

Democracy, Pluralism, and the Life-Ground of Value

By Jeff Noonan

1. Introduction

Contemporary democratic theory is in large part defined by a convergence between formerly antagonistic theories of democracy. Egalitarian liberal, deliberative democratic, and postmodern theories of radical democracy have in large part come to agree that democracy should be defined by constitutionally guaranteed participatory political practices. The constitutional guarantee should take the form of a set of civic and political rights formally separating the spheres of politics and economy. Mediating both spheres is a newly emergent idea of civil society defined as a space for freedom of expression and association in which circulates a great variety of definitions of the good life.¹ Uniting

¹This convergence can be seen by examining key texts from all three positions. The egalitarian liberal position I associate most with American liberalism from the 1970s. John Rawls is the key proponent, and we will examine his most up to date presentation of the theory of justice in the present paper. Other important contributors would be Ronald Dworkin and Judith Shklar. See respectively Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978) and Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). The deliberative democratic tradition is closely linked with some key themes of egalitarian liberalism, but also draws on the resources of critical theory for its understanding of the relationship between civil society and democracy. We will examine Jürgen Habermas' essential contribution in this paper. See also Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987); James Bohman, *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity, and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997). The themes of

this constellation of theories is the idea that pluralism is the defining value of democratic society. Establishing legal securities for persons that enable them to hold and pursue their own idea of the good life, rather than securing the material conditions necessary for citizens to realize their conception of the good life, has become the orienting goal of democratic theory.

It is not the object of the present investigation to dispute the value of pluralism. Instead, it will argue that contemporary democratic theory is guided by an abstract understanding of pluralism. By “abstract” I mean de-coupled from its material grounds, not just in the socio-economic system, but also deeper, in the nature of organic life. As a consequence, contemporary democratic theory underestimates the threat posed to pluralism by the latest phase of global capital expansion. In opposition to this abstraction, I will develop in this article a conception of social pluralism which understands it to be one moment of the universal pluralism of living forms. Both social and living pluralism are threatened by the invasive character of market relations and the life-denying value system that governs their attacks on evolved systems of living things and social infrastructure.

By social pluralism I mean a society that devotes its resources to ensuring that its citizens can express their individuality through actual life projects and not just tolerate different conceptions of the good life. By living pluralism I mean both the self-differentiating nature of individual life forms (a human being develops into a complex entity from its origins as a zygote, for example) and the diversity of living things that defines life as a whole. Rather than highlight the opposition between pluralism in these materialist senses and global market forces, the most influential democratic theorists today accept a capitalist growth economy steered by profit and private interest as a condition of democracy and pluralism

pluralism and complexity are again central to postmodern conceptions of radical democracy, although theorists in this tradition tend to emphasize the need to maintain separation between differences. Nevertheless, there is an open embrace of traditional liberal themes. See for example Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993); Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000); Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Iris Marion Young, “Deferring Group Representation,” Ian Shapiro and Will Kymlicka, eds., *Ethnicity and Group Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

The present critique has two parts. In the first, I explore the career of pluralism in the 20th century through an examination of the recent work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Rawls gives definitive expression to the key themes of the egalitarian liberalism that is at the core of the most influential theories of democracy today. Habermas' systematic work in democratic theory demonstrates clearly the drift of critical theory towards liberal shores. I argue that the emphasis on the legal conditions of pluralism in modern democratic theory uncritically presupposes the legitimacy of the liberal separation of economy from politics. Of course, both Rawls and Habermas accept the principle that government is charged with the obligation to ensure that basic needs are met through supplementary welfare measures. This approach to the problems generated by market dynamics presupposes the legitimacy of the dynamics and simply deals with the effects. At this moment of history, however, such inattention to the "value program"² of the global economy disables democratic theory from checking the advance of socio-economic dynamics opposed to pluralism.

In the second part, I will argue that the material grounds of pluralism lie in the evolved structure of organic life itself. Living things are by nature self-differentiating. In order to unfold their specific differences, however, living things must have secure access to the means of life. Capitalism extends itself by interposing market structures between living things and the means of life for the sake of profiting from what would otherwise be freely appropriated on the basis of need. I will argue that the growing invasiveness of market dynamics threatens both the pluralism of living things and human societies. It does so by compromising the ability of humans and other life forms from satisfying their defining needs. The only alternative left to living things is to adapt to market structures or perish. This claim will be developed with the aid of the life ethics of John McMurtry.

