

THE PHILOSOPHY OF OUR FUTURE

A RESPONSE TO MARTIN HÄGGLUND'S 'THIS LIFE'

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Interest in Marx in the academic world has been on the rise in recent years, and the idea of “socialism” – if not exactly Marx’s socialism – is back on the mainstream political agenda in the U.S. for the first time since Eugene Debs ran for president in the early twentieth century. Marxian journals like *Jacobin* have received favourable coverage in *The New York Times*, and the youngest congresswoman in American history is a card-carrying member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) who owes her current superstardom in large part to her willingness to characterize her proposed solutions to poverty and global warming as “socialist.” Yet this resurgent interest in Marxian ideas should be taken with a grain of salt. Those who espouse them offer withering criticisms of income inequality and the “immorality” of billionaires, but little in the way of explanation of the institutional forms and social conditions that systematically produce inequality and billionaires. So, what exactly does it mean to be a Marxist? What does Marxism commit us to and what sorts of commitments does it rule out? What would it mean to provide a truly adequate critique of the capitalist form of social life, a critique that would amount to more than an idle and unfocused airing of discontents?

It is one of the many virtues of Martin Hägglund’s new book that it addresses these urgent questions head-on and with maximal clarity. While *This Life* contributes in several crucial ways to the clarification of what the commitment to Marxism entails, I want to focus on what the book has to teach us about the



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distinctly *philosophical* nature of the question of an adequate critique of capitalist modernity. Specifically, I want to address two aspects of Hägglund's book: its philosophical method and its "timeliness." These things may seem to be unrelated: aren't philosophical claims supposed to be about what's true, regardless of the historical circumstances under which they are made? But Hägglund's book has Hegelian aspirations, and is as such subject to Hegel's famous description of philosophy as "its own time grasped in thought." Understood in light of Hegel's thesis, philosophy is not reducible to history (as is sometimes thought), but it also isn't simply exempt from it or unconstrained by it. That raises the question: what does Hägglund's philosophical approach tell us about who we have become?

First, I want to briefly suggest some of the ways in which *This Life* bears on the Marxism/philosophy issue. Hägglund's book is divided into two parts, one on "secular faith" and the other on "spiritual freedom." Roughly, these two parts correspond to distinct theoretical approaches, a therapeutic approach that focuses on religious faith as the fundamental paradigm of individual self-alienation, and a transformative approach that considers the adequacy of the shared practices and institutions that make up the capitalist form of life. Drawing on the post-Kantian philosophical tradition, Hägglund's book does not argue for a specific "worldview" but rather aims to provide an account of the "categories of intelligibility" that underlie agency – the concepts required for making sense of what it means to be an agent.

The first half of *This Life* is devoted to an explication of the idea of secular faith, which seeks to grasp the fundamental dynamic of any commitment, whether religious or secular. Hägglund defends a picture of human life as fundamentally fragile and mortal, and as dependent on intersubjective relations of recognition. Our commitments are a matter of faith because they are constitutively vulnerable to the possibility of failure and must be practically sustained. Whether or not I am the writer I take myself to be, for example, is a question not of how "certain" I am, but rather of a provisional belief ("faith") that is manifest in my doings that I am getting myself right. Being a writer depends on how and whether I am recognized as a writer by other writers, thinkers, critics and so on – those whose

authority I implicitly recognize just in trying to play a role in our shared institution. By the same token, our faith is "secular" because the values and commitments with which we keep faith are not independent goods mandated by an immortal god but ends that we give ourselves and that are thereby anchored in this essentially social and historical, finite life.

