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Self-constraint, Human Freedom, and the Conditions of Socialist Democracy

Jeff Noonan
University of Windsor

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“The re-discovery of Marx,” Marcello Musto argues, “is based on his persistent capacity to explain the present: he remains an indispensable instrument for understanding it and transforming it.” (Musto, 2012, 11-12). It is true that the continuity of problems connecting our world to Marx’s ensures the relevance of historical materialism. At the same time, changes in the structure and scale of capitalism, as well as failures of nineteenth and twentieth century socialism to build a democratic and life-affirming alternative, force twenty-first century socialists to risk new theoretical and practical departures. Yet, nowhere is a consistent ethical-political-economic foundation for twenty-first century socialism fully spelled out. The aim of this paper is to provide the missing foundations of a democratic and ecological socialism in the idea of *life-value* and the principle of *life-coherence* developed in the work of John McMurtry.

This principle is by and large absent from earlier conceptions of socialism that took their primary task to be the expansion of the forces of production once the fetters of capitalist relations of production had been cast off. Nor is it found in any significant way in the practice of contemporary social democrats. By contrast, it is found (in spirit, if not in word) disconnected from any idea of socialism in the work of ecological economists like Herman Daly. While Daly and other ecological economists understand the way in which the metrics of economic value in capitalism are blind to its life-destructive effects, they do not conclude that capitalism must be replaced with a democratic socialist life-economy, but its growth tendencies curtailed. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, those growth tendencies are not accidental features of capitalism, but generated by the competitive markets forces at its core.(Noonan, 2010, pp.109-130). The idea of life-value is even more clearly present in a variety of radical critiques of capitalism as systematically dominating and destructive of natural and human life grouped under the general heading of

‘ecofeminism.’ It was ecofeminists like Ariel Salleh who were in large part responsible for introducing the general idea of a life-economy, (a fact McMurtry has acknowledged). (McMurtry, 2013, p.362). In contrast to the sometimes arid formalism of Marxist political economy, Salleh and others were making the point—central to the argument that follows-- that contemporary capitalism is structured by “public institutions that are anti-life.”(Salleh, 1997, p. 81). Despite this shared critique of capitalism as “anti-life”, I believe that my argument is distinct from ecofeminism in that it is seeking, beneath any particular political, moral, or spiritual perspective the deepest conceptual basis for a unifying normative agreement between all *real* ro-life, anti-capitalist movements. The goal of this paper is to explicate the basic structure of that normative foundation. Space precludes the construction of an adequate political dialogue between my position and its ecological allies, whether they call themselves socialist or not.

The argument will be developed in three parts. In the first I will explain the idea of life-value and the principle of life-coherence. In the second I will uncover how twenty-first century socialists’ responses to contemporary crises imply the idea of life-value, and the consequences of their failure to make it explicit. In the third I will explain how those consequences can be avoided by specifying the *internal limitations* a life-coherent democratic socialism must recognise.

I: Life-Value and Capitalist Crisis

Human beings are biological and socially self-conscious beings. Human society depends upon maintaining constant connection with natural elements and resources which support and enable human life. However, since the good of human life is the meaningful realization of our life-capacities, definite forms of social institution and relationship are also human life-requirements. Natural or social life-requirements can be distinguished from consumer demands because deprivation of a life-requirement always results in objective harm.(McMurtry, 1998, 164).

In making this claim I do not mean to imply the value of the natural world lies exclusively in its instrumental life-value for human survival. Many forces in nature are threats to human life, while others may have intrinsic value apart from any connection to human survival. My point is that which is valuable for human beings is not purely a matter of convention or culture. Human values have an objective foundation in that which human beings require to live and develop, since if we cannot live and develop our symbolic and creative capacities, there will be no complex cultural worlds of artefacts and ideas to value.

Two examples will help to clarify my meaning. Food may be valued for its taste or its ritual value, but if it is not nutritious, the bodies that consume it will suffer ill-health and (at the extreme) early death. A similar point can be made in regards to social requirements of human life-capacity development. There are many ways in which people can become educated: formal schooling processes, apprenticeships, street learning. Nevertheless, if there is no development of cognitive and imaginative capacities beyond the initial level of development, there is no education. That which makes any process of structured interaction with a field of experience *educational* is that one emerges from it able to think and do more than before. When societies function as systems of life-capacity development, they do so by devoting resources to the satisfaction of these natural and social life-requirements.