²The term "value program" is adopted from the work of John McMurtry. A value program is an underlying conceptual schema according to which particular value judgments are made in a given society. The value program of the global market defines value as expansion of money value and thus decides in favor of whatever course of action is likely to lead to its maximal expansion. It is opposed by the life ground of value, which judges value in terms of the growth and expansion of capacities. See John McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System* (Toronto: Garamond, 1998), p. 6.

2. Pluralism, Democracy, and Free Markets: Rawls

John Rawls has in large part defined the egalitarian interpretation of liberalism in America since the publication of *A Theory of Justice* in 1971. Writing amidst the massive upheaval in American society caused by the civil rights movement, the New Left, radical black nationalism, the women's liberation movement, and the struggle against the Viet Nam war, Rawls sought to re-establish or rediscover the lost legitimacy of liberal-democratic principles. Against the right he argued in favor of income redistribution as a matter of fundamental justice. Against the left he argued in favor of the classical liberal values of basic rights and liberties as the unsurpassable foundation of a free community. In short, his theory "justice as fairness" argued in favor of principles of justice that Rawls believed free and equal people would agree to if they reasoned impartially.

Rawls' 1993 recasting of his famous argument focuses attention on the relationship between what he calls "reasonable pluralism" and his theory of justice. Reasonable pluralism, which he takes to be both a fact and a mark of the relative success of liberal society, refers to the peaceful co-existence in one society of different conceptions of the good life. Pluralism denotes the differences between these conceptions of the good life while "reasonable" denotes the fact that these conceptions do not seek to ally themselves with political power for the sake of eliminating different conceptions. Reasonable pluralism is the ground against which the justice of a political theory can be measured. In other words, no theory is just which cannot reconcile itself with reasonable pluralism defined both as an accomplished historical fact and as a primary social value. Rawls follows the traditions of liberal thought in maintaining that the key to the existence of pluralism is the freeing of social relations from substantive notions of the good life, either religious or socio-economic. He links the development of pluralism to the struggle for religious toleration.³ While the struggle for religious toleration is one key moment in the historical evolution of liberalism, there is another, equally if not more important moment, the freeing of economic activity from custom and state control. Rawls ignores this second moment, to his detriment, as we will see.

According to Rawls, the liberal tradition understands persons as reasonable and rational. By "reasonable" Rawls refers to the ability of people to define their own conceptions of the good life. By "rational" he refers to the ability of people to pursue that interpretation of the good

³John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. xxiv-xxv.

through means that they work out for themselves. Reasonable pluralism exists when these theories of the good life, or “comprehensive doctrines,” accept each other’s existence in the same society. Social stability depends on maintaining an overlapping consensus between citizens who disagree on the substance of one another’s interpretation of the good. That is, people who hold different conceptions of the good can get along with one another so long as they accept some basic ground rules defining the limits of legitimate conceptions. They do not have to agree to these rules for the same reasons, so long as they agree and are willing to abide by these just limits. The consensus is maintained through institutions whose powers are limited by a full complement of equal rights and liberties. Rights and liberties supplant a substantive notion of the good as the anchor of social stability because the deliberative procedures they define secure the allegiance of people with different substantive theories of the good life. While Rawls conception of reasonable pluralism seems to imply the conclusion that any position that is not liberal is by definition unreasonable, it fails, as we will see, to grasp the essentially unreasonable nature of market dynamics.

Rawls buttresses his defense of pluralism by highlighting the inability of anyone to provide an absolutely knock-down argument in support of her or his preferred comprehensive doctrine. Moral and political facts are never self-evident; every proponent of a comprehensive doctrine takes upon herself “the burdens of judgment.”⁴ The burdens of judgment place all comprehensive doctrines beyond final proof. No reasonable doctrine can be privileged over any other, because none can be shown to be perfectly true or false. The reasonable course of action in such a situation is simply to tolerate all reasonable doctrines:

