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Michael A. McCarthy

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## The Socialist Journey

Review of [This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom](#), by Martin Hägglund (Pantheon, 2019).

Michael A. McCarthy

Social and Cultural Sciences, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

Martin Hägglund's *This Life* deftly weaves religion, philosophy, and political economy to produce a moving vision of a socialist ethos. But it fails to grapple with the problems that will attend the journey beyond capitalism.



Martin Luther King Jr speaking. (Julian Wasser / Getty Images)

As Echol Cole, thirty-six, and Robert Walker, thirty, clung to the back of the garbage truck finishing their route, rain began to pour down. The vehicle was in a state of disrepair. It was Memphis, February

1, 1968, and the Public Works Department had cut all the costs it could for safety and equipment management for its largely black sanitation workforce. Without a union as a line of defense, they were subject to increased squeezing from the city council, overworked and paid so little that many had to wear hand-me-down clothing that barely fit. The new mayor, Henry Loeb, took office just a month earlier and was already pushing work speedups.

As the chilled February rain came down on the two men, they moved under a filthy hydraulic ram for shelter. An electrical malfunction seemed to have triggered the ram at about half past four. The driver, Willie Crane, quickly pulled over to find the two men struggling to escape the filthy jaws of the compactor only to both be, as historian Michael K. Honey [writes](#), “chewed up like refuse”—their lives, smothered short, and their families left with no insurance settlement, workman’s comp, or other support from the Memphis government that employed them.

The event would be the catalyst for a defining episode in American civil rights and labor history, two movements on parallel paths colliding into one. Against resistance from the white establishment, black sanitation workers and their communities launched a local campaign to challenge the old racial order in a bid for better conditions, pay, and a union. At the same time, Martin Luther King Jr was launching the Poor People’s Campaign, which aimed to move beyond civil rights to challenge the inequalities that were born out of capitalism itself. King now followed up wins in civil and voting rights with the demand to abolish poverty entirely through massive forms of redistribution to allow people to buy their basic necessities of life and had moved, albeit unofficially, to embrace democratic socialism as the goal of the movement.

The sanitation workers’ fight in Memphis is where King helped launch this second phase of the movement. It would also be his last fight, as he was shot dead early in the evening, just over two months after Cole and Walker were murdered by city negligence. The night before his death, King spoke to the striking sanitation workers at the Mason Temple, saying:

It’s all right to talk about “long white robes over yonder,” in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s all right to talk about “streets flowing with milk and honey,” but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preachers must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

## Secular Faith

Martin Hägglund writes in [This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom](#) that “To speak of the new Memphis — rather than the new Jerusalem — is to avow that we can achieve our collective emancipation in this life. The new Memphis is the object of a secular faith, a spiritual cause that moves us to take action and fight to establish the social conditions for mutual recognition of freedom.” This view of the promised land — the secular interpretation of Martin Luther King’s political philosophy — is not a vision of an eternal life, but rather what might be achieved in this one.

For Hägglund, a professor of comparative literature at Yale University, the existential fragility of life, captured by the deaths of Cole, Walker, and King, lies at the heart of the human experience. In *This*

*Life*, Hägglund uses that frailty to motivate a moving account of our own freedom and the ties that bind us together. Yet *This Life* is political and normative through and through, offering up a transformative proposal for the kind of society that might allow people to thrive — democratic socialism.

A finite life, we learn, is a crucial condition for anything mattering at all. Nothing is at stake in an endless life — eternity, it turns out, is not even desirable were it to be possible. The fact that life is finite gives it meaning. When I hold my two little kids and worry about them being unharmed and flourishing, there is something at stake precisely because I believe in their irreplaceable value, but I know they, like me, like their mother, like all of us, inhabit fragile bodies. *This Life* shows, quite expressively, that our definitive and undetermined end is the motivation, even if not everyone acts on it, to love and cherish and be responsible to one another. This applies to political projects as well. There is no guarantee that the values King fought for will ever be realized — and even those that have been won might be subject to significant reversals or setbacks.

Fidelity to the vision that King laid out exemplifies what Hägglund calls “secular faith,” the first of his three major concepts. We are committed to persons and projects that might very well be lost, are temporal, and expose us to risk — and they could turn out much differently than we hope or anticipate. As Hägglund writes, “the more you devote yourself to something — the more you allow a given passion to define who you are — the more you put yourself in peril. By committing yourself to a person, a political struggle, or a way of life, you become dependent on something whose continued existence is objectively uncertain.” This is not merely a part of life, it *is* life. As Søren Kierkegaard informs us, it is precisely through this existential becoming that we are a self in the first place.

