental life-value, and are therefore objective life-requirements, or needs, and consumer demands and preferences which may be desired, but are not life-requirements, and are therefore either of no life-value or negative life-value (life-destructive). In order to distinguish between life-requirements and consumer demands we must ask: if anyone were deprived of the given resource, relationship, practice, or institutional structure, would they suffer harm to any of their human capacities to experience the world through the senses, to feel the range of human emotions, to think and imagine, or act and create in life-valuable ways (McMurtry, 2008, p. 164)? If deprivation causes objective harm in the form of loss of life or vital capacity, such as would ensue if one were deprived of all shelter in a cold climate, then the object, relationship, practice or institutional structure in question is a requirement of organic-social human life. If only subjective feelings of relative deprivation ensue, as in the case of Marx's man jealous of his neighbour's house, then no life-requirement is involved, but only a consumer demand with no or negative life-value. Let me give one example from each class of life-requirements to clarify my meaning.

All of our sentient, cognitive, and imaginative capacities depend upon the functioning of our brains. Without adequate protein, brain function is degraded, and thus so too the capacities to sense, think, and imagine. There is an objective relationship between protein intake and brain function such that objective harm in the form of degradation of the various capacities of the brain necessarily follows deprivation. It does not follow that there is only one way to satisfy this life-requirement for protein; the life requirement is not for any particular form of food but for any food that will satisfy the brain's requirement for protein. Analogous forms of harm are caused by the deprivation of socio-cultural life-requirements, although here the harm is not to the organic systems themselves but to the human forms of experience, thought, and activity they enable. Adequately functioning eyes and brains can perfectly well sense the world, but it does not follow that they will see all that there is to experience. Unless the person to whom the eyes and brain belong receives some degree of education and cultivation, it is quite possible for the person not to see the natural and humanly created beauty of the

world. As Marx says, “the care burdened man in need has no sense for the finest play.”(Marx, 1975a, p. 302). The human form of capacity expression emerges out of the biological organization of the human body, but is not reducible to it. Well-functioning biological machines may be sociopathically indifferent to the others’ pain which they observe. Healthy people may be illiterate, or live in social circumstances that prevent them from participating in political life, or be forced into mindless drudgery as their life’s work. In cases such as these there is no impairment of biological functioning but there certainly is harm to the human form of expression of our sentient, cognitive, imaginative, and creative capacities. I admit that verbal scepticism about socio-cultural life-requirements is possible, but that it would only prove practically convincing were the sceptic willing to deprive him or herself permanently of that which he or she claims is not a real life-requirement: loving and caring concern between people, education, political participation, intrinsically and instrumentally life-valuable and democratically governed work, and the experience of all natural and humanly created beauty. Deprivation of the third class of life-requirement, the requirement of mortal beings for the experience of time as free, also causes objective harm, this time to our ability to express our life-capacities freely. By the expression “the experience of time as free” I do not mean the availability of “empty time,” time in which no external force compels us to do one thing rather than another (Noonan, 2009, p. 377-393). Some degree of empty time is a material condition of the experience of time as free, but the latter is not reducible to empty time. Rather, it is essentially an experience of time as an open matrix of possibilities for life-valuable activity, in contrast to unfree time, the experience of time as an inescapable, externally imposed routine. As the human form of capacity expression develops out of our biological organism, so too their free realization grows out of their human form. Freedom requires in addition to the satisfaction of biological and socio-cultural life-requirements some degree of free time in which the person can contemplate different possibilities for capacity expression and development and decide between them. There is thus a difference between a life rich in content of human capacity expression and a life in which this content is developed freely. Someone trapped in the “rat race” of capitalism may express complex and challenging capacities in a particularly human way at work and yet feel oppressed rather than free. If money-value pressures cause these capacities to be expressed in routinized ways, then the capacities are not freely developed but coerced by the structure of work in which the person is trapped.