The evident consequences of the burdens of judgment is that reasonable people do not all affirm the same comprehensive doctrine. Moreover, they recognize that all persons...are subject to these burdens, and so many comprehensive doctrines are affirmed, not all of which can be true (indeed, none of them may be true).⁵

Rawls’ political liberalism conforms to the implications of the burdens of judgment. It is not an affirmation of a substantive theory of the good life to the exclusion of other competing theories but rather a political

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 48-58.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 60.

framework for a society which, at least in principle, can accommodate all reasonable comprehensive doctrines. What Rawls' fails to see, however, is that capitalism is not simply a system which produces goods and services, but is itself a substantive value system (or comprehensive doctrine). Moreover, since, as we will see, this value system does ally itself with political power to rule out other competing conceptions, it is unreasonable on Rawls' own terms.⁶

For Rawls, society is reasonably pluralistic to the extent that its institutions do not claim for themselves objective grounding in a substantive notion of the good. Any attempt at such grounding will appear as exclusionary and oppressive:

Since many doctrines may seem to be reasonable, those who insist, when fundamental political questions are at stake, on what they take to be true, but others do not, seem to others simply to insist on their own beliefs, when they have the political power to do so.⁷

Once pluralism has been raised to the master value of society, comprehensive doctrines can no longer seek formal recognition as the regulative principles of society. Yet this is just what the dynamics of market society demand and increasingly receive, all without eliciting critical comment from Rawls.

That is not to say that Rawls is indifferent to the material conditions of pluralistic social relations, but he does fail to see the essential role principles of social morality play in deciding issues of the production and distribution of social resources. He argues that the basic structure of society (the major political, social, and economic institutions)⁸ must make provision for basic needs satisfaction, but he understands this provision as instrumental to securing the equal value of *political* liberties, not active pursuit of life projects. "The constitutional essential," he writes, "[is] that below a certain level of material and social well-being...people simply cannot take part in society as citizens..."⁹ True enough. But "citizenship" here means exercising one's

⁶In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls assumes that the market is a neutral means of distributing resources which even a "socialist" society would have to utilize. He does not alter this assumption in *Political Liberalism*. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 240.

⁷Rawls, 1993, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁸Rawls, 1993, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁹Rawls, 1993, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

civil and political rights in the political sphere. He makes no mention of the quite different principles operative in the socio-economic structure, a sphere where the equality of the political sphere is replaced by the inequality of economic power between workers and the controllers of economic resources. The socio-economic sphere is governed by the expansionary imperative to always increase monetary value. Moreover, as can easily be confirmed, it is driven by its basic dynamics to invade all spheres of life (basic necessities, health care, entertainment, education, etc.,) and is thus unalterably opposed, at the deepest level, to active pluralism of life projects. Real pluralism not only presupposes need-governed access to resources such that people can develop and pursue different life plans, it also demands that the society be structured such that people can survive whilst living outside of accepted norms.¹⁰ Rawls, however, explicitly rules out basic socio-economic dynamics from the hypothetical deliberations in the original position. He argues:

...the question of private property in the means of production or their social ownership and similar questions are not settled at the level of first principles of justice, but depend upon the traditions of a country and its particular problems and historical circumstances.¹¹

This view is too superficial. The crucial question does not concern the “form of property relations” but rather the principles of social morality which regulate those relations. Unless the question is asked: “Will social resources be governed by the imperative of need satisfaction or the imperative of profit expansion?” the theory of justice is decoupled from justice’s material grounds.

¹⁰Rawls has come under criticism from thinkers like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum for failing to distinguish between rights to a general basket of need satisfying goods and the specific goods different individuals need in order to be in a position to function. This criticism is sound and highlights the internal relationship between need satisfaction and capacity development, but both Sen and Nussbaum fail to develop the critique of market logic necessary to make their goals viable. See Amartya Sen, “Well-being, Agency, and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures, 1984,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXII, 4, April, 1985; “Justice: Means Versus Freedoms,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 19, 2, Spring, 1990; *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999); and Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹¹Rawls, 1993, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