Up to this point in history, however, the life-value of society has been compromised by its class structure and other forms of sexual and racialized domination. In class societies the ruling class has to meet three basic requirements to ensure their own perpetuation. This reproduction is a class project, and not, as Lise Vogel rightly argues, a mere function of a system's needs for labour power which are "inevitably ... fulfilled by the workings of that system." (Vogel, 1983, 144). The first requirement, as social reproduction theorists like Vogel have emphasised, is to ensure the reproduction of the labouring population, typically through different forms of patriarchal

domination of the life-bearing and life-rearing labour of women. As Vogel argues, “If children are to be born, it is women who will carry and deliver them. Women belonging to the subordinate class have, therefore, a special role with respect to the generational replacement of labor power [which] ... lies at the root of their oppression in class society.” (Vogel, 1983, 145) Beyond the problem of generational reproduction, the ruling class must also ensure the survival of the working populations, at a level of material culture sufficient to ensure their ability produce. Finally, they must ensure the compliance of subaltern groups with the ruling value system and structure of power.

Any actual society is a complex dynamic system riven by contradictions and contestations generated by the struggles of subaltern groups against their objectification by ruling class power, the reduction of the value of their lives to their function as tools of reproducing the given structure of power and wealth, and the systematic way in which they are deprived of that which their lives require to develop and flourish. Given the fact that oppression of all sorts always involves real deprivation, liberation has typically—and understandably—been conceived of in terms of full and free need satisfaction and self-determination. In the socialist tradition this conception it has typically failed to pay *explicit* attention to the deleterious environmental impacts that full and free need-satisfaction and self-determination with no life-grounding could have. Not everything that a person might demand is something that a person really requires in order to live and live well; not everything a society is technologically capable of producing is worth producing. At this point in human history, the growth of life-value depends often upon constraints on actions that are now technically possible (e.g., increasing CO₂ emissions) but life-destructive.

The crucial question for critics of contemporary capitalism is thus the form constraint will take. Will it be imposed from above or will it emerge as an integral element of revolutionary demands from below, as an essential element of a new set of human values? And what will those new values economic values be? Subsistence, as ecofeminists like Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies

argue? While they provide a nuanced and complex understanding of subsistence economies that proves that happiness and meaning do not depend upon Western-capitalist conceptions of material abundance, subsistence strikes me as too limiting and confining a basis for a new ruling value system. The way in which Bennholdt's and Mies' book was composed illustrates the reason why. They derived their conclusions from conversations with women from a variety of subsistence agriculture communities around the world, which required them to travel. The point is not that they are hypocrites, but rather that their curiosity and desire to learn caused them to travel and converse and expand their knowledge beyond their own local horizons. The conversations and the learning thus presupposes a technological capacity to move beyond the local that seems inconsistent with the "subsistence perspective." To be sure, any democratic life-economy must start from and preserve "life and everything necessary to produce and maintain it," but it can do so and still incorporate the capacity for growth and development, provided growth and development is governed in the shared life-interest. (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 1999, p. 5). This point also holds against the "de-growth" strategy defended by Mauro Bonaiuti. (Bonaiuti, 2012, pp. 35-50). The really decisive issue is not growth or de-growth, but growth of what? As Saed argues in opposition to the critique of growth in the abstract, "not all forms of economic growth have the same effects, environmentally or socially." (Saed, 2012, p. 28). What is required is a criterion to distinguish life-valuable growth (of access to nutritious food, education, of mutuality and reciprocity, beauty) from life-destructive growth (of waste, of deadly commodities, etc).

I suggest that McMurtry's *principle of life-coherence* can do this essential job. (McMurtry, 2011, 14). It gives the idea of sustainable development ethical and political substance by anchoring it in people's consciousness of their own good and the good of the societies which they are struggling to build. In its technocratic formulation sustainable development means on-going capitalist exploitation of the natural world, with the exploitation of labour never mentioned. By contrast, life-

coherent *use* of the natural world is limited to the production of goods that meet one or more real life-requirements, and through forms of labour—productive and reproductive-- that are meaningful and valuable to the labourers. Life-coherent societies can reduce the demands they make on natural wealth and at the same time increase the value of their members lives, by freeing their time and energy from alienated labour and hierarchical, oppressive relationships.

The principle of life-coherence yields a new way of thinking about social crises that brings to light what is really at stake for human beings when the three ruling class projects noted above fail. Nature, life-capacities, and social institutions have intrinsic life-value. Social crises are not essentially caused by contradictions between the relations and forces of production, but by rebellions against the ways in which nature, human beings, their social institutions and life-capacities are reduced to instruments of ruling class power. Hence social crises involve the human relationship to nature, to each other, and to our own selves as goal-directed agents seeking to unfold our capacities in life-coherent ways. I will treat each of these dimensions of capitalist life-crisis in turn.

