Moral Socialism and Liberal Citizenship

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Abstract

The current crisis of liberal democracy has led to a reconsideration of the idea of socialism. This article seeks to critically compare three different approaches to socialism, all of which draw on specifically moral criteria. The first is a form of liberal socialism that has a long history in critical theory, and has most recently been re-imagined by Axel Honneth through a theory of recognition. The second is a conservative version of socialism, which encourages citizens to return to native traditions that can restrain the destructive individualism of liberalism. Finally, I look at a more materialist version of socialism that can be associated with the writing of Marx. In the concluding section, I argue that the return to a materialist vision of moral socialism is long overdue; this is especially the case in the context of the impoverished cultural life of neoliberal capitalism, and the on-going ecological crisis.

Keywords

Capitalism, class, neoliberalism, recognition, socialism, liberalism, sociology

Introduction

The warnings about run-away climate change, growing levels of social and economic inequality, and the rise of populism should be reason enough to question how well we are being served by our dominant intellectual paradigms. The intensification of neoliberalism, and the widening of class inequalities, has turned some intellectual debate towards rethinking the idea of socialism. More recently, the rise of more radical forms of populism (represented by Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn) has, despite their respective electoral failures, also helped revive discussions of socialism. What is less than clear, more conceptually, is which version of socialism is best suited to our times.

The eclipse of social democracy, and the long-term decline of the labour movement, have paved the way for a more individualized and fragmented society. This has not yet found an answer to the challenge posed by neoliberalism. The idea of a liberal society based on universal ideas of equality and respect is now also under threat from the political Right. Trump, Farage and Orban have built on intense feelings of anger and resentment, while developing nativist and anti-immigrant policies (Rasmussen 2022). This has all come at a point where there is a considerable amount of discussion about the limits of identity politics, and the need to revive ideas of the common good. The problem with identity politics is that it tends to focus on specific groups – rather than the whole of the community – and draws on the language of identity, self and authenticity rather than shared ideas of how we might improve society to the benefit of everyone. If right-wing populism offers a version of identity politics that is overly concerned with the nativist concerns of 'white' voters, then leftist identity politics exclusively focuses on 'marginalized' voices (Lilla 2017, Ozkirimli 2023).

Here, I will presume that the answer to these questions lies less within populism, and more in a critical re-engagement with the legacy of the Enlightenment. This will presume that rather than adopting a form of cynical realism, we are best served by seeking to reignite a normative form of politics that is founded in universal ideas. Despite the rapid rise of cultural relativism in the wake of postmodernism, we still require a politics grounded in universal ideals that can resist the move into more authoritarian modes of thinking. The distinction between the 'is' and the 'ought' is the necessary defining feature of any decent society (Neiman 2009). The two main

traditions that emerged from the Enlightenment, which are both founded in notions of universal values, are liberalism and Marxism. As we will see, these both embody ideas of human progress, and will need careful reconciliation in the twenty-first century if we are to resist more conservative and identity-driven concerns.

Liberalism, Socialism and Critical Theory

In the European and North American context, there is a well-founded concern that a retreat from liberalism is underway. The dangers of populism are especially evident with the rise of intolerant forms of politics that leave little space for civil forms of disagreement (Fukuyama 2022). In this setting, liberalism can be defined as a set of institutional arrangements underpinning shared ideas of citizenship; these depend on laws, tolerance, free-speech, and other practices such as free and fair elections (Lukes 2003). These historical achievements are now being challenged by populism, identity politics, tribalism, and dichotomous forms of thinking (Gabriel 2022, Neiman 2023, Ozkirimli 2023). Liberalism is, at its most progressive, careful not to base questions of citizenship on one specific version of the good. Yet, it still manages to prioritize access to certain primary goods, such as income and wealth (Rawls 1973). Historically, those who are sympathetic to this perspective have suggested different (and sometimes competing) ideas on how liberalism and socialism might be combined (Dewey 1946, Orwell 2001, Bobbio 2002).