Thus, it is not only wrong, it is self-contradictory to put off debate about what socio-economic dynamics will govern a just society. Social and living pluralism as defined in the introduction presupposes that life activity is directly need-satisfying, and it is the socio-economic dynamics of a society that will decide how and to what extent labor is or is not need satisfying. Pluralism is fundamentally a function of living, of developing capacities, not simply the political and legal structure of a society.¹² Today, when market capitalism is dogmatically assumed to be the only system capable of producing and distributing resources efficiently despite all evidence to the contrary, it is the primary duty of democratic political philosophy to bring to light its life-compromising and undemocratic effects.¹³ The market, governed by the value program of maximizing monetary returns, produces only in response to effective demand, not need. More, since it demands compliance with its logic from everyone, anyone whose talents, insights, or conception of the good life cannot be articulated in a way that will return profit is increasingly silenced, *de facto* if not *de jure*.¹⁴

¹²As for the difference principle, which stipulates that any inequalities must be to the advantage of the least advantaged classes in society, since it too refuses to offer a substantive definition of what well being for the worst off is, it is of no obvious help in criticizing contemporary distributions or justifying alternative models.

¹³For example, NAFTA provisions supercede municipal, provincial (or state), and federal laws on all matters relating to trade, thus effectively preventing governments from regulating the operations of intercontinental trade. These dynamics, however, shape our lives on all fronts, from what we eat, to what we wear, what we watch on television, what music we listen to, and so forth. If local citizens, provincial and state governments, and even federal governments are handcuffed by trade law to accept whatever markets supply, then we can expect to see the growth of corporate-consumerist monoculture, not robust pluralism, (see McMurtry, *op. cit.*, p. 233).

¹⁴For example, in a published open letter of resignation to the head of the IMF, a former economist, Davison L. Budhoo disclosed how the IMF prescribed “reform” of the Trinidad and Tobago economy deliberately undermined the social viability of the country’s economy. Budhoo argued that the policy was conceived “irrespective of economic realities.” “Trinidad and Tobago,” he writes, “is only one country from the host of Third World countries where we (the IMF) are perpetrating the same economic nonsense, with the same catastrophic consequences.” These catastrophic consequences are the result of IMF policy, which invariably demands “devaluation of the local currency (thus raising the price of imports), removal of price controls even on the most basic essentials, accelerated reduction of wages, removal of exchange controls on external capital...spectacular cuts in public sector wage bills...deep reductions in

The point that needs to be made is that globalized market forces decouple citizens from need-governed access to life-sustaining and life-enhancing resources, and thus constitute a system of global dependence which seriously impairs social and living pluralism locally and worldwide. The need for radical questioning of the economy does not even appear on Rawls' ethical radar screen. According to Rawls' understanding of citizenship, people are free to the extent that, 1) they are capable of conceiving of a conception of the good, 2) they understand themselves as "self-authenticating" sources of norms, and 3) they are capable of taking responsibility for their ends.¹⁵ Destitution and lack of education certainly undermine these three capacities. However, in so far as self-determination is confined to the exercise of intellectual capacities, Rawls' misses the deeper dependence relation operative in a capitalist economy, namely, that of life and life's requirements on the capitalist market. Rights to equal liberty and respect serve to secure *abstract* freedom, but close off from view the sources of *concrete* unfreedom. Those sources lie in the subordination of life and the pursuit of life projects to the expansion of economic value. Unchecked global market dynamics tolerate pluralism as an ideology, but rule it out by and large at the level of lived practice.

3. Pluralism, Democracy, and Free Markets: Habermas

In terms of his philosophical development Habermas could not be more distant from Rawls. Habermas' early work was a continuation of the traditions of Frankfurt Critical Theory which was itself (among other things) a continuation of the Marxist critique of ideology. While the main figures of the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse) eventually diverged in their assessment of Western capitalist society, they all began from the position that it was essentially invasive, oppressive, and life-destructive. Habermas initially continued their work of de-mystifying the life-destructive nature of capitalism, but eventually abandoned the critique of ideology for an

social services, including health and education." As social spending on infrastructure goes down, the opportunities of people in the Third World decrease, and the globe becomes more and more subject to the demands of a single organizing principle. Pluralism of social forms is thus also threatened by autonomous market forces. The quotations are from a review of Budhoo's book in *Economic Reform* (Toronto: Committee on Economic and Monetary Reform), 10, 7, July, 1998, p. 10. See also Davison L. Budhoo, *Enough is Enough: Dear Mr. Camdessus....Open Letter of Resignation to the Managing Director of The International Monetary Fund* (New York: New Horizons Press, 1990).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 30-33.