Since human beings have only a finite life-span, they are harmed to the extent that their life-time is structured as a closed routine rather than an open matrix of possibilities for life-valuable activity. Again, sceptical rejoinders are possible, but presuppose exactly what they deny. No one without the time to freely mull over the structure and implications of philosophical arguments makes sceptical rejoinders. Hence I conclude that these three-dimensions of human life-requirement are objectively real, the material foundation of any humanly possible good life, and that anyone is harmed to the extent that they are deprived of one or more of them.

Capitalism is systematically harmful to people because: it degrades the natural field of life-support upon which our biological organism depends and makes the satisfaction of natural, socio-cultural, and temporal life-requirements contingent on their serving the master capitalist goal of money-value accumulation. In thus making life-requirement satisfaction contingent on the ability to pay, capitalism treats life-requirements as instruments for the expansion of money-value rather than instruments of the creation of intrinsic life-value. It thus reduces social institutions to structures of exploitation rather than life-requirement satisfaction and free life-capacity realization. Finally, capitalism reifies time such that it is experienced as an oppressive structure in which human activity is systematically routinized in the service of external powers. If socialism is the solution for these harms then it must solve these problems in a life-coherent manner. What would such a solution entail?

As I noted in the introductory comments, life-coherence requires enabling ecological and human life together. It might seem that the simultaneous satisfaction of these twin demands is impossible, that the good life for humans requires more and more things, such that human life can only be enabled if ecological life is damaged. In fact, the accumulation of things beyond life-requirements does not make life any better, because life is essentially creative activity, and most consumer goods are passivity-inducing, which is why shopping for them tends to be more enjoyable than possessing them (Kasser, 2002, p. 85-86). Thin a social activity it may be, but shopping is nevertheless a social activity. Once the new gadget has been brought home, boredom with it soon ensues. The life-requirements set out above are the natural, social, and temporal conditions for the widest possible life-coherent expression of human capacities. Since their satisfaction can be achieved without much of what advertisers tell us are necessities but which in reality have no committed life-function in any dimension of being humanly alive, socialist

production can enable human and ecological life together by progressively reducing the energy and resources devoted to the production of life-disvaluable commodities. As it is the wealthy societies of the Global North that waste the most energy and resources in the consumption of commodities which contribute nothing to life-maintenance, development, or enjoyment, the shift in priorities of production would, while reducing the overall ecological impact of human economies, make more resources available for life-development of the Global South, and still enable more active and enjoyable lives in the global North. In this way, socialism as a life-coherent society can enable human and ecological life together by limiting the output of production to that which is required by our organism and to fund the institutions, relationships and free time required to freely cultivate our capacities.

To put this point another way, minimizing the energy and resources it takes to produce instrumental life-value is the condition for the maximization of intrinsic life-value over the open-ended future of the human species. Intrinsic life-value, recall, is the enjoyed, life-coherent expression of freely realized life-capacities. Capitalism is life incoherent in relation to the expression and enjoyment of human capacities because its ruling value system does not valorise the universal and comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements. Thus the lives of most people are dependent upon finding paid work, which in turn is not organized so as to enable the comprehensive expression and enjoyment of the full-range of life-capacities, but to maximise profits for the firm which purchases the labour-power through which the capacities are expressed. Life-capacities may be developed, but not as intrinsic life-values, but as exploitable inputs to the production of money-value. Even where human capacities are developed in rich and complex ways, the ends they serve are often life-destructive. And even where the ends they serve are not life-destructive, the distribution of positions is not according to talent and aptitude, but limited by the demands of profitability, which means that people who are willing and able to contribute their talents and aptitudes to life-valuable social tasks cannot find work.

Traditionally, socialism has encapsulated its solution to these structural impediments to the free expression and enjoyment of capacities in slogans like “from

each according to their abilities, to each according their needs” (Marx, 1978, p. 531). But just as in the case of needs, which have not been consistently and coherently defined in terms of the three classes of life-requirements, so too has the question of the limits of life-valuable

capacity development been left unaddressed. Instead of systematic interrogation of these limits we too often find socialism identified with the transcendence of all limits. Lebowitz quotes Marx with approval for his claim that socialism will develop “all human powers as such as ends in themselves,” without noting the obvious problem, all too clear from the history of capitalist industry, that the set of all human powers includes life-destructive powers. Clearly Marx and Lebowitz do not mean to affirm the power to destroy, but by not tying down the human powers whose development they affirm to the required life-coherence limitation, they open themselves to objections of this sort. Such critiques are not only abstract philosophical objections but also political, as in environmentalist critiques of socialism as ecologically destructive or radical feminist critiques of Marxism as still rooted in masculinist psychologies of violence and conquest. (Benton, 1989, p. 51-86; Wittig, 1997, p. 224-225).