In terms of critical theory, Jurgen Habermas (1989) has argued for a democratic citizenship that can secure the rule of law and basic rights, while emphasizing the importance of citizens having opportunities to participate in public forms of deliberation that can lead to the formation of public policy. Habermas's (2023) defense of a democratic public sphere is necessary for ensuring the passage of legislation that acts in the common good, thereby balancing the different interests of a variety of social groups. For this process to work, we will need a relatively democratic media, widespread public participation, and to uphold the normative value of being truthful. Meanwhile, Stephen Eric Bronner (2004) maintains that at its best, critical theory is connected to liberal ideas. Enlightenment-based liberalism has played an important role in rooting out prejudice and promoting a shared culture of civility, while also demanding that traditional forms of authority be justified. In this regard, liberalism provides a relentless critique of the forces of power and privilege, while

seeking to promote a culture of individual freedom, democracy and human rights (Gabriel 2024). Liberalism has also been important in helping to resist what Bronner (2004:62) describes as 'the Counter-Enlightenment' of conservativism, represented by established forms of authority and an 'organic sense of the nation'. With good reason, progressive forms of critical theory have pointed to the dangers of nationalism, and other reactionary ideas, that undermine the Enlightenment's democratic heritage.

Socialism continues to have a role to play in defending some of the achievements of the welfare state, while also accepting that inequality undermines the legitimacy of the liberal state (Bronner 2001, 2004). More recently, Bronner (2014) argues that the rise of right-wing populism has supplied new energy to more reactionary attitudes and dispositions. The intensification of bigotry – and lying in public – are an affront to democratic politics. Meanwhile, identity-politics can have a darker side that relishes in extreme forms of hatred. Bronner (2014) notes that, in this respect, reactionary populist ideologies are often based on a rejection of modernity, and embody a desire to return to a past that reaffirms the dominance of groups based on ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

Micheal J Thompson (2016) has challenged the liberal turn in critical theory by arguing against what he sees as the processes of domestication that have been proposed by figures like Bronner, Habermas, and others who emphasise liberalism in their arguments. This fails to investigate how our social identities are shaped by the power relations that are evident within economic life, and which continue to be determined by the exploitative social relations of capitalism. The early Frankfurt school can be rightly criticized for maintaining a philosophy of consciousness that lacks a necessary understanding of the inter-subjective foundations of social and cultural life. But it nevertheless has a good deal to say about the reification and alienation that inform life under capitalism.

Twenty-first century critical theory should seek to understand the dominance of capitalism, and how it polices the emergence of democratic alternatives. A more materialist analysis of society would seek to reconstruct critical theory, and insist on an analysis 'of the concrete power relations that socialise and pervert the same rationality in and through social processes shaped by the imperatives of economic power and interests' (Thompson 2016: 3). Despite this insight, given its neglect of the importance of established liberal institutions, and the formation of democratic

citizenship, there is no return to the revolutionary politics of the early Frankfurt school (Bronner 2014).

However, it is true to say that that historically, liberalism has found it difficult to not only counter growing levels of inequality and disrespect, but also to respond to the need for autonomy and material satisfaction in democratic society, both of which are needed to make a good life possible. Liberalism has also tended to rely on an idea of individual freedom that remains disconnected from more communal ties and responsibilities. Both of these shortcomings are problematic, and need to be faced in any moral approach to socialism. In the next section, I shall explore the ways in which Axel Honneth has sought to build on the critical inheritance of liberalism, while also seeking to develop a more inter-subjective understanding of freedom – thereby renewing the development of critical theory.

Liberal Socialism Reimagined: Axel Honneth and the Ethical Life

Axel Honneth (2017:1) notes that despite the widespread outrage focused on the failings of political liberalism and the global capitalist market economy, there is currently no widespread vision of a feasible alternative. While Honneth (2017) steers clear of discussing populism, he adds that the decline of the socialist Left's utopian energy amidst the global rise of social inequality must be soberly confronted. In this regard, Marxists have failed to deal with changes in working-class culture and actual demands (Honneth 2017:39). In addition, the emergence of a post-industrial economy has weakened socialism's connection with the working-class.

This is not to say that the working-class do not experience their own (intensely felt) moral feelings of disrespect and injustice. For Honneth, the unequal forms of recognition and respect that emerge within class-based society will continue to be on-going sources of conflict. Honneth's (2014) reformulation of critical theory begins from the argument that ideas of justice must be linked to an explicitly liberal paradigm. His starting point is that the widely-held value of individual autonomy can be attached to the more community-orientated idea of social freedom. This arguably seeks to resurrect a more ethical vision of socialism – one that refuses to see the other in terms of a threat to my freedom, but rather as a condition for the possibility of forging more co-operative relationships. The 'reciprocal experience of seeing

ourselves as confirmed in the desires and the aims of the other' (Honneth 2014: 44) is key in this regard.