Economic health in a capitalist society requires economic growth. As David Harvey argues, “capital is not a thing but a process in which money is perpetually sent in search of more money.” (Harvey, 2010, 40). The growth of capitalist money-value ultimately runs up against natural limits, since it requires more resources, more energy, and produces more waste. Yet, the metric of evaluating economic health by the growth of money-value is blind to the accumulating destruction of the natural conditions of life-support. “The economic signals and incentives generated by the wage labour relationship,” Paul Burkett notes, “do not, and cannot, encompass the requirements of a healthy and sustainable economy-environment interaction. They can only encompass the environmental requirements of value accumulation.” (Burkett, 2006, 293) Those requirements do not take into account considerations of open-ended sustainability, nor do they consider the intrinsic life-value of the creatures and ecosystems permanently destroyed in the name

of profit.

It is thus true, as John Bellamy Foster argues, that capitalism sees nature as “a mere instrument of world social domination.” (Foster, 2009, 46) The domination of nature, understood as a capitalist class project, necessarily involves domination over human beings who are forced by their dependence on wage labor into alienating and life-destructive work. Our capacity to value things for their own sake is corrupted into the capacity to discover market niches and untapped sources of money-value. Our capacity to care for each other is corrupted into the capacity to create new consumer demand for products not required by a meaningful life (e.g., slimmer smartphones). Finally, our capacity to care for ourselves, our desire for a meaningful life, is corrupted into the need to find paid employment.

As embodied social self-conscious agents, human beings are capable of understanding the interdependencies and interrelationships with nature and other life, both human and non-human, that the development of their defining life-projects require. Freedom is thus not, as liberal philosophy would have it, independence from other people posited as barriers to self-expression. The ability of individuals to act freely depends upon relationships to nature and other people that satisfy their real life-requirements and a willingness to realise their projects in ways that contribute back to nature and society. The need to contribute back is a fundamental condition of a life-coherent democratic society. To not give back is to undermine the material conditions of life and free activity. Materially rational democratic self-consciousness is rooted in this understanding of what is required for society to carry on so that its individual members can flourish. In understanding the *shared* conditions of life and development one understands the conditions of *one's own* conditions of life and development.

In order to understand this point fully democracy as ideological legitimation for the reproduction of capitalism must be distinguished from democracy as a life-valuable form of self-

government across different social institutions. As ideological, democracy is understood as a formal system in which the people rule for the sake of safeguarding their liberties. From this perspective, any limitation on the “right to choose,” even *collectively determined self-limitations*, will be attacked as tyrannical. What is really being protected is not the conditions of free choice of ways of life, but the freedom of the ruling class to accumulate money, with life’s real conditions unsustainably consumed as means. Life-valuable democracy, by contrast, depends upon the capacity of citizens to make materially rational decisions on the basis of a clear understanding of their real conditions of life. Materially rational free choices respect the general natural and social conditions outside of which life, (and therefore, by extension, choice), is impossible. Materially rational choices enable further choice by ensuring that the material conditions of life are preserved, developed, and extended.

The preservation, development, and extension of these material conditions of life cannot be ensured under capitalism. The core of capitalist crisis at the level of society is that it exploits formally democratic institutions for materially irrational, and therefore, ultimately, systematically undemocratic ends. Because the capitalist class controls that which all people require to live and live well, they are able to determine the goals of political action, even in societies which are nominally democratic, and even when those goals are not in people’s shared interests in determining together how scarce resources can best be utilised in sustainable ways. Typically, those resources are utilised in ways that maximise the production of money-value regardless of the costs to human and planetary life, with even traditional workers’ defence organizations like unions going along, because their members are dependent, within the horizons of capitalist society, on the wage labour employment provides. For example, Unifor, the largest private-sector union in Canada, supports the construction of an East-West pipeline to carry crude from the oil sands of Alberta to a refinery in

Saint John New Brunswick, despite the well-known environmental devastation to ecosystems and the health of First Nations communities that work in the oil sands causes. (Rosenfeld, 2013).