To obviate these objections and to build political links to those who lodge them it must be made clear the ways in which the principle of life-coherence would govern the development of human capacities in a future socialist society. Just as it is not the case that every use-value has instrumental life-value, so too not every expression of human capacities has intrinsic life-value. Absolute intrinsic life-value attaches only to the raw capacities to sense, feel, think, imagine, and act. Definite constellations of these raw capacities in concrete expressions are subject to evaluation according to the principle of life-coherence. This principle rules out forms of capacity expression which: (1) permanently degrade the natural life-support system or destroy non-human life for no higher, long-term life-serving purpose; and (2) depend necessarily on the exploitation of others' life-requirements, such that the exploited other is prevented from expressing and enjoying his or her life-capacities as a necessary consequence of the structure of exploitation within which he or she lives.

The normal expression of life-capacities under capitalism violates both of these limitations. The extent of their development is limited not by the principle of life-coherence but by the degree to which the development of any given capacity is money-valuable. Even where eco-destruction is avoided, the development and expression of life-capacities cannot escape the structures of exploitative work and oppressive socio-cultural institutions and ideologies that dominate life in activity in capitalist society. The life-coherent solution to these systematic problems is to create the social conditions in which human capacities are expressed and enjoyed only in those forms that enable ecological and human life

together. If that which is intrinsically valuable in its effects destroys the natural and social life-support and life-development systems upon which its very existence depends, then this conception of intrinsic value must be materially irrational. If socialism is to solve the problems of capitalism and secure the comprehensive conditions for everyone to enjoy their lives through making valuable contributions to the natural and social worlds, it must take care to specify clearly the limits that life-support systems and the shared life-interests of other people impose on individual goals and projects. Analogous limits must govern the forms of political struggle through which socialism can be progressively built. To an explanation and defence of a life-coherent political practice I now turn in conclusion.

LIFE-COHERENCE AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

As Lebowitz rightly argues, new societies do not “drop from the sky” or emerge “pristine and complete from the conceptions of intellectuals,” but rather “emerge within and in opposition to the existing society” (Lebowitz, 2006, p. 62). His point, as I interpret it, is that the task of building socialism is not like constructing a new building from blueprints, but like an on-going project of renovating an existing building piece by piece until a different building sits on the same foundations. As he argues in relation to the emergence in Venezuela of new neighbourhood-based democratic councils and workers’ co-management of enterprises, “the emergence of both these new elements is a process—a process of learning and a process of development.” (Lebowitz, 2006, p. 112). They are elements of a socialist alternative developing within an existing capitalist society. Building socialism is thus not a process that awaits a revolutionary break with capitalism but is itself that break which emerges within and in tension and struggle with the prevailing capitalist institutions. Some socialists might vociferously object to the implications of the metaphor by noting that it claims that a new society can be built upon on the same foundations as the old. The objection can be met by pointing out that all societies have the same material foundations: the natural life-support system and human labour as “metabolic interchange” with it. Nevertheless, it is true that the metaphor is meant to emphasise more than is usual the continuities that link present capitalist society to a future socialist society. Socialists have paid most attention, for obvious reasons, to questions about how best to bring about fundamental social transformation: can it be achieved through reforms, or is revolution necessary? If revolution is necessary, what does revolu-

tion mean? Can it be the spontaneous product of workers' self-activity, or does it require a vanguard party? What ought the relationship be between workers and the party, or between workers as a class and other oppressed groups whose members belong to different classes? These questions define in large part the political history of different socialist movements, and I will have something to say, in general, about them at the end. To begin, however, I want to say something about what would remain continuous between socialist and capitalist society, not for the sake of novelty, but because I think that the principle of life-coherence sheds light on this under-examined issue in a way that has important practical implications for rebuilding a democratic socialist movement.