analysis of the presuppositions of communication. In Habermas' extraordinarily erudite and sophisticated work since the mid 1970s he has argued that the basic problem besetting Western societies is systematically distorted processes of communication. His work in democratic theory since the early 1990s has tried to reconstruct democracy from the standpoint of undistorted communication. His political philosophy thus converges with that of Rawls, their radically different starting points notwithstanding.¹⁶

In *Between Facts and Norms*, his elaboration of the democratic implications of his theory of communicative action, Habermas attempts to reconstruct democracy from the standpoint of discourse theory. That means that he understands democracy as essentially a process of debate and deliberation between citizens who recognize each other as free and equal. In effect, it is an historical as well as philosophical justification of democracy as a procedure of legitimate law-making rooted in human autonomy. The procedural model is legitimated, according to Habermas, on the grounds of its superior rationality. This project follows from his moral philosophy, which in turn follows from his pioneering sociological theory of communicative action. In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Habermas argued that moral principles in the modern world can no longer be anchored in substantive theories of the good that appeal to some metaphysical or religious truth.¹⁷ Since theories oriented by a substantive and teleological notions of the good rule out reasonable debate as to the content of the good, Habermas sees them as either archaic vestiges of pre-rational human society or the ghost of the revolutionary-utopian hopes of the 19th century. That is, Habermas believes that we can no longer look to heaven or to ourselves, to some essential human nature, for the values that will guide the organization of our societies. Both of these grounds have been undermined by social evolution and historical transformation. Religion has retreated to the private conscience of individuals and natural science has supplanted metaphysics as the privileged theory for explaining the natural world. Like Rawls, Habermas' approach starts from a world in which citizens differ on substantive questions (questions of the good

¹⁶Habermas himself remarks on the continuities and differences between his own work and that of Rawls in *The Inclusion of the Other* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998). See also, Kenneth Baynes, *The Normative Grounds of Social Criticism: Kant, Rawls, Habermas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

¹⁷Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 58-68, 76, 108, 116-133, 156-171. This perspective was first alluded to in *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 102-117.

life), but, because they are rational, are invested with the potential to resolve these disputes through debate. As in Rawls, the operative value here is reasonable reconciliation of differences, not the comprehension of the material grounds from which the differences develop.

According to Habermas, the evolution of reason legitimates procedural democracy for just the same reason that it legitimates procedural morality. Rational citizens in a post-traditional state must decide for themselves the laws according to which they will be governed. Just as autonomous moral agents must discover for themselves the principles governing moral conduct, so too rationally autonomous political agents will assent only to laws which have passed through the filter of legitimate debate. Questions of the common good cannot be settled by appeal to purportedly universal truths of human nature. Instead, such questions can only be resolved through deliberations oriented by the presuppositions of communicative action. As he argues:

Post-conventional morality provides no more than a procedure for impartially judging disputed questions. It cannot pick out a catalog of duties or even designate a list of hierarchically ordered norms, but it expects subjects to form their own judgments. Moreover, the communicative freedom they enjoy in moral discourse leads only to fallible insights in the contest of interpretations.¹⁸

While Habermas rejects Rawls method of argument, according to which individuals are to reason about principles of social justice as if they did not have anything concrete themselves at stake, he nevertheless accepts the more important point, namely, that pluralism, structured and tempered by a legitimate constitutional order, is the defining value of democratic society.

Thus, it is no surprise to see Habermas define democracy as a procedure for the legitimate production of law. His justification for this definition strongly parallels his justification of post-conventional morality. He writes:

...the democratic principle states that only those structures may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted.

¹⁸Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 114; Habermas, 1990, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-68, 98-109.

In other words, the principle explains the performative meaning of the practice of self-determination on the part of legal consociates who recognize one another as free and equal members of an association they have joined voluntarily.¹⁹

Just as moral principles are legitimated through debate between rational selves who disagree about the good, so too law is legitimated through rational debate between legally free and equal political agents who disagree about where society should go, but agree to procedures for deciding upon the direction.