Honneth draws a good deal from Hegel at this point. The early Frankfurt school saw in Hegel a model of dialectics that developed a negative form of reason – one that could eventually lead to the liberation of the working-class. However, Honneth discovers other features (Adorno 1973, Marcuse 1960). Honneth (2023a) seeks to develop Berlin's (1995) classic description of so-called negative and positive (or reflexive) freedom through a Hegelian lens. For Honneth (2023a), Hegel's idea of the ethical life accepts the importance of both negative and reflexive freedom, while also developing a third form of freedom with an intersubjective basis. What Honneth (2023: 28) terms 'objective freedom' thus 'allows each subject to recognize himself or herself in social situations insofar as he or she can perceive in the habitual desires of fellow citizens a precondition – or perhaps even a product – of his or her own rationally attained desire'.

Citizens sharing certain goals or collective needs can only address these issues by building democratic institutions that are not founded on coercive relationships. These institutions, which would include the family, education and workplaces, would all require public-minded citizens to act together in a co-operative fashion. Accordingly, the 'ethical life must consist of intersubjective practices and relations, the opportunities of individual self-realization that this sphere has to provide as a remedy from suffering from indeterminacy must, so to speak, be made up of forms of communication which subjects mutually recognize constituting a condition of their own freedom' (Honneth 2001: 50).

Honneth's (2023a) attempt at grounding freedom in a more co-operative context draws on the work of John Dewey. If Honneth (2007) finds Habermas's (1962) theory of communicative ethics persuasive in the sense that it links the idea of a democratic society to the need for a communicative public sphere, deliberative exchange and personal freedom, it also has its weaknesses. In part, this can be located in the need for a theory of democracy that depends on a shared sense of public co-operation – one that has become part of the virtues and daily practices of citizens' lives. This recognition is missing from Habermas's proceduralism. Within Dewey's (1946) mature writing, there is a powerful critique of market orientated individualism and social atomism. But there is also an appreciation of the necessity of the co-operative basis of social life. It is only through our association with others that we can

come together as a democratic community. This will inevitably require not only democratic forms of communication that enable public debate on state policy, but also a recognition that shared institutions require considerable amounts of collaboration. Honneth (2014) reminds us that historically, the labour movement has accepted the premise that freedom has a social dimension, and rejected capitalism's individualistic foundations. It is this form of ethical socialism that led to the setting up of the welfare state, along with the requirement that the economic system should be regulated to serve the common good.

These insights are clearly related to Honneth's (1995) previous work, which locates the intersubjective struggle for recognition in a framework that focuses on the need for loving human relationships, rights-based citizenship, and a sense of esteem granted by the wider community. This argument moves away from the individualism that is evident within liberalism to understand the significance of more inter-personal and respectful relationships. There is a broad recognition that during the social democratic era, the working-class was to become more fully incorporated into the language of citizenship through the provision of economic security and a wider sense of communal respect. But for Honneth (2017: 15), the non-Marxist democratic socialist tradition understood that personal freedom, equality and solidarity 'cannot be fully reconciled with one another as long as liberty is not interpreted in a less individualistic and more intersubjective manner'.

One of Honneth's (1995) key insights is that social conflict is not generated by the rational calculation of economic interests, or the quest for individual rights, but by moral feelings. As Honneth (1995: 163) suggests, 'if these normative expectations are disappointed by society, this generates precisely the type of moral experience expressed in cases where subjects feel disrespected'. Historically, much of the literature associated with the labour movement has been preoccupied with the class-based shame of being seen as inferior by the middle class. For example, Richard Hoggart (1989:152) recalls from the 1930s a constant fear of 'shabbiness' that was associated with feelings of disrespect and being judged. Feelings and sentiments of this kind provided a moral basis for the development of the welfare state, and more collective forms of provision.

