THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

A RESPONSE TO MARTIN HÄGGLUND'S 'THIS LIFE'

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One of the most interesting and persuasive arguments Martin Hägglund makes in his wonderful new book, *This Life: Why Mortality Makes us Free,* is that democratic socialism (not reformed liberalism, and not social democracy) is the only political form that recognizes spiritual freedom as an unconditional secular value. Democratic socialism enables human beings to recognise and appreciate their own vulnerability and finitude by creating forms of social organization that liberate them from the contradictory reassurances of religion, and that put "socially available free time" at the centre of a new set of freedom-enhancing democratic practices and commitments.

Democratic socialism is, for Hägglund, "a political transformation of the economy", a transformation that requires "a revaluation of what value is", and that enables us to recognise "socially available free time as an end in itself". The vision he defends emerges from an immanent critique of liberalism, a critique that does not oppose one abstract ideal to another, but that takes seriously liberalism's commitment to the freedom of individuals and goes on to illustrate how the very institutions that for liberals are supposed to realise that freedom end up suppressing and undermining it.

SOCIALISM SHARES WITH LIBERALISM A COMMITMENT TO THE INDIVIDUAL AS THE FUNDAMENTAL UNIT OF MORAL CONCERN

Socialism shares with liberalism a commitment to the individual as the fundamental unit of moral concern. It also shares with liberalism the aspiration to specify the conditions under which we can be effectively free, as well as the emphasis on the mutual dependence of human beings in the social realisation of effective freedom. Yet liberalism entrenches these commitments in market-based institutions that prioritise a type of wealth creation based on the exchange of labour power and the extraction of surplus value. Democratic socialism, on the other hand, is built around three core principles that Hägglund outlines: firstly, that we

measure our wealth, both individual and collective, in terms of socially available labour time and create democratic institutions adequate to express that value; secondly that "the means of production are collectively owned and cannot be used for the sake of profit", and thirdly, that it is based on institutions that realise the Marxist principle of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need".

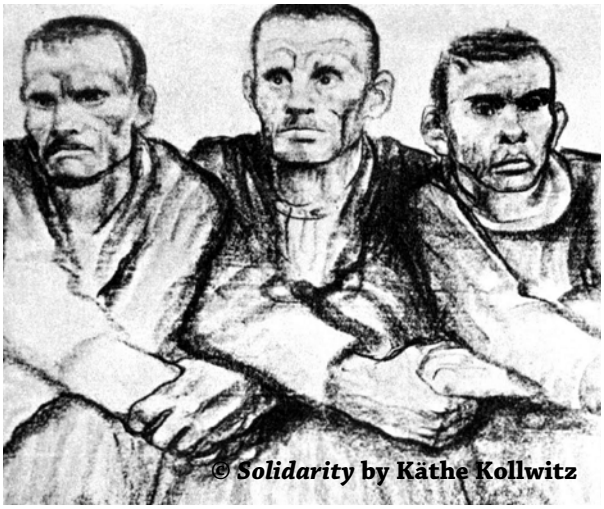
I agree with everything Hägglund says about the desirability of democratic socialism. In what follows, I will focus on two issues that, as will become clearer, are interconnected: 1) his strategy of justification and 2) the problem of agency. I will develop these issues by probing the relation between liberalism and democratic socialism in relation to the three core principles he advocates. It is important to start with the first because, as I see it, Hägglund's understanding of the relationship between liberalism and democratic socialism is at the heart of his subsequent analysis of the core socialist principles, and constitutes what I see as the main gap in his book: the absence of a more nuanced account of democratic agents in charge of democratic socialist transformation.