It is not my purpose to dissect these procedures and norms of discourse, but rather to stay focused on the deep assumptions of Habermas' argument. What is crucial is Habermas' understanding of self-determination. Like Rawls, he detaches self-determination from its material grounds, and sees it realized in the public exercise of private reason. Habermas goes beyond both Rawls and traditional liberalism, however, in so far as he does not take reason to be a fixed property of a self-maximizing agent. Instead, he situates individual reason as a node in a communicative network. Civil society is the ground from which unique perspectives on the good and law are spawned. It is thus the condition for a free and democratic society:

What is meant by civil society today, in contrast to its usage in the Marxist tradition, no longer includes the economy as constituted by private law and steered through markets in labor, capital, and commodities. Rather, its institutional core comprises those non-governmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations that order the communicative structures of the public sphere in the society component of the life world.²⁰

Habermas' understanding of civil society supercedes the abstract conception of individual difference characteristic of the history of liberalism, and rejects the classical liberal belief that private interests are fixed and given contents of individual minds. On the other hand, however, it remains abstract in so far as it understands self-determination in the primary sense as the exercise of reason. Consequently, it focuses analysis on the discursive and legal conditions for a pluralistic public sphere, minimizing the attention paid to the

¹⁹Habermas, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 366.

manner in which the economic system shapes the form and content of discourse and constricts the life horizons of citizens.²¹

That is not to say that Habermas is oblivious to the deleterious consequences the economy can have on civil society and the public sphere. Since markets are steered by instrumental considerations, while the life world, civil society, and the public realm are (or should be) structured strategically and communicatively, the irruption of instrumental reason into the other spheres directly violates their proper nature.²² However, he thinks these consequences can be controlled by a vital public sphere. Like Rawls, however, Habermas fails to see the market as anything more than a system for the production and distribution of resources, calling it, in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, “an ethically neutral system.”²³ He likewise fails, therefore, to see how the market as a system of substantive valuation predetermines (or always attempts to do so) all public debate by making its parameters conform to the market’s preferred system of valuing (increasing monetary returns). Thus, he fails to see how permitting it its autonomy is not a question of economic efficiency but rather opening the door to the reprogramming of public discourse and potential life practices to terms amenable to further market efficiency and growth. He argues:

...political steering mechanisms can often only take an indirect approach and must leave intact the modes of operation internal to other highly organized spheres of action. As a result, democratic movements emerging from civil society must give up holistic aspirations to a self-organizing society.²⁴

As with Rawls, Habermas fails to bring to light and criticize the grounds of social morality which lay behind these ‘instrumental’ steering mechanisms. The principles of the market are not simply instrumental, they rest upon a substantive value claim to the effect that the only value is money value and that the forces of society must be geared to ensuring its expansion. As intensifying globalization proves, the forces of market capitalism are not content with limited autonomy,

²¹This argument is elaborated upon by Deborah Cook, “The Two Faces of Liberal Democracy in Habermas,” *Philosophy Today*, Spring, 2001, pp. 95-104.

²²This irruption of instrumental action into the lifeworld is the core of his famous “‘colonization’ thesis.” See *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), p. 355.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁴Habermas, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

but push everywhere, often with extraordinary violence, for complete autonomy from democratic deliberation, the privatization of public infrastructure, and the subordination of need satisfaction to profit expansion. While Habermas is aware of the expansionary logic of capitalism, he fails to understand its deep implications for the social morality of a genuinely democratic society. That social morality must not only tame, limit, or control that logic, but progressively supplant it with a life-grounded economic dynamic.

Habermas' argument brings to a head the defining problems of contemporary democratic theory. Its increasing stress on proceduralism spells out very well the legal conditions of individual self-reflection and the public exercise of private reason, but at the cost of accepting the univocal value program and irrational principles of globalized market forces steered by the imperative of profit expansion. The value program of the market is univocal because it reduces every value to monetary value. It is irrational because the expansion of money value is fully compatible with need deprivation on a global scale. As democracy justifies itself on the basis of its superior protection and cultivation of human freedom, it obliges itself to take a fundamental interest in need satisfaction. As we have seen in the above examples, its most astute contemporary defenders do not take such a fundamental interest, but instead permit (or exclude from consideration) market dynamics as the unquestioned producer and distributor of need satisfying resources.

