

# **LIFE-BLIND LIBERALISM AND LIFE GROUNDED DEMOCRACY**

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## **Summary**

The chapter examines the development, in theory and practice, of liberal democracy from a life-grounded perspective. The chapter traces the development to a conflict between the rights ground and the needs ground of social morality. The liberal rights ground has traditionally subordinated access to need-satisfying resources to those with the ability of pay for them. The needs ground, by contrast, resisted the life-destructive effects of liberal property rights. Liberal democracy is the outcome of the democratization of liberal society which, in its classical form, was neither democratic nor life-grounded. The real gains of liberal democracy from the standpoint of the interests of life have been eroded by the gains of a new corporate rights ground which is at the root of the globalization of capitalist market dynamics. The chapter concludes with an overview of life-grounded responses to these new threats.

## **1. Introduction**

One can think of a democratic society as a whole composed of individual wholes. Individuals are integral centers of need and capacity for physical and cognitive activity defined by their potential to create their life according to a self-given project. Individuals are, at the same time, interdependent social beings who can achieve nothing meaningful outside of social institutions designed and governed for the sake of the well-being of the people whose commitment sustains them. Thus there is an intrinsic link

between the well-being of people and democratic institutions. Only when people themselves can participate in the design, governance, and functioning of major social institutions can they be said to enjoy human well-being, for only then is their highest potential realized on the social level of being. Unlike undemocratic societies, the institutions of a democratic society are not oppressive burdens to be borne by the citizens but the objective expression of their freedom. The social whole (institutions) exists for the good of the individual's wholes, rather than the individuals existing for the sake of the perpetuation of the institutions and the private good of the class that controls them.

If democratic freedom entails that the citizens of a democratic society are collectively self-determining in the ultimate interest of their individual well-being, then it follows that all major social institutions must ultimately be governed by their universal life-interest in need-satisfaction and capacity development. Otherwise, the material conditions of their defining potential for freedom are left outside of their collective power, and their actuality would be in contradiction with their human potentiality. More concretely, if the economic dynamics of a putatively democratic society are not subordinated to the universal life-interests of the citizens, but are instead allowed to operate 'free' of democratic power solely according to the goal of their own self-expansion as measured by the growth of money-profits, then the freedom of the citizens of that society must inevitably be in contradiction to the freedom of those economic dynamics. Since their freedom depends upon collective life-grounded use of natural and social wealth in the service of their self-given projects, while the 'freedom' of the economic system depends upon the subordination of all needs and capacities to its overriding interest in the growth of money, the two freedoms cannot coexist in any stable configuration but must be in constant opposition until one or the other is victorious. Those contemporary societies called liberal-democratic manifest this contradiction.

The contradiction is essentially social. As noted above, a society that claims to be democratic implies by this claim that the universal life-interests of its citizens in need-satisfaction and capacity development govern major social institutions, including, especially, the economic system. Actual societies, however, allow private and exclusive corporate control over the sources and institutions of need-satisfying and life-engendering wealth. Governments willingly acquiesce in the de-regulation of economic systems and brow-beat their citizens into accepting the reduction of their life-activity to whatever the 'market decides.' In so doing these governments prove that it is not collective power and free thought that determine the course of public policy and individual life, but corporate property rights that rule. Collective self-determination is trumped by market mechanisms dominated by corporate right; the price of freedom, everyone is told, is to 'let the market decide' every problem of substance. But to let a reified power decide issues of substance is by definition not to decide for ourselves. If we are not deciding those crucial issues for ourselves then we do not live in a self-determining society. If we do not live in a self-determining society we do not live in a democratic society.

In order to understand the grounds for this conclusion a conceptual and historical investigation of the development of the societies which are called democratic is

necessary. The first section of this investigation will spell out the necessary conceptual framework of a critical understanding of democratic society. The second section will chart the contradictory sources of liberal-democratic capitalist society. The third will explain conceptually the contradiction between liberal capitalism and democracy and disclose the systematic inadequacy of contemporary liberal-democratic philosophy. The fourth will return to the practical level and demonstrate the antithetical relationship between capitalist globalization and democracy. Finally, the fifth section will identify and explain the sources of life-grounded democratic development today.