These sentiments are also evident within more recent work on questions of class identity. This has shown how working-class, single mothers build alternative networks of respect and care that help them deal with the negative stigma they bear in

the eyes of both the wider society and bureaucratic officials (McKenzie 2015). Honneth's (1995) intervention is important, as it recognizes that the moral agency of class, and the struggle for intersubjective recognition, is not simply a matter of the practices of the state. It also requires organization from below. E. P. Thompson's (1968) work on the cultural dimensions of class struggle had previously demonstrated that the industrial working-class was formed through a background consensus that was based on the rights of 'free-born Englishman'. These were all important forms of cultural inheritance that helped shape a series of class struggles, and which informed the moral vocabulary of Chartism and other democratic working-class struggles of the period.

Historically, critical theory could be said to have had an ambiguous relationship to class analysis (Honneth 2007). For the first wave of critical theorists, like Adorno (2003) and Marcuse (1965), the working-class remained an important agent of change. But more empirical understandings of class structure were held at considerable distance. Arguably, much of this came from the adoption of a Western, Marxist critique. This argued that despite the failings of communism, Marxist versions of class analysis still held up. This could be seen from the on-going extraction of surplus labour, and the subordination of the working-class to the structures of capitalism (Adorno 2003). Axel Honneth (2007) notes that work by Adorno, Marcuse – and more recently, Habermas – has had a distinct tendency to over-state the extent to which the working-class is integrated into the structures of late capitalism. Honneth (2007: 91) claims that previous waves of critical theory have tended to see the working-class through the lens of 'apathetic servitude'. He goes on to say that these claims not only lack empirical support, but equally neglect the moral conflicts that are evident in a society characterized by the unequal distribution of material rewards, and which views much of the work done by the working-class as adding little value to the wider society. However, the weakening of class identities in the current era would inevitably mean that socialism, as a moral idea, is no longer explicitly tied to working-class lives and experiences (Honneth 2017).

In this sense, while Honneth (2017) argues that the trade union movement is still a force, we need to reconsider what class politics means in an age of privatization, declining welfare support, free markets, and competitive ideologies. The arrival of post-industrial society, and the decline of the trade union movement, has meant that many working-class people lack a meaningful relationship to labour

politics or secure forms of employment. In this setting, Honneth (2022) has expressed concern that the absence of collective resistance from working-class organizations has meant that many people see little alternative to the rule of precarity and insecurity.

Axel Honneth has also explored moral economy. His social theory demonstrates how the growth of inequality, post-industrialism and an insecure relationship with work and employment can generate cultures of disrespect and humiliation (Honneth 1995, 2014). The welfare state's gradual expansion, and the regulation of capitalism, can be related to the remit of social freedom, which provided the institutional basis necessary for the exercise of individual rights. These views are in keeping with the broader moral socialist tradition of figures like Tawney (1964) and Polanyi (1944). Their arguments instilled a communitarian factor into capitalism, whereby the market would be regulated by moral norms which supported the common good.

In Honneth's (2014) terms, the problem is that neoliberalism has explicitly sought to undermine the idea of co-operative responsibilities in favour of a vision of an ethical life that is built on individualism, competition, and shorter-term considerations. A more progressive economic model is required to 'primarily help the economically disadvantaged, and the greatest appeal for all to come together, with courage and shared will, to realize this new contract in the interests of justice' (Honneth 2023a: 240). The idea of the economy having a co-operative basis points towards the inter-subjective framework of liberal socialism, removing concerns around atomism but in ways that seek to protect the idea of individual rights while linking them to a need to build democratic institutions.

More recently, Honneth (2023b) has expanded his view of social freedom to include a discussion of the relationship between democracy and work. Historically, one of Marxism's key charges about liberalism was that it limits questions of democracy to the political and civil domains, and has little to say about the relations of exploitation that are evident within the economy (Meiksins Wood 2016). For Honneth (2023b), the ability to participate within a democratic community depends on working conditions that can either facilitate, or disable, the expression of meaningful forms of democratic citizenship. These features are required to facilitate the fostering of fair wages, reasonably good and respectful relationships, stable employment, as well as a sense of self-confidence and worth.