4. Needs, Self-Differentiation, and Freedom

While Rawls and Habermas recognize the deleterious consequences of poverty to the exercise of political rights, they fail to trace poverty's roots to the normal operations of a value program incapable of recognizing the material harm of need deprivation. This failure owes to the way in which each de-couples their understanding of pluralism and democracy from any consideration of the relationship between these values and the material production of the means of life and the way in which the principles that govern that production impact upon the globe as a living system. As a consequence, they fail to criticize capitalism as a life-destructive system in general, and the way in which its univocal value program is the very antithesis of the pluralism they uphold in particular. In order to advance the value of pluralism, not only in society but throughout the system of life itself, political theory must begin not with the legal structure of a society, but from its basic economic dynamics.

Considered as systems which produce the means of life, economies must be judged as to how well they fulfill their essential task. Needs,

however, are not simply human, but are definitive of living things as such. Needs must be anchored in the nature of organic life, and economies ultimately judged not solely in terms of how well they satisfy human needs, but how well they maintain the living integrity of the globe. Today it is not simply social pluralism that is threatened by autonomous market dynamics, but also the pluralism of living things that is at risk. Unless democratic theory anchors itself in the needs of life, grasping life itself as the activity from which pluralism develops, it will continue to overlook the primary threat to human and natural pluralism.²⁵ Only by connecting democratic social forms to what McMurtry calls the life ground of value can its superiority to other social forms be seen and justified.

According to McMurtry, needs are organic requirements of living things. He defines need as follows: “N is a need if and only if, and to the extent that, deprivation of N always leads to a reduction of organic capacity.”²⁶ Deprivation of any one need leads to a reduction in the organic capabilities of the being so deprived, and a being so deprived is harmed. From this perspective value is not money value, but rather capacity expansion. The value ground of this system of thinking is what McMurtry calls the life ground. In contrast to the value program of the market, which is driven to subordinate everything, including life itself, to the self-expansion of capital, the life ground is steered by the goal of connecting life to life’s requirements for the sake of engendering qualitatively more and better life (engendering the realization of capacities). As McMurtry defines the life ground:

...life means organic movement, sentience and feeling, and thought. Means of life refers to whatever

²⁵The idea of life itself as self-manifesting difference is anticipated in the various strands of deep ecology, most effectively from my perspective in the work of Arne Naess. While Naess is not indifferent to the social determination of value, his work in particular, and deep ecology in general fail to engage with the specific mode of valuation proper to a capitalist market economy. For a concise exposition of Naess’ thought of life as self-manifesting difference, see “The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movements: A Summary,” Witozek and Brennan eds., *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Deep Ecology* (Langham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 3-9. For a critique of the lack of concrete social philosophy in deep ecology see Bron Taylor, “Deep Ecology and its Social Philosophy: A Critique,” Eric Katz, Andrew Light, and David Rosenberg, eds., *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in Deep Ecology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

²⁶McMurtry, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

enables life to be preserved or to extend its vital range on these three planes of being alive. Clean air, food, water, shelter, environmental space and accessible learning conditions are all means of life. To reproduce life-value is to hold these capacities at their established scope. To increase life-value is to widen or deepen them to a more comprehensive range.²⁷

McMurtry thus defines life in terms of its essential activities. All life forms share in at least one of those activities. The more activities a life form is capable of the more complex and valuable it is, but in any case what makes life forms valuable is not their potential usefulness but their intrinsic abilities to move, to feel, and to think to the extent to which their specific nature enables them. To put his point in terms of this paper, to increase life value is to expand the pluralism of living things on the globe, to enable the capacities that permit human beings to develop creative and different life projects, and to ensure that those life projects do not contradict their material grounds by becoming life-destructive.

In the case of each of those means of life catalogued by McMurtry, however, the effect of the market is life-destructive. It permits industry to poison the atmosphere and water, to compromise biodiversity²⁸ by untrammelled habitat destruction, it sells food to only those who can afford it, and violates the freedom of intellectual inquiry by attempting to make schools serve the interest of labor markets. The homogenizing and life-destroying impact of global market forces is thus a demonstrable empirical fact.