Hägglund plausibly suggests that socialism and liberalism overlap in their commitment to an idea of individuals as ends in themselves, and to spiritual freedom as an unconditional value. But I wonder what exactly "liberalism" means here. In so far as it means a set of views (sometimes in tension with each other) of how social and political institutions ought to be arranged and which includes (but is not limited to) recognising the authority of the state and the value of commercial society, I think he is too quick to credit liberalism with the invention of the secular idea of the ultimate worth of individuals. That idea seems to me to be a product of the Enlightenment, and more specifically of the discovery of the "autonomy of reason" sometime around the late 17th and 18th centuries, an effort which was in turn the result of a number of not exclusively liberal, often not even proto-liberal, and sometimes, possibly, anti-liberal debates trying to articulate a new understanding of the human being free from the burdens of religion and tradition.

We can, of course, endlessly debate when the Enlightenment started, how widely shared the thesis of the autonomy of reason was, and what contribution to the emergence of these ideas was made by the Copernican revolution, or by narratives of travelling the New World, or by the legacy of the analysis of Christianity during Humanism and the Renaissance. Or we can turn our focus to the transformations of feudal societies, the emergence of the modern state, or the legacy of the wars of religion, to mention but some of the historian's favourite narratives. But it seems clear that the idea of spiritual freedom is grounded in an Enlightenment critique of authority, and to assimilate that account to a "liberal" critique runs the risk of rendering us blind to how liberals often utilized Enlightenment conceptions of morality to advance profoundly immoral ends in other parts of the world. It also runs the risk of obscuring currents of the Enlightenment that inspired radical republican or democratic critiques of liberalism and of concealing the emancipatory impact that Enlightenment ideas had in other non-liberal parts of the world – as many recent critics highlight when discussing the relation between freedom and modernity in Hegel's theory.

LIBERALISM DOES NOT OWN FREEDOM AND EQUALITY, AND IF WE ASSIMILATE SUCH IDEALS TO A LIBERAL TRADITION WE FAIL TO UNDERSTAND HOW LIBERALISM OFTEN CORRUPTED THEM, OR PUT THEM AT THE SERVICE OF PROJECTS OF IMPERIAL CONQUEST AND DOMINATION

Liberalism was, of course, inspired by these Enlightenment ideas as it built on the autonomy of reason a powerful legal, social and political apparatus through which the ideas of individual freedom and



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equality acted as an important vehicle of self-correction. But liberalism does not own freedom and equality, and if we assimilate such ideals to a liberal tradition we fail to understand how liberalism often corrupted them, or put them at the service of projects of imperial conquest and domination that not only failed to achieve what liberals purported to achieve but also contradicted the spirit of freedom as self-emancipation on which they were premised.

I emphasise all this, not to set the record straight on the relationship between liberalism and the Enlightenment, as it is impossible to do justice to the complexity of that relation in the space of this short reply; rather, the main reason I raise the question is that I worry that this interpretation of the relation between liberalism and Marxism has relevant implications for how we assess the role of the state, in particular the modern liberal state, in relation to the core values of democratic socialism. The problem of agency in realising these values is to my mind the least developed part of *This Life*, and it may be worth raising some questions in hope of advancing the future debate.

Hägglund rightly emphasises that the main reason that liberal social and political institutions cannot realise their own commitment to freedom is capitalism, and the fact that the type of wealth creation that capitalism enables fails to realise the value of free time. He is also right to emphasise that this is the reason why even progressive liberalism and social democracy are inadequate solutions to the problems posed by wealth creation under capitalism: they both fail to realise that the problem is not how to distribute particular goods but how to change relations of production so that such relations are no longer based on the extraction of surplus value in the form of socially necessary labour time.

My worry is that there is too much economic reductionism in this critique of capitalism. In reading the book, I often could not help thinking that Hägglund's formula for democratic socialism is liberal democracy minus capitalism, and if we could only strip liberal democracy of capitalism we would come up with the right form of social organisation. It is no coincidence that his three principles all emphasise goods that a democratic society should realise, but are largely silent on the agents and institutions through which such goods ought to be brought about. His framework tackles the difficult problem of wage labour under capitalism and gives us excellent answers in the direction of the revaluation of value, common ownership of the means of production, and the institutionalisation of the ability/needs principle. Both his critique of progressive liberalism and his critique of social democracy are essentially focused on the realm of wealth creation and on the horizons that democratic socialism opens up. In both cases, however, he misses the critique of the state, and fails to analyse how the institutions of the liberal state, and the relations between states in the international sphere, are an intrinsic component of how capitalism is organised, such that it is impossible to transform the latter without transforming – possibly transcending – the former.