Capitalism is able to reproduce itself in the short and medium term despite the manifold economic, political, social, and environmental crises it regularly generates because people believe themselves to be ultimately dependent upon access to its labour and commodity markets for their survival and development. Although the ultimate foundations of human life are not markets and commodities, but natural resources and human labour, this belief is not completely mistaken. It is supported by the fact that in capitalist social reality money is required to exchange for the commodities that one's life and development requires. So long as the belief persists that capitalist labour and commodity markets are the ultimate foundations of life and development it will appear to all who hold this belief that any attack on the existing society is an attack on the very foundations of life and life-development.

By this claim I do not mean that people never fight back unless they believe that a completely different world is possible, but rather that they fight back in self-limiting ways because they cannot see any real possibility for successfully building a fundamentally different society. To take a recent case as illustration of the meaning of my claim, in June 2011 postal workers went on strike against Canada Post. Fearing back to work legislation, they decided to engage in rotating strikes rather than an all-out nation-wide strike. In response, Canada Post locked them out and the Conservative government then passed back to work legislation. Yet, the strategy, though it ultimately proved self-undermining, is understandable, not simply as conservatism on the part of the union leadership, but as rooted in genuine fear of the consequences of all-out challenges to capitalist power in an era where a systematic alternative seems remote. As Albo, Gindin, and Panitch argue, capitalism has consistently "compelled workers to become more dependent on the market as individuals so as to limit their ability to contest the social relations

of the capitalist market as a class" (Albo, Gindin, and Pantich, 2010, p. 90). From the standpoint of anyone enmeshed in the daily struggle to make money in order to survive, talk of total social transformation does not sound utopian, but suicidal. Hence oppositional politics, especially in wealthy societies, remains limited to promises of piecemeal reform that do not upset "the markets" for fear of compromising money-value growth upon which life and life-development appear to depend. Systemic causes are never addressed, and society lurches from one crisis to the next.

This fear cannot be overcome by talk of "smashing" and "destroying" capitalism that sometimes tempt socialists because people for the most part do not believe that it can be smashed or destroyed. In order to build movements broad-based and powerful enough to solve the causes of life-crises, socialists might do better to emphasise the natural and institutional continuity between capitalism and socialism. By 'natural and institutional continuity' I refer to the natural system of life-support that underlies any human society and supplies all the physical-organic requirements of life, and existing social institutions, relationships, and practices in so far as they actually fulfill their life-coherent function: enabling the development of human capacities through the satisfaction of life-requirements. The point of emphasising natural and institutional continuity is not to attenuate the essential opposition between capitalism and socialism, but rather to bring to light the longer and deeper history of collective labour and struggle through which social institutions have been built up from their natural bases and progressively turned from support of the particular interests of ruling classes towards universal provision of life-requirements across the three dimensions of human life. If we ground the struggle for socialism in those aspects of existing institutions which actually serve the shared life-interest, stressing always the role that struggle has played historically in extending this life-service, then the task of building socialism no longer appears as a suicidal destruction of existing means of life-support, but an organic development beyond the achieved plateaus of life-requirement satisfaction found in actually existing civil commons institutions and practices.

The civil commons is McMurtry's term for all non-commodified social goods which enable human life to freely develop (McMurtry, 2002, p. 117). These institutions and practices range from languages and love for children through to free education, health care, and the democratic principle that all who are subject to institutions ought to play an active role in their governance. The universality of life-requirement provision

that defines the civil commons contrast with privacy of monetary benefit that defines the system-value that governs institutions today. All social institutions are marked by this contradiction. People love their children, but often express this love by buying them things which they in no sense require and which contribute to inculcating the habitual equation of enjoyment with the purchase of commodities. Publically funded health care in Canada is a civil commons institution, but it is continually eroded at the margins by the commodified medical industry. Education is a public civil commons good, but at the post-secondary level it is becoming increasingly commodified and bent to the purposes of private industry. Existing political institutions are formally democratic, but determined by the master purpose of protecting the existing structure of power and ruling value system, and thus not coherently anchored in protection and satisfaction of the shared life-interest.