The problem here is not short-sighted, economistic union leadership, but, as Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, the dependence of human life on access to labour and consumer markets. “The market,” she argues, [plays] an unprecedented role in capitalist society, as not only a simple mechanism of exchange and distribution but the principle determinant and regulator of social reproduction.” (Meiksins Wood, 2002, 97). By allocating labour and resources according to calculations of money-profit and not life-requirement satisfaction, capitalist markets dominate rather than liberate people. Since economic institutions are absolutely essential to social life, the class that controls economic institutions can colonise the functions of other social institutions, subverting their nominally democratic character. As Erik Olin Wright argues,

the democratic collectivity has very limited power to ask the question: how should we allocate *the aggregate social surplus* to different priorities The issue here is not simply that many of these decisions are made outside of democratic deliberation, but that because investments are made privately, the threat of disinvestment heavily constrains all other allocative decisions within democratic bodies. (Olin Wright, 2012, 83).

Where democracy plays either no or a severely circumscribed role in determining how social wealth is produced and distributed, a life-crisis affecting major social institutions is generated. Once the majority of citizens awake to the disconnect between their common life-interests and the ruling value-system, opposition to the prevailing value-disorder arises (Occupy, struggles against austerity in Europe and North America, the Arab Spring). These movements sought to reconnect the political value of democratic voice to the social value of collective self-government, not only as an intrinsic value, but also for the sake of comprehensive and universal satisfaction of life-requirements, against the tyranny of money-value, domestic or foreign. (Noonan, 2013).

Just as natural life-support systems enable the development of human societies, so to human societies enable the development and enjoyment good individual lives. The natural, social, and

individual levels of life-organization are interrelated in a dialectical circle: natural life-support systems enable societies to develop, societies enable the growth and development of individuals, individuals conscious of the natural and social conditions of their own life-development and enjoyment posit and pursue life-projects which seek to maintain and improve the health of natural life-support systems and the justice of social life-development systems. While all levels of life-organization are essential, it is in individual consciousness and activity that the intrinsic value of life-capacity expression and enjoyment is realized.

From the life-value perspective, the purpose of social life is the creation of the conditions required for the free expression of the capacities to sense and feel, to think and imagine, to move and create, and to mutualistically relate to other human beings. Human life becomes meaningful and good to the extent that it transcends the evolutionary imperative of mere survival to become rich in the enjoyed expression of life-capacities through which individuals contribute *as individuals* to the on-going construction and development of human social life. For example, education goes beyond animal survival techniques to enable the developing mind to value learning as an end in itself; government is not simply about maintaining order, but bringing different people into conversation so that collective life can be freely governed. As McMurtry argues,

Against this ruling arbitrariness of rights, life-value understanding re-grounds thought and analysis at the level of human life necessities and capacities and, therefore, in the ecological support systems that make them possible at the same time. This is the *ecology of life value and justice* underpinning the regulating whole..” (McMurtry, 2011, 20).

Capitalism reproduces itself not only through class exploitation, patriarchal domination, and racial division, it also anchors itself in the desires of individual people for good and meaningful lives.

Once the demands of capitalism have been internalized in this way, “every person speculates on creating a *new* need in another, so as to drive him to fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence.” (Marx, 1975, 306). Capitalism exploits the desire for a meaningful and good life as

sales opportunities to move consumer goods whose consumption promises fulfillment but leads only to emptiness. Bill McKibben cites studies dating back to the 1950's that reveal that Americans believe that material progress will continue, and that it will not increase their "inner happiness." (McKibben, 2004, 125). David Schweickhart speculates that an alien anthropologist observing life under capitalism, would be "perplexed to learn that new technologies allow us to produce ever more goods with ever less labour, and yet the intensity of work ... has increased." (Schweickart, 2011, 107). The alien visitor's perplexity would increase when it realized that this drive both deepens the servitude of people who desire to be free and threatens the natural basis upon which their lives depend. The crisis at the individual level of life organization links back, via the mediation of the social dynamics of capitalism, to the fundamental crisis at the level of natural life-organization.

The reproduction of capitalism depends upon selling commodities at a profit, whether those commodities have life-value (poetry, nutritious food), no life-value, (Mardi Gras beads, giant screen televisions), or are life-destructive (hand guns, junk food). Social institutions become geared to ensuring the expanded reproduction of capital and not the sustainable, universal, and comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements. The subordination of the life-value of social institutions to their role as agents of the reproduction of capital is rooted in dependence and force, but also requires individuals who are shaped to demand only that which the system can provide. Hard work is rewarded with wages which can be 'freely' spent on commodities that promise 'happiness.' However, since capitalism judges good and bad only on the basis of more or less money-value, it is systematically blind to the way in which its "healthy" operations undermines the natural basis of life-support, confuses democratic freedom with servitude to markets at the social-institutional level of life-organization, and alienated wage labour and consumption with meaningful and good human lives at the individual-ethical level.