RELIGIOUS FAITH DEMANDS THE SUBORDINATION OF OUR EARTHLY PROJECTS AND ATTACHMENTS TO THE IDEA OF AN ETERNAL LIFE, INVULNERABLE TO LOSS AND DEATH

To reiterate, it is crucial that Hägglund's categories not be understood along psychological lines, as if secular faith were a particular worldview, something we could choose to have or not. Rather, without secular faith the ideas of "choice," "action," and "commitment" would be unintelligible. Accordingly, the notion of "religious faith" is itself an unconscious, internally conflicted form of secular faith. As Hägglund shows, religious faith demands the subordination of our earthly projects and attachments to the idea of an eternal life, invulnerable to loss and death. The therapeutic aim of the first part of the book is to ask believers whether their own ideals of community, integrity, and value actually accord with their commitment to a religious vision of salvation. A life without the possibility of failure and loss would not actually be a life, since there would be no reason to do anything, to act or to forbear from acting: the ultimate end of religious faith is empty, undermining the very possibility of sustaining an end, as well as any form of reconciled community.

The analysis of secular faith in part one paves the way for the account of spiritual freedom in part two – Hägglund's path-breaking contribution to our understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Marx's critical theory of the capitalist form of life. I want to highlight two key



lines of argument in part two. First, Hägglund develops a distinction between natural life and spiritual life, between the freedom of the living (“natural freedom”) and the freedom of the rationally alive (“spiritual freedom”). A crucial feature of this account is that rationality is not “added to” or simply other than natural life, but is rather a distinct way of being a living being. Like the other animals, we live by striving to live, by resisting what we take to be painful and by pursuing what we count as good, but unlike our others, what counts as self-maintenance for us is a matter of what we can *justify* to one another. Our purposes are thus not given in advance, as if hard-wired by nature. Rather, our purposes are norms that we count as reasons for acting – reasons that are as such subject to contestation and change. We negotiate our goods collectively, in complex institutional processes, over historical time. It is in our nature to change our nature.

Second, Hägglund employs the philosophical account of life to provide a powerful new reading of Marx’s critique of capital. By drawing on the formal resources developed in the earlier part, Hägglund is able to deduce the transcendental structure of economic life (the form of collective self-maintenance specific to spiritual beings). What distinguishes the modern economic form – capitalism – is the “emancipated” character of wage labour: we all own our own labour power, and can (or rather must) exchange it for a wage on a purportedly free market. In an important move, Hägglund distinguishes between value as a category of intelligibility and the historically specific measure of value under capitalism, labour time. As Marx argues, if labour time is the measure of social wealth, then it follows that capital must strive to increase the amount of surplus value it extracts, by decreasing the amount of time workers labour on their own behalf. Capital accomplishes this feat through investment in technological innovation, which renders labour increasingly superfluous as a means to collective self-maintenance, even as capital itself continues to require surplus value to keep itself afloat. Following Moishe Postone’s important thesis that capitalist domination is not primarily a matter of the exploitation of one class by another, but rather a matter of the self-undermining dynamic of wage labour itself, *This Life* demonstrates the practical necessity of a “revaluation of value,” of the abolition of wage labour and of the transformation of the very form of our shared economic life.

A key feature of Hägglund’s book lies in its implicit demonstration of the inseparability of the therapeutic and the transformative aspects of critique. On the one hand, Hägglund’s therapeutic approach to the question of religious faith takes up a classic object of Marxian critique and addresses its basis in lived reality. Marx famously argues that religion is the “opiate of the masses,” both in the sense that it ameliorates the pain of immiseration and in the sense that it tranquilizes the working class. The religious ideal of eternal life has motivational force precisely because it carries the promise of fulfilment beyond the bounds of “this life,” as structured by modern institutions. By addressing himself to the believer, Hägglund takes seriously the *first-personal* experience of capitalist contradiction and the real reasons individuals have for continuing to endure the pain. On the other hand, challenging the prevailing “redistributive” models of economic change, Hägglund shows that the only way to realize the very ideals of equality and freedom is to transform our mode of production by abolishing wage labour. Yet far from representing an ideal external to the standpoint of the religious believer, Hägglund’s vision of democratic socialism is meant to make good on the promise distortedly expressed in the religious idea of salvation. As a form of life in which we could actually see ourselves, identify with our work, and share a sense of purpose and value, democratic socialism would represent the transformation of society required to complete the therapeutic overcoming of religious faith.