My contention is that socialism indeed does not drop from the sky but finds its organic basis in the achieved level of civil commons development. Motivating people in the struggle for socialism is thus not a task, which even socialists sometimes present it as being, of winning people to an alien ideology, but disclosing how socialist values are already embodied in the civil commons function of existing institutions which people already support, and whose erosion they lament, if not always actively resist. The politically relevant contradiction, the one that socialists ought to focus people's attention on, is between the goodness of the civil commons function of these institutions, and the ways in which this actually existing goodness is negated to the extent that private money-value interests seize control. Let me illustrate my claim through the paradigmatic example of Canadian public health care.

The principle if not the complete practice of public medicine in Canada is "to each according to her or his need." People might debate the cogency of this principle in the abstract, but as concretely applied to medical care, the majority of Canadians consistently defend it. More importantly, by any metric one cares to choose: cost effectiveness, health outcomes, or equity of access it is demonstrably superior to commodified medicine (Armstrong, Armstrong, Bourgeault, Choniere, Lexchin,

Mykhalovsky, Peters, and White, 2004, p. 13-38). Thus public medical care is a real life, if partial and imperfect, realization of the socialist principle of distribution. When it is attacked, people mobilise to defend it. What they defend it from is the core distributive principle of capitalism: to each according to his or her ability to pay, regardless of his or her own or others' need. Yet, proponents of public medical care rarely

equate it with the demonstrably superior outcomes of the socialist principle of distribution that underlies it. "Socialism" is most often only mentioned by opponents who castigate it as such. Defenders typically bend over backwards trying to distance their defence of public medical care from socialism, and Marxists too often treat it as nothing more than a "reform" within capitalism. But this response misses a crucial opportunity to link socialism with a practice that enjoys majority support and actually works.

Of course it is true that a means of health care delivery is not a whole society. My point is not to claim that advanced capitalism is implicitly socialist. Nor I am not arguing that the path towards socialism can be advanced by what Erik Olin Wright calls "symbiotic" forms of social transformation (Wright, 2010, p. 337-365). Symbiotic forms of

social transformation are processes of social change which achieve real reform for workers and other subordinate groups while at the same time solve certain problems for capitalists. Universal suffrage is an example: it solved the problem of containing radical opposition to capitalism while also enabling workers to gain and use political power to advance certain other economic goals. Although real reform is possible through such strategies, fundamental social change is not. Eventually the logic of the existing system is going to put a stop to the evolving counter-logic of the alternative.

My point is thus not that radical change can be achieved by progressive reforms extended over an open ended time frame, but rather that past social struggles have created civil commons institutions which demonstrably function according to socialist principles. This point can become the centre of political education for mass mobilization— another world is possible because elements of it are actual, and have been made so through successful struggles. The fact that these institutions work better than market alternatives provides an organic basis for socialist politics. By "organic" I mean actually existing and functioning in the present as means of life-requirement satisfaction. Organic is to be contrasted with "theoretical," i.e., abstract arguments that claim to prove that a systematic socialist alternative to capitalism is possible, but whose plausibility depends entirely upon the internal logical cogency of argument. In other words, the term is meant to stress that the struggle for socialism occurs along an historical continuum of building up civil commons institutions whose real value is the universal enabling of life-coherent capacities through comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements. By arguing from the achieved level of civil commons development, and

demonstrating how this development demands collective as opposed to private appropriation of social wealth, socialists can refute the capitalist critique of socialism by embracing it. All that socialists need as an effective rejoinder is to say: yes it is socialist, and look, it actually works. Conceiving of socialism as an organic development out struggles oriented by the universal goal of comprehensive satisfaction of life requirements takes us beyond sterile debates about reform or revolution. The real problem is not constructing an abstract proof that capitalism is or is not reformable, but securing public control over life-sustaining and life-developing resources and institutions, and using them in life-coherent ways. The practicability of this task is proven by the existing level of civil commons development. The task of building socialism is thus a task of extending existing civil commons practices into the core economic and political systems of capitalist society. To conclude I will examine whether or not there are any existing practices which can serve as an organic basis from which to build struggles capable of transforming these core systems.