In order to maintain a life-sustaining environment, new principles of social morality are needed. These must be anchored in the principle that harm means need deprivation, and it must ensure that the needs of other living creatures as well as our fellow humans take center-stage in

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 298.

²⁸This point is brought home in the 2000 report of the World Conservation Union. They argue that we are facing a global extinction crisis. Human activity has accelerated the extinction rate to between 1000 and 10,000 times its natural pace. Not only is this rate of extinction a threat to the "biological resources on which human life depends" but is, more deeply, a loss of natural pluralism, a loss in the intrinsically valuable diversity of living forms. For details see, "Confirming the Global Extinction Crisis," (<<http://www.iucn.org/redlist/2000/news.html>>), October 4, 2000.

our deliberations.²⁹ We do not simply inhabit a pluralistic society, we inhabit a diverse world of life. Life itself is self-differentiation, and self-differentiation is that fundamental activity from which (for humans) diverse conceptions of the good life flow. Human self-differentiation, however, is dependent upon the evolved interconnection of life forms with one another and the resources they depend upon for the active expression of their differences. Human beings are unique in that we alone (to the best of our knowledge) self-consciously determine our life plans. But the conditions of successful pursuit of these life plans go far beyond the legal structures of our societies, they stretch right down into our interchange with the natural world, the ultimate source of all need satisfying resources. Market logic, however, refuses to recognize this essential dependence of human life on the living system which is the earth. Instead, it reduces the beautiful complexity of living things to “raw materials and “natural resources” (or, in “ecological economics,” to “natural capital”) to be stripped for profit by analogously reduced “human resources.”

This point is neither abstract nor platitudinous. Continuing to ignore the growing separation of market dynamics from their impact on life’s access to life-requirements threatens not only cultural pluralism, but also the pluralism of evolved life forms on the globe, including what Habermas would call the “steering capacities of communities.” Human beings exist as one of those life forms, more complex than others and forced by our organic nature to transform nature through social labor. But the system through which nature is currently transformed, driven by the systemic “need” for markets to expand, rather than satisfaction of defining life needs within known natural limits, is unhinged from conscious integration with the currents and requirements of global life. Democratic theory cannot long tolerate this divorce of socio-economic dynamics from the system of life, not simply because human life depends on a healthy natural world, but also because such a divorce contradicts the proper value of democratic society — pluralism. A pluralistic human society is the social and conscious expression of the self-differentiating nature of life itself.

If democratic society justifies itself on the basis of pluralism, it, in effect, affirms capacity exercise as the ground of social value. It must

²⁹How we go about consciously re-integrating our social practices with the natural world is a matter that must be decided by the types of democratic deliberation sketched by Rawls and Habermas. The point I am making is that the life ground of value must be the framework within which the deliberations take place.

therefore recognize need satisfaction as fundamental, because need satisfaction is the material condition of the development and expression of our life's capacities. If it recognizes need satisfaction as fundamental, however, it must take the social processes through which humans produce and distribute need satisfying resources as its fundamental object of criticism. In other words, it must contest rather than accept the separation of politics from the economy. When the value program governing the economic system is unhinged both from the natural world and the existence of nature in humans, i.e., needs; when it reduces human and natural wealth simply to instruments for its own self-expansion, then it must be criticized as contrary to the democratic value of pluralism. What is valuable to the market is not what is ultimately valuable, the self-expression of the capacities that define living forms.³⁰ The value of life lies in life's abilities and this value is a property of living things, and their relationships, not just human living things. Thus, the proper criterion by which to judge the justice or goodness of a society is the extent to which its metabolic interchange with nature permits maximum expansion of living diversity. If this can be understood as the defining value of democratic theory, then it takes upon itself the obligation to inquire into the system through which need satisfying resources are produced and distributed, and criticize as undemocratic a system like autonomous market dynamics which fails to satisfy needs and thus restricts the expression of capacities.

³⁰This point is not contradicted by the fact, a) that the exercise of the capacities of some creatures harm others or b) that some creatures feed on others for their own survival. Death is an essential moment of life, and that some creatures kill others for the sake of their own survival is perfectly coherent from the perspective of the life ground. What is incoherent is a system of death with no links to improving life overall, e.g., factory production of chickens, clear-cutting a rainforest or polluting a river system with toxic effluent when alternatives are readily available.