The idea of dignified work has also been explored by John Cruddas (2021), who has investigated the ethics of labour in an economy where workers are often subjected to precarity, relatively low wages, and low levels of respect. According to his analysis, the world of work for the working-class represents an ethical challenge that hinges on questions of human dignity. Like Honneth (2023b), this is both a matter of material reward, and of how the contribution of workers is understood by the wider community. The restoration of dignified working conditions requires re-establishing the role of labour organizations and work-place democracy, and a new charter of democratic workers' rights. What is notable about the contributions of both Honneth (2023b) and Cruddas (2021) is the considerable distance between them and others who have recently adopted a more utopian language in relation to work, the issue of universal basic income, or technological visions of a fully automated world (Bastani 2018). Both Honneth (2023b) and Cruddas (2021) belong to a moral socialist tradition that seeks to democratize work-place relationships, while valuing the contributions that people can make to the common good.

Liberalism and Post-Liberalism

So far, I have sought to defend the idea of liberal socialism through a language of citizenship. I have done this by locating Axel Honneth in the liberal tradition of critical theory, and by arguing that his theory of social freedom makes a significant contribution to this way of thinking. This approach could arguably be criticized for failing to address the extent to which we inherit our moral horizons from our own communities, and because liberalism's own individualism ends up undermining any meaningful version of community.

Fred Dallmayr (2019) offers a different starting point. Within liberalism, there is an attempt to reconcile individual freedom to the procedures and norms of democracy. The transformation of liberalism into neoliberalism strains this alliance by stressing a view of the self that is disconnected from any recognizable community or sense of duty. This has undermined the practice of democracy, given the prevailing logic of consumerism that stresses atomized wants without giving any good reason for participation in the wider community. The critique of the atomized self that has withdrawn from public spaces into more narcissistic preoccupations has a long history in critical thought (Sennett 1977). Such a vision of the self, risks undermining

pluralistic understandings of public space, thereby losing a broader sense of public responsibility, awareness of our connections to history, and a meaningful life that can be pursued in ways that do not entirely focus on self-fulfillment (Lasch 1980). What becomes displaced at this juncture is any broader sense of the common good. There is now a range of work on questions of citizenship that follows some of these suggestions (Pabst 2019, 2020, Rutherford 2015).

The key philosopher that many of post-liberal intellectuals have turned to is Alasdair MacIntyre. As is well known, MacIntyre (1997) argues that the Enlightenment project was bound to fail given its insistence that a shared morality could be based entirely on reasoned arguments. MacIntyre (1997) returns to Aristotle's idea of virtue ethics, which focuses on questions concerning what I ought to do. MacIntyre (1997: 126) argues that in returning to this tradition, we soon discover that questions of morality are strongly located in place, and that ideas of a universal moral order are limited. Thinking about questions of virtue requires a connection to inherited traditions. The self, in this respect, is less the self-creation of liberal thinking, and more of an active inheritance, in the sense that 'the virtues promulgated in such a community would teach its citizens what kinds of actions would gain them merit and honor' (MacIntyre 1997: 151). If post-liberalism is not explicitly socialist, it has sparked a recent debate about the possibility of renewing socialist forms of politics through less overtly individualistic frameworks (Borg 2023).

Maurice Gasman (2022) has defended a conservative and nationalistic version of socialism in these terms. Glassman (2022) argues that the labour tradition was never an attempt to overthrow capitalism. Rather, it was constructed on inherited traditions of democracy. The labour tradition's strength lies less in its philosophical rigor, but more in its ability – as a living tradition – to combine paradoxical elements. This inherited tradition contains several essential features. The first can be connected to Aristotelian ideas of the common good – to the idea of virtue, and participation in the shared life of the nation. The second emerges through a commitment to common law, and the ways this has historically restricted power and authority. Notably, this tradition draws not only from secular arguments, but also religious views that played a key role in the labour movement's foundation. Unlike globalist versions of liberalism or neoliberalism, the labour tradition provides a strong link with the past, and seeks to resist (rather than enhance) the commodification of people and nature by the market.

This view suggests that human beings are creatures of attachment, and that relationships are a strong source of solidarity. For Glasman (2022: 20) 'the point of democratic politics is to shape a home in the world under the threats of domination and dispossession and maintain the structure of society in the face of intense forces of disintegration'. The 'social' aspects of socialism in this respect emerge through attachments to place, community, faith, nation, and the family.