II: Twenty-first Century Socialism and Life-Value

Capitalism is in crisis today because it can no longer successfully realize the projects of social reproduction, productive integration of the working class, and ideological domination of consciousness in sustainable and satisfying ways. The socialist solution to the tripartite crisis of capitalism must respond to each of its dimensions, with a conception of socialism that convinces the people exploited, oppressed, and alienated by capitalism that there is a sustainable and democratic alternative that can overcome not only class exploitation, but the oppression of women and the racially and sexually subaltern, not only environmental crisis but also the instrumentalizing domination of human beings over the natural world. In this section I will argue that life-valuable goals have been implicit in the socialist project going back to Marx, but that they need to be made explicit. Working class control over production is not an end in itself, but a means by which a comprehensive re-valuation of nature, human life-requirements, human life-capacities, and human relationships can be accomplished.

The implied life-value basis of Marx's conception of socialism is summed up in the aphorism: "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." (Marx, 1978, 531). For Marx, the very essence of socialism was the use of resources to satisfy needs for the sake of enabling individuals to realize their capacities in ways that contribute to the satisfaction of others' needs. The vision that underlies this principle is thus not narrowly 'economic;' it is essentially ethical, focussed on a conception of the good for human beings as the contributions each can make to the lives of others with whom they share a society. Recovery of this radically different and life-valuable understanding of the individual good has been central to the revitalized socialist vision of the twenty-first century. This revitalized vision has, according to Michael Lebowitz, rejected "productivist" interpretations of socialism for a vision which places "human beings at the centre." (Lebowitz, 2010, 21).

For Lebowitz, placing human beings at centre of the socialist project means that the essential value served by socialism is real human development, which is conceived as communities of people working together mutualistically. By “producing as members of a human family,” Lebowitz argues, “each produces consciously for the sake of satisfying the needs of others.” (Lebowitz, 2010, 79). On the one hand, this is a naïve view of the reality of much family life under patriarchal conditions. On the other, it is useful as a foil against which the depth problem of capitalist work relationships becomes apparent. Work under capitalism is not for the sake of satisfying needs, and it is not necessary to care about anything—the natural costs, the social contribution or lack thereof, the meaning or lack thereof of the work itself—while doing it. Overcoming alienated labour is thus central to Lebowitz’s humanistic socialism in which work becomes valuable *as* a form of life-capacity expression that is enjoyed because it helps meet others’ needs.

The idea that the individual good is essentially linked to the contributions one’s work makes to the lives of others in the local and global community it makes to its community also underlies David McNally’s defence of the possibility of a world other than that envisaged by capitalist globalization. This new world would be “a place in which people have escaped commodification to live as free beings, as ends in themselves, ... where nature is no longer destroyed, ... where people are celebrated in the richness of their diversity.” (McNally, 2002, 275). It underlies the more systematically theoretical defence of the necessity of socialism undertaken by Istvan Meszaros. “The positive alternative” to capitalism, he argues, is “a social reproductive order consciously regulated by the associated individuals” on the basis of “values chosen by social individuals themselves, in accordance with their real needs.” (Meszaros, 2008, 245.) It is also ethically foundational in the analytic Marxist attempt to connect the socialist project to democratic egalitarianism. G.A. Cohen’s final defence of the socialist project before he died grounded socialism in a principle of “communal reciprocity ... according to which I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so, but

because you need or want my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me.” (Cohen, 2009, 39). What is lacking in each of these expressions of the humanistic values underlying the twenty-first century socialist project is any systematic demonstration that real needs *limit* our demands against nature and human capacities *worth developing* are such because they make a positive contribution to the natural and social worlds in which they are realized.

Socialist society must therefore create new institutions of economic democracy. A great deal of work has been done by theorists like David Schweickhart and Michael Albert to construct new models of democratic social organization, but I believe that it is in the work of Pat Devine that one finds the most coherent, rich and workable conception of a democratic socialist economy. The essential principle of Devine’s model of negotiated coordination is that a democratic socialist economy must abandon the metric of value of capitalist society—monetary profit and loss—and regulating dynamics—market forces-- for values and regulations grounded in democratic deliberation. “In capitalism, the criterion in terms of which choices are made is the potential or actual private profitability of an innovation, enforced by the coercive pressure of market forces. In our model, a pluralistic set of criteria, discursively arrived at and revised, would inform a deliberative process for evaluating innovation in terms of its socially productive, unproductive, or destructive potential, paying due attention to the precautionary principle.” (Devine and Adaman, 2001, 235; Devine, 1988). While this reformulation specifies the democratic nature of socialist economies, and hints at, through its reference to the precautionary principle, the need to limit economic activity by considerations of sustainability as I defined it above, Devine does not make the life-value basis of his model explicit.