When that critique of the state is taken into account, the problem of agency in bringing about democratic socialist transformation comes to the fore. How is democratic socialism going to come about? Which agents and institutions are going to be in charge of these transformations? What is the role of social class in this account? How are those agents whose surplus labour is extracted in the course of commodity production related to each other and to the rest of society? How do they relate to the conditions of their own oppression? What role does the nation play in their self-understanding? What is the role of territorial sovereignty in stabilising capitalist relations on a global level?

When these questions are answered, a different line of critique of progressive liberalism and social democracy

can be developed. The reason their solutions are deficient is not only that their reflections on value are confused but that their analysis of political agency is limited to the reform of the state, and to the power structures and representative institutions associated with the state. Both see the state as a vehicle of social transformation without realising how capitalism and the liberal state are mutually constitutive. But what about democratic socialism in Hägglund's version? Does democratic socialism need the state? What does the theory have to say about unequal technological development in different areas of the world and the impact of these inequalities on the possibility of developing labour-saving technologies? Should we wait for developing markets to modernise fully before democratic socialism becomes a realistic prospect? What impact do theories of imperialism have on his analysis of crisis and over-production, and on the possibility of developing a unified theory of class and class struggle? Are these theories even necessary? Do they have global scope? Who is the "owner" behind collective ownership of the means of production? Should we think about needs and abilities along global dimensions, national, supranational or regional ones?

It is of course impossible to have an answer to all these questions in a book that is already so rich and thought-provoking. The reason I mention them here is to put pressure on Hägglund's analysis of the relation between the liberal state and capitalist relations of production, and also because I am interested in how a Marxist theory of *Sittlichkeit* would look. What kind of social institutions does spiritual life require to be realised in democratic socialism? To what extent would this Marxian analysis of *Sittlichkeit* be continuous with Hegel's theory of the state, provided the latter could solve the conflict with civil society? To what extent would it give us a radically different account of social and political institutions, and of forms of communal association where spiritual freedom is realised without the need for coercion backed by law?

Although Hägglund engages relatively little with Marx's theory and critique of the state, or with his analysis of social classes, his remarks in the conclusion of the book do to some extent turn to questions of agency and political transformation. The pages exploring the relation of Martin Luther King Jr. to the socialist tradition are beautifully written and will give many progressive liberals and social democrats a source of inspiration. But I wonder if the radical thesis that Hägglund's book so persuasively advances is best served by that concluding example and the focus on the actions of one individual who understood that the quest for democracy is inseparable from the quest for socialism, and sought to organise collective action through processes of civil disobedience in one particular state?

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM HAS A LONG HISTORY OF FOCUSING ON THE AGENCY NOT OF INDIVIDUALS BUT OF COLLECTIVES, AND THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH POWER – THE POWER OF CAPITAL BUT ALSO OF STATES

Democratic socialism has a long history of focusing on the agency not of individuals but of collectives, and their engagement with power – the power of capital but also of states. It also has a long tradition of discussing problems of means and ends, of how to fight political and economic power, and of how to mobilise working classes both nationally and internationally. Yet questions of transition are barely mentioned in the book, and while Marx's elaboration of the "ability and needs" principle is part of a larger engagement with progressive movements and forces of his time, that dimension is almost entirely absent in Hägglund's book. Perhaps one might respond that this is a book of philosophy and not politics, and so the question of agency belongs elsewhere. But that analysis of the division of labour is one that socialists have never accepted, and, I think, for good reason.

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