## **2. Conceptual Framework: Value Systems and Grounds of Social Morality**

The dominant traditions in liberal ethical and political philosophy treat values as the abstract products of atomistic egos reasoning self-interestedly. What this approach cannot explain is, on the one hand, the uniformity of values between people in given social formations and, on the other hand, the opposition between values that emerges in periods of social conflict and transformation. If we are to explain normative continuity and conflict a deeper and more systematic approach to the origin of values is necessary. Values in general we can define as reasons or goods that orient conscious action. Their foundation is not the atomic ego but rather fundamental interests in relation to objects of significance that follow from different social positions in given social formations. Oppositions of value then follow from different interests in relation to different objects which attach to different social positions and point toward different social formations. To analyze values in this deep structural way is not to reduce human consciousness to a mere function of a system. Human beings can reflect upon and change the values that orient their actions, and, in the process develop and deepen definite value commitments. This social process of value transformation, however, is quite distinct from creating values *ex nihilo*.

To understand shared values on the basis of which given social formations reproduce themselves requires two distinct levels of analysis. At the level of society as a whole it is possible to determine the operation of a value system at work in its major institutions and, so long as it remains stable, anchored in the consciousness of the majority of its members. Value systems, in John McMurtry's definition, "connect together goods that are affirmed and bads that are repudiated as an integrated way of thinking and acting in the world." These value systems may be secular or religious and be explicated through apparently distinct philosophical theories. No matter what the stated ground or interpretation, however, no socially dominant value system will permit any affirmation of values that challenge its hegemony and the social interests that it serves.

Thus the function of a value system is to produce commitment in the body of citizens to living their lives in such a way that the society reproduces itself from generation to generation. In order for social reproduction to be successful, however, people must work together (at least unconsciously) to produce the goods and services that everyone needs in order to survive. At the decisive level of the socio-economic system one finds regulating normative principles that I call the 'ground of social morality.' I define a ground of social morality as the values that legitimate the production, distribution, and appropriation of life-sustaining resources in a given period. The ground of social

morality in a stable society will always cohere with and never contradict the value system and the social interests it serves.

So far the argument has confined itself to the abstract form of value systems and grounds of social morality in order to make clear their structure and function. But actual value systems are distinguished from one another by their content, that is, by the actual values which they affirm and the excluded others which they repudiate. The operative values of a given society are not a matter of indifference for human beings. On the contrary, the character and quality of individual life is largely determined by the values that people accept. Societies that one wants to call unfree or oppressive do not reproduce themselves simply by force of arms, but also because citizens, including those who suffer the worst of the oppression and unfreedom, accept them, at least over the short or medium term. Thus the essential normative questions that must be asked when the problem concerns judgments about a society's free or unfree character are: what is the content of its value system, what is its ground of social morality, and whose interests do both serve? When the society is unfree the general answer will always reveal that a non-living thing is valued over human life. The quality of a human life will be reduced to the quantitative increase in the non-living good. The value of the lives of self and other appear to be thereby determined by a substance outside of and independent of their needs and capabilities such that these true determinant of life value appear real only when exercised in relation to the non-living good. The non-living good appears to be a universal value, but critical philosophical analysis will always uncover, in the case of unfree societies, a particular class who, by virtue of its preponderant social power, is able to maximally satisfy its short-term interests at the expense of the universal life-interests of the whole.