Secular faith is the basis for our existential commitments about what we ought to be and what we ought to do. Yet, in spite of uncertainty, we act because we have faith that our actions matter, or at least we take a calculated risk. Hägglund elegantly shows that faith in the finite is the motivational force for caring and having an urgency about acting in this life. Faith, then, is a necessary condition for experience. When, in the last sentences of King’s final speech, he said, “I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land,” he was exercising faith in an uncertain future in this world.

To develop the argument about secular faith, *This Life* plucks insights from a wide range of sources through profound rereadings of writers like Charles Taylor and Karl Ove Knausgård. But even more skilled are the surprising ways that Hägglund deconstructs the religious texts of C.S. Lewis, Kierkegaard, Saint Augustine, and Martin Luther King Jr to show how their most gripping ideas were, unbeknownst to them, profoundly secular in their implications. For instance, he unpacks Kierkegaard’s definition of faith through a secular reading, saying, “Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty.” Uncertainty is a constant mark on our present internal experience as we live with a constant eye to things that have not yet happened. This means faith is not simply a matter of devils and angels. It is a necessary aspect of our every experience.

*This Life* offers a fresh atheism, one that, compared to the stale new atheism of YouTube hits like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, trades gotcha science about the existence of God for profound introspection about the conditions of life. Its strength is that it elaborates a positive case for

secularism on its own terms rather than a negative case against religion. For a book pitched largely against religious thinking, it is a monumental achievement that, from front to end, we never leave this world. But it is not merely a secular defense of existentialism — Hägglund convincingly pushes the reader to understand that secular faith makes possible the capacity to pose the central question of the book: *What should I do with my time?*

But the fact that we are able to pose the question and answer does not make us free, as many of the existentialists believed. Our ability to embark on the life we want to live and to decide what we ought to do is always constrained by our relationships of dependence on others and the way the very organization of our societies helps to constitute those relationships. This leads to Hägglund's second major concept, the normative core of *This Life*, spiritual freedom.

Spiritual freedom is best contrasted with natural freedom. Natural freedom is a freedom of movement and the ability to make choices, but only in light of imperatives that are given and ends that can't be questioned. Consider a wolf in the woods, which lives to reproduce itself and its pack. It chooses when to hunt, when to sleep, and when to lick its wounds. But what the wolf lacks is the ability to ask what imperatives to follow in light of its ends — and to question and change the ends themselves. This much deeper form of freedom is spiritual freedom. Drawing from the work of philosopher Christine Korsgaard, Hägglund argues that the spiritual purpose of a human life is normative, not natural, and involves the development of both a practical identity, who we take ourselves to be, and an existential identity, which treats our life purpose as unfolding rather than fixed. Hägglund insists that our existential identity “does not designate the completion of who I am but the fragile coherence of who I am trying to be.”

## The Realm of Freedom

Here Hägglund turns to a deep engagement with the key figure of *This Life*, Karl Marx, to explore the third and final concept of the book, democratic socialism. Our spiritual freedom hinges on the question of our time. To lead a free life, one must be the subject of that life, rather than merely subjected to it. This means, to the greatest extent possible, socially expanding what Marx termed the “realm of freedom” — time to use to pursue the projects that we desire as ends in themselves — and shrinking, as far as possible, “the realm of necessity” — the time dedicated to produce our basic means of survival which we don't value as an end in and of itself.

These realms are inseparable; there will always be some amount of labor needed to make society work, which some people are unlikely to want to do. But Hägglund tends to think that, given the opportunity, people will *want* to do what is socially beneficial. I might find intrinsic value in cleaning the leaves out of rain gutters, so what is work for you might be leisure for me. What Hägglund's version of democratic socialism aims for, quite simply, is spending more time in the realm of freedom, where people can pursue their own interests and passions, and less in the realm of necessity.

“The point of democratic socialism,” Hägglund writes, “is not to impose a general consensus regarding what matters, but to sustain a form of life that makes it possible for us to own the question of what is worth doing with our lives — what we value individually as well as collectively — as an irreducible question of our lives.” That question can only be meaningfully grappled within a society with abundant free time.

Capitalism is ill equipped to produce that free time. Hägglund uses Marx's political economy to persuade the reader that capitalist wealth itself is generated by labor time. We implicitly understand this because part of the day we are free and the other (usually much larger) part of the day we are working against our deeper desires, in the realm of necessity, to feed, clothe, and shelter ourselves and our families. It is only in this social context that we can begin to experience labor *itself* as a personal cost. This is what makes other people's work valuable.

Drawing from Moishe Postone's [\*Time, Labor and Social Domination\*](#), *This Life* argues that more free time based on greater technological efficiency and productivity will never be attainable within a capitalist society. Hägglund argues that, because labor time is the essence of value in a capitalist mode of production, technological changes alone can't lead to greater free time.