The closest that twenty-first century socialism comes to systematic explication of the connection between socialism and a democratic life-economy is in the wide body of literature connecting Marxism to the ecological critique of capitalist growth dynamics. Ecologically re-

interpreted Marxism has not only grasped the necessary contradiction between capitalist and environmental health, but also, as a consequence, the need to expand the socialist understanding of value beyond the use-value-exchange value dichotomy. In this deepened vision, socialist production is not only about the priority of use-values, it must also make room for what Kovel calls “intrinsic values.” He identifies intrinsic values with non-appropriative, non-exploitative, experiential relations between human beings as a species and the natural world and between human beings as individual members of communities. “Clearly, use-value is necessary for human-life; and one might venture to say that a realized, ecologically integral life can be carried out through a rich interplay of use-value-as-utility with intrinsic value, through a combined transformative and receptive relation to nature.” (Kovel, 2007, 213). In other words, human beings will always have to appropriate resources from nature in order to live, but the essential value of life is not found in these material relationships through which nature is objectified and instrumentalized, but in the non-destructive experiential relationships to things and other people as intrinsically valuable (beauty, love, etc) that the objectifying relationships make possible.

I agree with Kovel that the good life for human beings is determined by the range and depth of the intrinsic values we are able to experience over the course of a lifetime, and that the justification for socialist relations or production is to ensure the satisfaction of necessary conditions for the experience of intrinsic value. Where my position differs is on the problem of specifying limits to the range of intrinsic values a socialist society strives to create. Gamers, for example, regard a life immersed in virtual reality on-line gaming as intrinsically valuable, even though it can become addictive to the point of death. As an element of a good life socialists might be able to accept on-line gaming, but as an exclusive focus that so overwhelms one’s identity that one cannot stop to re-engage in even the basic functions required by our bodies the activity becomes pathological, though still intrinsically valuable to the player. The upshot is that intrinsic values are not necessarily life

values just because they are valued for themselves and not for the sake of something else. This crucial point needs spelling out if socialist value is to cohere with the conditions not only of biological life, but good and meaningful lives.

As central as needs and capacities have been to the ethical foundation of the democratic socialist project, a crucial distinction has never been made. (Heller, 1976, Fraser 1998). This distinction is between *need* as a demand for something which satisfies an instrumental requirement of whatever project a person happens to conceive, and need as *an instrumental life-requirement for the fuller development and expression of fundamental life-capacities*. The distinction is important because if need is identified with demand for the instrumental requirements for the successful realization of *any* project whatsoever, the aphorism, “to each according to his need” fails to challenge the potentially limitless demand on resources which underlies the fundamental form of capitalist life-incoherence- limitless economic growth in a materially finite world. Kovel, for example, argues that “every commodity is defined by its use-value, and this, too, is necessarily a function of need, which in turn is a function of want, which in turn is a function of desire.” (Kovel, 2007, 112). If need is the normative basis for legitimate claims on resources, but grounded in desires, rather than in what life-valuable capacity expression objectively requires, then Kovel has no principled way of rejecting arguments of the form: I need whatever I happen to desire, therefore socialist society is obliged by its fundamental normative principle to satisfy all of my desires. If I have a desire for a green lawn, and a green lawn requires water, then, if needs are grounded in desires and ought to be satisfied in a socialist society, my desire gives me a legitimate claim on water for my lawn, even if I live in the desert where water is scarce and also needed to grow food. Clearly, given Kovel’s arguments regarding the ultimate grounding of use-value in intrinsic value, he does not intend to affirm capitalist consumer psychology and its conflation of the distinction between need and desire. However, the only way to make his practical economic arguments consistent with his ultimate ethical and political goals is to

make the explicit the distinction between needs as demands rooted in desires and needs as life-requirements rooted in the organic and social conditions of life-maintenance and development. If socialist society is the solution to capitalist life-crises, then it must convince its members that it is not contrary to but a component of their good to limit their demands on nature and other people, not only for the sake of sheer sustainability, but so that there is space for the flourishing of other life forms (whose beauty we can appreciate) and a myriad of forms of human life-expression (from which we can learn and develop).