The deeply conservative tenor of these views seemingly replicates that of figures such as Oakeshott (1962) and Scruton (2017), whose work often displays a distaste for critical forms of reflection in favour of the tried, tested, and inherited. Ultimately, these perspectives can be traced to a strain of anti-Enlightenment thinking associated with Edmund Burke (1993) and others. This tradition has, in the past, resisted liberal reforms aimed at making the polity more representative, developing inclusive versions of society, or tackling prejudice (Bronner 2004, Bobbio 2002). Even so, liberalism continues to be necessary for its continued insistence on tolerance, and for its emphasis on universal ideas of democracy and human rights.

But before we simply dismiss post-liberalism for failing to recognize individual rights, there is much to be said for the argument that within the labour movement, inherited ideas and traditions have shaped contemporary perspectives. Many of the problems with 'third way' socialism can be located in the argument that modern citizens are simply 'post-traditional' (Giddens 1998). There is an on-going need to dialogue with our inherited ideas, and not simply assume that citizens lack memories and attachments that inform their worldviews. A political community presupposes a sense of unity, with common institutions and laws (Taylor 1989). Post-liberal critics are correct in their charge that the entirely self-determining individual – free from the bonds of community – is a myth. However, this view is mistaken if it holds that this automatically converts people into being loyal servants of the nation. As I hope to demonstrate, there are other, arguably radical traditions of moral socialism that are worthy of investigation.

Socialism, Morality and Materialism

While liberal versions of socialism remain overly individualistic for some, for others, they are not radical enough. Lois McNay (2008) argues that the theory of recognition fails to focus on the power of social hierarchies that normalize current social and

economic conditions. If the theory of recognition is an attempt to move away from the individualism that is embedded in liberalism, it reproduces some of its problems through a failure to adequately account for the material social divisions and power relations that continue to exist within society. There are often good reasons – related to questions of hegemony, ideology, and other forms of domination – as to why social suffering and exploitation do not always lead to the development of oppositional or critical ideas (McNay 2008: 140). A theory of recognition offers a critique of liberal individualism, but lacks an analysis of the on-going structures of domination that inhibit the development of more critical perspectives. This points to a serious flaw in liberalism, and in Honneth's thinking more generally.

Honneth (2017) rejects Marxism because it mostly focuses on ideas of economic freedom, and because as a political theory, it takes little account of the concrete desires of the working-class. It has also become socially redundant due to the arrival of the post-industrial economy, and its over-reliance on the centrally planned economy. Missing from this view, however, is any understanding of how later generations of thinkers, inspired by Marxism, have learned from liberalism. Marxism, and the wider socialist tradition, can still help develop a substantial moral theory that challenges some of the assumptions evident within Honneth's (2017) own. In many respects, the theory of recognition is part of a trend in contemporary sociology: the withdrawal from issues of political economy. Despite the market crash of 2008, there has been little interest in reviving this area of inquiry. Sociology's retreat into questions of culture and identity has meant that the on-going tension between material needs and the capitalist system has gone unchecked (Streeck 2016). Notably, more conservative accounts of socialism have recognized these questions, even if the way they have done so is problematic.

The debate on whether Marxism has a morality was reignited by Stephen Lukes (1985). Lukes examined a paradox in Marx, who rejected moralism, but provided a moral critique of capitalism. What bothered Marx was not so much morality, but a way of looking at the world which made moral pronouncements without taking the wider context into account. We might readily agree with Kant (1997) that stealing is prohibited by the categorical imperative, but take a different view if it seems the only way to deal with extreme hunger or destitution. By taking a materialist approach, we could argue that many socialists have been historically driven by a form of morality which aims at taking both material poverty and our

shared capacity for self-development seriously. Norman Geras (1990) argues that within the Marxist tradition, there has been a consistent focus on the importance of satisfying basic human needs. This is different from the expanding range of consumerist 'wants' that are at least partly responsible for the ecological crisis. The second focus has been on egalitarian values that insist on the equitable distribution of goods in the interest of human welfare. Just how far this equitable distribution should go is a matter for public debate, which in turn presupposes a public sphere and liberal institutions. For Geras (1990), only extreme relativists would argue that human beings are too variable to agree a basic list of needs (including food, clean water, shelter and others, along with a reasonable level of education).