Hägglund recalls us to the self-undermining form of modern social life and, in light of that structure, shows us why reformist and redistributive political proposals will always be insufficient for achieving an emancipated form of life. Moreover, as I have argued, Hägglund seeks to provide a philosophical justification for Marx’s vision of emancipation. Such justification is not simply an empty academic exercise, but is itself an attempt to transform the practice of theory: how we think about the world, so the claim goes, *itself* ought to change.

As Hegel argues, it is a distinctive feature of rational agency that what we are *for ourselves* is essential to what we are *in ourselves*. Part of what it means to be a teacher is that I take myself to be one. If I didn’t so take myself, it would be a kind of mistake or misunderstanding for others to recognize me as one. The implication for theory is that our philosophical self-understanding

is partly constitutive of who we are practically. For example, if we understood ourselves on a Humean model, as subject to the vagaries of desire, we could not take ourselves as agents of change – we could not take the required steps to achieving emancipation. By contrast, in making the philosophical case for our freedom, Hägglund is able to argue that democratic socialism is what we require of ourselves. In aiming to transform our theoretical self-understanding, *This Life* aims to expand our practical field of vision. If it can be shown that we must understand ourselves as free, then it can also be shown that we are responsible for our form of life. In sustaining capitalism, we do not fail to fulfil an objective ethical imperative or to satisfy the demands of human nature; rather, we fail to fulfil the definitive modern value, our commitment to leading a free life.

IN SUSTAINING CAPITALISM, WE DO NOT FAIL TO FULFIL AN OBJECTIVE ETHICAL IMPERATIVE OR TO SATISFY THE DEMANDS OF HUMAN NATURE; RATHER, WE FAIL TO FULFIL THE DEFINITIVE MODERN VALUE, OUR COMMITMENT TO LEADING A FREE LIFE

But this does raise the crucial question, famously posed by Lenin in the title of his text from 1902: What is to be done? And that raises a series of related questions: How did we get here? If capitalism is so painful, why haven't we overcome it? Why were the revolutions in the 1910s unsuccessful? Why, exactly, has it been so hard to get Marx right? Is it just a question of bad readings and misinterpretations? And why does it seem that the political imagination of the Left has contracted over the course of the past century, instead of expanding?

A little over one-hundred years ago, socialism was not only on the agenda across Europe, but there was a Leftist intelligentsia that firmly believed that philosophical reflection was indispensable for political organization. What went wrong, and why is a project like Hägglund's necessary today?

In a recent review of *This Life*, which provides an illuminating account of Hägglund's inheritance of Marx, Conall Cash points out that what the book lacks is a theory of transition, a theory of how we will get from "here to there" – from capitalism to democratic socialism. I would suggest, however, that this is not really a matter of theoretical "incompleteness," but rather reflects something essential about our historical situation – a situation in which the political task of broad institutional transformation has been superseded by calls for perennial resistance and/or reform. If the Left has become more reconciled to the status quo, if the working class is more assimilated than it has ever been (for better or worse), then critical theory has, in effect, lost its object – it has become a political movement in need of resources for orienting itself. But the divorce of theory from praxis has created a new opportunity for theoretical self-reflection; if we have fallen back behind the political revolutions of 1848 and 1917, it is not inconceivable that we might have returned to the philosophical moment of 1807, when Hegel wrote his *Phenomenology of Spirit* – a moment that we are compelled to repeat with a historical difference.

Hägglund's text prescind from the issue of "what must be done" because the theory of transition must have as its critical object a reality in which a transition is already being practically envisioned. Nevertheless, *This Life* is neither utopian nor conformist: it does not offer a "blueprint" for a better life or a set of prescriptions for reforming capitalist institutions, but rather begins to *make* the transition – precisely by recalling us to a largely forgotten concrete possibility for change.

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