The same argument holds in relation to the idea that it is the expression of life-capacities that ultimately make life meaningful and good. The point must be made explicit that the good ways of expressing our capacities for experience, cognition, imagination, creative activity and mutualistic relationship are limited by considerations of environmental carrying capacity and the life-interests of other people. In other words, not any capacity at all in any form one chooses is good, but only those which are not permanently destructive of essential aspects of the natural world and which contribute in some valuable and valued way to the lives of others. If we assign intrinsic value to capacity expression without these limitations built in, then it is possible that individual means of realizing capacities can give rise to destructive patterns of social activity, even where resources are collectively controlled by the direct producers. As it stands, the twenty-first century socialist vision asserts, as did Marx, the essential link between the intrinsic good of capacity realization and enjoyment and the instrumental good of satisfying others' needs, but it does not explicate how this link is to be made life-coherent. At the extreme, socialist affirmations of capacity expression of the good veer off towards liberal neutrality about forms of the good life. Erik Olin Wright argues, for example, that "the idea of human flourishing is neutral with respect to the various ways of life that can be constructed around particular ways of flourishing." It is of course true, as he notes, "that people have many potentials, and it is impossible in general that all of these potentials can be

realized, regardless of access to material and social means.” (Olin Wright, 2010, 14). But Wright’s argument confuses this general existential condition of human being—the need to choose between different possibilities for self-realization—with a political principle—neutrality between ways of human flourishing. If socialists were really neutral, they would have nothing coherently critical to argue against capitalist ways of “flourishing.” Thus, the socialist affirmation of capacity expression and enjoyment cannot mean: do what you feel like regardless of its impact on nature and other people, but rather: individuate yourself as a socially self-conscious creative agent through projects that deepen the communal bonds that organize society as an ethical whole by satisfying others’ life-requirements in ways that are sustainable over an open-ended human future.

The potential for socialism to itself become inconsistent with the natural conditions of life-reproduction and the social conditions for life-valuable capacity expression and enjoyment cannot be resolved by pointing to the fact that socialism would be a democratic economy in which workplaces, investment decisions, and the forms and pace of economic development will be governed by the collective decisions of the associated producers. Class consciousness must itself be life-grounded, that is, consciousness of the shared interests of workers in controlling the means of production must itself be understood as one form of the expression of the more universal human life-interest in forms of social organization, relationship, and individual activity that are meaningful and sustainable over the open-ended future of the species. Otherwise, socialists can succumb to the neo-classical illusion that there are always technological substitutes for natural resources. Harvey exemplifies this danger when he argues that “the concept of natural resources are, for example, technical, social, and cultural appraisals, and so any apparent natural scarcity can in principle be mitigated, if not totally circumvented, by technological, social, or cultural changes.” (Harvey, 2010, 73). While it is possible to, for example, mitigate the scarcity of oil by increased use of solar energy, there is no mitigating an absolute scarcity of water, should such a scarcity arise (as a consequence of

climate change) since water is a non-substitutable condition of organic life. The upshot of this argument is that unless economic democracy is consciously anchored in substantive life-values that function as internal constraints on legitimate outcomes, then even a democratic socialist economy in which all resources are under the collective control of the direct producers could fail to resolve capitalist life-crisis.

This conclusion is implicitly recognised in Meszaros' understanding of socialist democracy, but is again not fully explicated: "Even the smallest relations of the alternative system are deeply embedded in the general value determinations of an overall framework of human needs whose inviolable elementary axiom is the radical exclusion of waste and destruction, in accordance with its innermost nature." (Meszaros, 2008, 283). The crucial implication of the link that Meszaros establishes between socialist democracy, human needs, and the elimination of waste and destruction is that socialism can only ensure the resolution of capitalist life-crises is if it understands how the life-coherence principle must function as an internal limitation, not external constraint, upon the formulation of materially rational, good, public policy and individual choice of life-project. I will explicate that link in the concluding section.

III: Life-Coherence as the Constitutive Principle of Socialist Freedom

Capitalism has historically justified itself as a society which maximises liberty, freedom of choice, and democracy. It claims to have successfully removed as many external constraints on human freedom as is compatible with there being any social order at all. From the capitalist perspective, socialist demands for public institutions that support and serve shared values and goals,, for workers control over production, for democratic determination of socio-economic priorities, with targeted investment of social wealth to overcome structural inequalities and to redress the material implications of centuries of oppressive hierarchization, all appear as regressive and tyrannical re-introductions of external constraints on human activity. If the capitalist argument is

true, then it follows, *a fortiori*, that the principle that democratic governance of social life must itself be constrained by the life-coherence principle is also a tyrannical constraint on freedom. It is even possible that some socialists would agree with the argument in so far as it appears to be an external constraint on collective self-determination. Such a conclusion would, however, commit the same error as the capitalist critique of socialist *governance* of the economy. That error would be to confuse an external constraint with internal constitutive conditions of possibility. Freedom is contradicted by external constraints, but constituted as a material reality by its internal constitutive conditions of possibility. Wherever this conceptual confusion takes hold, life-incoherent results are generated.