Kate Soper (1990) has similarly responded that Marx's morality is rooted in the idea that scarcity and exploitation (along with the continuation of poverty) are part of the basic structure of capitalism. If needs are different from wants, they are never fully socially constructed. However, they can be understood in universal terms that cut across different cultures. A materialist focus on morality would suggest that as biological creatures, we are all susceptible to suffering. We therefore have a moral duty to minimise it, and make sure that as many of our fellow citizens as possible can access the shelter, health care and nourishment that is necessary to flourish as a human (Eagleton 1990). Raymond Williams (1980) has previously pointed out that any project for a just society should aim at ensuring good health – and find human deprivation, and extreme forms of inequality, morally unacceptable.

Despite the views of post-modernists, and other versions of social constructivism, these arguments are rooted in a specifically humanist view of Marxist materialism (Timpanaro 1970). If Marx understood the human need for communal contact, he also grasped that our bodies required rest and health if we were to thrive and meet our full potential. The problem was that the underlying social conditions and relations imposed on most of the working population meant that they only had limited opportunities for self-development (Geras 1983). That is not to say that this specific 'nature' is not culturally mediated. Whatever form socialism may take in the twenty-first century, universal needs must have priority over other claims if we are to avoid a considerable amount of human misery. Geras (1983) maintains that these needs have an ontological basis, thus denying that we are entirely socially and culturally constructed.

Socialists have historically tried to build relations of solidarity with the working-class. This is not only because the working-class is the group most likely to be deprived of the material means necessary to meet its needs, but also because capitalism remains a hierarchical system that unequally distributes economic surplus. According to this understanding, class is less a matter of respect and recognition than a system which creates scarcity – not only through poverty, but through the development of new consumer gadgets (Eagleton 2011). This also helps explain why socialists have clung to the idea of class interests. It is too crude to claim that interests are simply the expression of one's position in the class structure, given the changing nature of historical circumstances and the democratic agreements they require. On the other hand, a popular socialist movement would need to persuade the working-class they have an interest in a different kind of society. It would, after all, be the poor and the working-class that would gain most from a redistribution of wealth, well-funded educational provision, public libraries, reasonably priced food, literacy campaigns, and the return of public housing (Eagleton 1991: 213-220). That I may have 'interests' of which I am not currently aware is not necessarily an authoritarian argument. Inevitably the unequal relations of capitalism, and wealth and privilege shape our interests. The disconnection of socialism from the working-class, and questions of economic interest, remains a key flaw in Honneth's (2017) argument.

A similar view is developed by Doyal and Gough (1991), who focused on what they described as the universal preconditions for participating in community life: human health and autonomy. This requires not only the satisfaction of basic bodily needs, but also good mental health and a reasonable cognitive capacity, which enable people to become full citizens. Such a project aims to be universal – applying to people everywhere – but minimal enough to allow for significant cultural variation. Kate Soper (1993) notes that what is less clear is how these needs are to be satisfied in such a way that they do not become ecologically hazardous. This implies that there is a pressing need to think about wants, recognizing that the lifestyles in wealthy societies have ecological limits.

Andrew Sayer (2016) makes the point that since the 1970s, there has been a global transfer of wealth into the hands of the top 0.5% of the global population. This trend, which has intensified since the 2008 market crash, has been accompanied by the increasing scapegoating of the poor as being people without worth. The lifestyles of the very wealthy have a disproportionate impact on climate change, with

approximately 50 percent of the carbon emissions being emitted by the wealthiest 10 percent of the global population (Saito 2020:47). This would suggest that not only is global capitalism unlikely to meet everyone's needs, but equally, it is unlikely to ever be sustainable. Even in a global system that shared wealth more equally, we would need to alter our lifestyles so we did not destroy the planet. The demand for a less consumer-driven society should also revive discussion about what a more sober culture might look like. For example, it might become less concerned with money, things and status, and more interested in the development of less ecologically harmful ways of being (Soper 2020). This point recalls some of Herbert Marcuse's (1972) arguments about freedom: that it is not best served by a combination of economic growth, intensive labour, work and technology. A civilisation that perpetuates scarcity cannot help but be ecologically destructive.