Conflicts between value systems and grounds of social morality arise when those groups (always a majority) who suffer under the hegemony of what we can call, following McMurtry, life-blind systems of value awaken to the human interests grounded in their social-organic nature. 'Social-organic' nature is meant to stress the fact that human nature is framed but not determined by a fixed abstraction like our genetic code. The complex organic being of humanity cannot be understood outside of an examination of the socio-historical development which that being makes possible (in so far as it enables humans to think projectively and act creatively). This social-organic nature entails shared, universal interests in the basic conditions of life maintenance and the social and institutional conditions of comprehensive capacity development. A life-grounded value system always ensures that these shared universal interests are the ruling values. Life-blind systems, by contrast, invariably subordinate the conditions for the free development of self-determining human beings to the conditions for the self-expansion of the non-living substance they serve. Since these two systems of value are essentially opposed, periods of social conflict always follow the awakening of people to their shared life-interests, variously articulated as concrete struggles against different forms of oppression and exploitation. Unifying these struggles, but not always apparent to definite political movements, is the universal human value of free self-realization according to a self-given project. This value necessarily underlies concrete struggles as their explanatory normative ground. The interests of women in overcoming patriarchy, racial minorities in overcoming racism, workers in overcoming exploitations, gays and lesbians in overcoming homophobia, the disabled in overcoming exclusion from public

spaces are all concretizations of the universal underlying interest of human life in the free, conscious development of its physical, cognitive, and affective capacities.

The following examination of the contradictory development of liberal-capitalist society will explain its evolution as a function of social conflict between two opposed value systems and two opposed grounds of social morality. The dominant value system of the liberal-capitalist world is the value system of the global economy. Its essential principle is, in the words of McMurtry, “to multiply by ever more deregulation and new financial instruments the monetized circuits of power through which directive control of all the world’s means of existence increasingly pass.”

Affirmed goods will all serve the growth of money for major corporate interests, repudiated bads will be anything that impedes this growth, regardless of whether the repudiated ‘bad’ is demonstrably linked to the growth of life. The corresponding ground of social morality is what I have called the liberal rights ground. It regards as legitimate modes of producing, distributing, and appropriating resources only those which are grounded in private and exclusive property rights. The sign of a legitimate property right is the ability to pay. The existence of a need without a corresponding right (ability to pay) means that the need will go unsatisfied. This value system and its corresponding ground of social morality together form the normative ground of liberal-capitalist society.

Interpreted from a life-grounded perspective a democratic society is antithetical to the ruling value system and ground of social morality today. To the extent that democratic elements exist within contemporary society they must be understood as the outcome of struggles against the ruling system of value and ground of social morality, not as following from them. The underlying principle of the manifold of democratic struggles and thus the base principle of any possible democratic society is: “[satisfaction] of life need ... for life-capacity and experience in more comprehensive enjoyment and expression.” The system of value that follows from this base principle is essentially democratic in so far as it puts the universal life-interests of citizens in charge of all major social institutions. At the level of economic institutions this value system entails the substitution of the needs-ground of social morality for the currently operative liberal-rights ground. Following McMurtry, I mean by ‘need’ an organic requirement of life such that failure to satisfy it results directly in harm to the organism in the form of impaired capacity.

I call this ground of social morality needs-based in order to emphasize the contrast with the way in which need-satisfaction is subordinated to the ability to pay in actual liberal-capitalist societies. Of course, need-satisfaction is not an end in itself in a democratic society, but instrumental to the free development of consciously self-determining people. Given this relationship it follows that the mode of need-satisfaction must itself be organized freely. In other words, free beings must organize the institutions and practices of need-satisfaction themselves; they cannot be ‘freed’ from need by a totalitarian bureaucracy, even if it were possible to imagine a well-intentioned one. In order to understand this positive claim and the critique of actually existing society that it implies it is essential to look at the historical development of liberal-capitalist society from the perspective of its underlying value system and ground of social morality.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Jeff Noonan** was born in 1968 in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. He received his BA (Philosophy and Social and Political Thought) from York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada in 1991, his MA (Philosophy) and Ph. D (Philosophy) from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, in 1993 and 1996, respectively. He taught as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta from 1996-1998 and is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He also serves on the Coordinating Committee of the Centre for Social Justice, University of Windsor, the Academic Advisory Board of the Humanities Research Group, and the Coordinating Committee of the Labour Studies Program. He is the author of *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference* (McGill-Queen's University Press), 2003 (short-listed for the Canadian Philosophical Association's Book Prize, 2005) and more than twenty articles and reviews that have appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *ReThinking Marxism*, *Res Publica*, and *Social Theory and Practice*.