In capitalist society this confusion leads to demands that all constraints on economic growth: considerations of ecological integrity, governmental, cultural, educational, scientific and medical institutions serving purposes of human development rather than capital accumulation, and individuals who set goals for themselves that reject market values be *removed* because they are external constraints on freedom. If we consider the same problem from the standpoint of life-value, then it becomes apparent that these *are not* external constraints on human freedom, but rather internal constitutive conditions of its material possibility. They are external constraints on the *growth of capital*, but the growth of capital is not identical with the growth of human freedom. On the contrary, over the long term, capitalist dynamics contradict the natural and social conditions of human freedom, which is why it generates life-crises at the natural, social, and individual levels of life-organization.

The fundamental practical changes that a democratic socialist society would enact: comprehensive environmental regulations designed to lower the human impact on planetary life and life-support systems, the open-ended sustainability of levels of production and consumption as a frame within which democratic economic planning takes place, health and safety regulations, demands that work enable workers to make valuable and valued contributions to the lives of others

now and in the future, cultural institutions funded by a portion of the social product which allow free reign to human creativity, publically funded educational and medical and scientific institutions, and democratic decisions as to how social wealth is to be allocated and how workplaces are to be managed- are not external constraints on human freedom, they are its internal constitutive conditions of possibility. To better understand the crucial difference between external constraints and internal constitutive conditions of possibility, consider a simple example.

I am an organism that must eat in order to have the energy required to fuel the metabolic functions that underlie my conscious, creative activities. The fact that I must eat is not an external constraint on my freedom, it is an internal constitutive condition of what it is to be a human being, and thus integral to the conditions of any materially real freedom. If I did not have to eat I would not become more free, I would no longer be an embodied human being, and the category 'human freedom' would not apply to me. Recognition of internal constitutive conditions is identical to understanding the necessary conditions of a thing's being and doing that which it is and is capable of doing. External constraints impede the satisfaction of these internal constitutive conditions, thus undermining the material possibility of the thing's doing or being that which it is. Insisting that internal constitutive conditions be recognized and satisfied is the very opposite of imposing external constraints on freedom. We have seen the way in which capitalist ideology confuses external constraints on capital with external constraints on freedom. We must also recognise the danger that socialists can make this category mistake as well.

It is possible to imagine an argument against the principle of life-coherence that rejected it as an external constraint on the freedom of the associated producers to decide collectively what and how to produce. For example, Schweickart argues that workers in his model of economic democracy might opt to continue high consumption lifestyles, even though they know the levels of resource consumption it demanded are unsustainable. "It cannot be said with certainty that a serious

attempt at ecological sanity will ever be made. Economic Democracy, is, after all, a democracy—and hence the quality of its general will is dependent on the particular wills of the individual citizen.” (Schweickart, 2011, 151). While Schweickart goes on to add that it would be surprising, if not absurd, that workers in control of production would collectively decide to use those hard won gains to continue environmentally destructive forms of production and consumption, such a decision cannot be ruled out unless, as I argued above, class consciousness is expressed as one mode of more deeply life-grounded consciousness. When workers focus narrowly on income and not on the overall contribution that their work makes—to meaning in their own lives, to life-requirement satisfaction in the lives of others, to the future—they can make life-destructive decisions. Consider the case of Yugoslavia under Tito. While by no means a fully realized democratic socialist society, there were elements of workers’ control over production. One of its key problems, Lebowitz has shown, was that workers tended to favour relinquishing democratic control to managers who could consistently produce higher returns, and thus more income for themselves. (Lebowitz, 2006, 76). While it could be objected that the consciousness of such workers was still alienated, the example nevertheless reveals a danger—so long as one requires income as means of exchange (and any democratic socialist economy is going to have to preserve this practice for a long time) people might continue to demand higher income and higher consumption at the expense of the long term future.

If socialism is to be the solution to capitalist life-crises, *then it follows that the life-coherence principle is the internal constitutive principle of socialism as a democratic life-economy.* This principle does not violate, but rather specifies, the necessary conditions, at the natural, social, and individual levels, of free human life. Concretely, the principle of life-coherence mandates that economic activity be sustainable over an open ended future, that social institutions be governed by the life-requirements they developed to satisfy, and that individuals create good lives for themselves by making

meaningful contributions to the natural and social world of which they are members. These are the values central to the history of the socialist project, reinterpreted from the life value standpoint.

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