It is a well-known objection to capitalist democracy that it is at best incomplete because it does not extend into economic institutions (see for example Meiksins Wood, 1995). One of the great achievements in the history of socialist struggle is the development of workers' councils, novel political institutions through which the coercive economic power exercised by money-value and management as its servant over workers can be overcome. In the experience of the contemporary working class in North America and Europe there appear to be no analogues of workers councils. Hence the demand for workers councils would sound exactly like a demand "dropping from the sky" and be unlikely to mobilise significant numbers of people.

While there are no existing analogues of institutions like workers' councils in contemporary Western capitalism, there is a civil commons institution which embodies the principle of workplace democracy. That institution is the trade union understood as a forum in which workers debate together about how best to structure their conditions of work. Like other civil commons institutions under capitalism unions are imperfect expressions of the democratic principle of workers control of production because unions presuppose management as a bargaining opponent and the money-value system as the object of bargaining. Nevertheless, unions are an organic basis for socialist arguments in favour of the more comprehensive democratization of work life because, when they are functioning well, they draw workers out of self-enclosed con-

cern for doing their job and getting paid into political debates about how work life ought to be governed and what its universal social significance is. Without minimizing any of the challenges facing unions or the limitations of their current mode of operation, it remains true to say, as Hilary Wainwright recently has, that “unions are, in many countries, the largest, the best resourced, most stable, most institutional, and in some respects to most rooted ... movements in civil society...Unions can facilitate the organization of knowledge, practical actions, expert research, and popular expression of the mass of people to defend social needs and the means of meeting them” (Wainwright, 2011, p. 3). Consciously turned in the direction of contesting the authority of management at work and the rule of money-value over life-requirement satisfaction, unions could function as the organic foundation for deeper struggles for the democratization, i.e., the rule of the common life-interest within, economic life generally.

But is not the principle of the rule of the common life-interest the deepest justification of existing democratic institutions? The very first value affirmed by the American Declaration of Independence, for example, is “life.” Yet we know through observation that it is not the value of life that actually rules, but the power of money. Nevertheless, existing democratic institutions cannot openly reject the principle that they are designed to allow people to govern themselves in the shared life-interest, for to break openly with it would be to compromise the deepest legitimating value of liberal-democratic capitalism: freedom.

Thus the political institutions of existing liberal-democratic capitalism also provide an organic basis for the comprehensive life-coherent democratic institutions that socialism would require. Marx himself argued that the working class must win the battle of democracy (Marx and Engles, 1986, p. 53; see also Nimtz, 2000). Today I believe that struggles need to be organized around gaining political control of existing political institutions and using them for life-valuable ends. The age of revolutionary vanguardism and the “Noah complex” (the belief that nothing new can be built until the old world has been washed away) has passed (Collier, 2009, p. 98). While certainly far from perfect, the examples of Venezuela and Bolivia provide evidence that existing parliamentary institutions need not be instruments of class power, but can be transformed from institutions of class rule to institutions of genuine life-coherent democracy. The history of revolutionary vanguardism proves that the violent conquest of the existing ruling class does

not at all entail success in building a life-coherent society. The construction of a life-coherent alternative does not so much depend upon single-minded devotion to the cause—always a mindset that carries with it profound dangers—as it does learning to distinguish in every case between the life-value of a given institution and the system-value that prevents the full expression of that life-value. Radical political practice today depends not so much on the invention of new institutions as the fuller realization of the life-value of the existing institution. In the case of existing political institutions the life-value is that their legitimacy enables ruling parties to use state power to implement their agenda.

If this agenda is a comprehensive program of life-coherent social transformation, then its democratic legitimacy cannot be coherently contested by opponents. If its democratic legitimacy cannot be contested, then the only way in which it can be attacked is for opponents to drop all pretence to democracy and violently assert their particular interests against the universal life-interest. In doing so they deprive themselves of the legitimacy

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