It is notable that Doyal and Gough (1991), despite their focus on human autonomy, have little to say about questions related to education. Education is mostly talked about in terms of universal provision. But this argument, depending on the cultural context, deserves to be taken further. The dangers of doing so would of course mean that such a venture would be overly prescriptive and particular to certain cultural contexts. Perhaps the best way to think about this is more in terms of the need to rescue education from the way it is currently being deformed by the capitalist consumerist economy. Liberalism has long traded on the view that education was necessary for individuals to become autonomous citizens. John Stuart Mill's (1974) arguments around freedom of speech as a joint venture in sharing the ability to test out arguments is a case in point. The problem is that when these arguments were formulated, such an education was restricted to elites (despite the argument that in principle it should apply to all citizens equally). Raymond Williams's (1961) claim that everyone should receive a liberal education only becomes possible under the material conditions of egalitarianism and adequate public provision. Returning to Marx, the expansion of opportunities for those born outside the privileged classes to experience different forms of self-expression will depend on social and material conditions (Adams 1991).

Kate Soper and Martin Ryle (2002) argue that such a project would require not only a cultural education for everyone – one that provided access to ideas and perspectives that were not always immediately consumable – but also a rejection of the idea that culture is simply a matter of individual choice. The market-driven

relativist approach to education has little to contribute to questions of cultural value, or the idea that the development of an autonomous self means valuing not only our capacity to learn, but also the provision of free time that would make this possible in the first place. This would require a different kind of society in which our human capacities were not subordinate to the economy – thereby enabling citizens to experiment with different forms of creative expression, and give them opportunities to develop their capacity to reason.

It is not necessary to argue that the reflective subject, formed by a good education, is entirely freed from their cultural background. What is more significant is the freedom to develop new cultural tastes and ideas. Similar perspectives have helped form the understandings of working-class people who have historically wanted to gain access to literary or philosophical works despite having little formal education (Rose 2010). Such views also provide a backdrop to the labour movement's own development of courses for adults to take outside their working lives (Hoggart 1995). It remains the case that the desire for self-improvement, rather than social mobility, is not well served by a contemporary popular culture that trades on commodified views of self-hood. If contemporary culture does provide access to plural viewpoints, it mostly fails to develop the need for educated dialogue – and access to a culture beyond more narcissistic investments. In summary, these ideas could well find assent not only among humanist Marxists, but with a variety of radical social democrats desiring a popular socialism that prioritizes different kinds of human flourishing which have been actively repressed by the neoliberal present.

Conclusion

Norman Birnbaum's (2001) historical survey of the progressive reforms that took place in the twentieth century shows they all depended on a belief in the progressive force of the Enlightenment and the liberal tradition. In this sense, 'the problem of democratic socialism is that of citizenship' (Birnbaum 2001:369-370). The considerable human progress that took place within the latter part of the twentieth century has been rolled back. The task of the progressive movements of the twenty-first century is to redefine socialism so that it protects the basic rights of citizens, but does so in a way that recognises the planet's ecological limits (Hickel 2023, Malm 2018). Kohei Saito's (2024:9) recent scholarship is important in this regard, since it

positions ‘the Imperial Mode of Living’ (especially evident in the Global North) at the center of our thinking. There can be no long-term return to the Keynesian growth projects of the post-war social democratic period, as the ecological cost will be too high (Wissen and Brand 2021). As Herbert Marcuse (1965) might have reminded us, only the insistence of a profoundly one-dimensional mode of thought could suggest we can rely on a purely technocratic fix. Any Green New Deal style programme would need to be accompanied by an overall slowing down of the economy, while also meeting the needs of the most economically vulnerable.

One of Saito’s (2022) major discoveries is that despite the productivism of Marx’s early writing, he had begun to accept, at the end of his life, that there was nothing progressive about the economic system. For Marx (1947), we must begin reimagining our shared wealth in ways that serve the community and the common good. This will mean not only a return to more co-operative modes of production, but also the progressive de-commodification of what is required to meet our basic human needs. Instead of the privatization of the commons, which produces scarcity, an emphasis on public wealth would promote an abundance of cultural opportunities while also meeting people’s basic human needs. As I indicated, this will not be achieved by a new politics of production alone. It will require us to reimagine our collective lives. This is all part of a longer process of global transformation that will be needed if we are to build an alternative to the barbarism of today. A new moral socialism can rely neither on the politics of recognition, nor conservativism. It will need to be utopian in its thinking, and practical in its aims. This will mean working within the structures of liberal and democratic processes (Jay 2023). To do this, as Raymond Williams (1980) often reminded us, we will need to reconnect moral, cultural and material questions.

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