Marx never accepted the idea that the labor theory of value — the notion that the value of commodities is determined by the average amount of labor needed to make them — was transhistorical. Classical economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo held this view, but the subtitle of Marx's *Capital* was "A Critique of Political Economy." Though it has since been the subject of vigorous debate, with Marxists and marginalists alike dismissing it, Marx instead held that socially necessary labor time was the measure of value specific to commodity production. And so, somewhat ironically, from the point of view of people thinking about how to organize society in a way that people can have more free time, labor-saving technologies in capitalism don't translate to greater free time, they instead translate into larger private profits.

For Hägglund, the task at the center of democratic socialism is a revaluation of value itself. This turns on a somewhat Hegelian form of argument. Hegel argued that the idea of freedom made it possible to recognize slavery as a self-contradictory and broken institution that had to be abolished for that idea to be realized. Similarly, a society based in large part on wage labor, even though justified by liberal principles like freedom and equality, must go beyond that wage labor to actually realize those values in socially available free time.

Postone looms large in *This Life*. Hägglund firmly insists on a view of democratic socialism in which society is fundamentally transformed from a capitalist one, where value as socially necessary labor time dominates, to one where value as socially available free time supersedes it. The very idea of wealth itself must be turned upside down. Such a transformation might then render a new socialist technology that is put to the service of leisure rather than profit. As Marx famously wrote in the [\*Grundrisse\*](#), "The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time."

Here is democratic socialism for Hägglund, the vision he insists we put our secular faith in. It has three guiding principles: it would be a form of society committed to reducing socially necessary labor time; the means of production would be collectively owned; and it would allow us to lead our lives by both satisfying our needs and cultivating our abilities. This latter point is especially crucial for Hägglund's gold standard for the good life, spiritual freedom. In a democratic socialist society, everyone would be able to freely choose what they do with their time, because the basics would be universally supplied. We would only be bound by our commitments, not our subsistence needs.

## Freedom for What?

In its turn to political economy and its vision for a socialist future, *This Life* gets uncharacteristically murky on specifics and concrete institutional designs. Hägglund is no unrealistic utopian; he acknowledges that the realm of necessity can never be fully transcended. There will always be social labor that will be necessary for survival. Yet *This Life* makes the claim that “under democratic socialism no one is forced to participate in social labor, since each one is provided for in accordance with his or her needs just by virtue of being part of society.” In its brave speculation about a democratic socialist future, key questions of political philosophy and political economy seem to be brushed away. For spiritual freedom to be realized in the sense Hägglund envisions requires us to accept some very large assumptions about what people might desire and want in a post-capitalist society. In his view, people will *want* to do what is best for the social good. Short of that, it appears that the only way for democratic socialism to be viable will be with a weaker version of spiritual freedom than the one Hägglund advances.

As Hägglund would likely agree, providing the basics won't afford everyone the capacity to do as they choose if we assume their choices will be random and idiosyncratic. Even if people were given the material, political, and institutional resources to live their life as they individually pleased, there would still be impersonal forces constraining choice on a more collective level.

Imagine that someone chooses to opt out of social labor, instead simply living the life of a bodybuilder. Now imagine that 20 percent of society wants to be bodybuilders. To speak nothing of all the protein supplements we will need to start making, at some point society will cease to be able to accommodate people choosing to be full-time bodybuilders. The example is starker if we use activities that are more expensive: How many big budget movie directors can we sustain? Citizens in a democratic socialist economy might be free to opt out individually, but [collectively they won't be](#). In fact, democratic socialist citizens wouldn't be free to simply opt out of social labor in the way Hägglund ensures us they would be.

Hägglund's vision of democratic socialism presumes a radical transformation of the individual. He writes that “we will be intrinsically motivated to participate in social labor when we can recognize that the social production is *for the sake of* the common good and our own freedom to lead a life.” The idea that people will immediately be good citizens and voluntarily organize their internal preferences in ways that serve the broader good is the real secular faith guiding Hägglund's vision. This normative anthropology weakens it.

We can hope that people will behave in fundamentally different ways under democratic socialism, and it might be an effect that they do — reinforcing and stabilizing democratic socialist institutions so that they are more durable. But it's another issue entirely to hitch our vision on that gamble. It is easy to assume that people will be different to defend our models. Far more difficult — but critically necessary — is developing theory and institutional designs that can accommodate people behaving largely as they do now.

*This Life* is a clarion call to live in the present but strive for an emancipatory future project. Yet that project's institutional details are underspecified. At its core, this rests on Hägglund's separation between redistributive questions and the question of revaluating value, with the latter seeming too

easy a solution to the problems of planning, motivation, coordination, and democracy that have been core to all emancipatory social projects.

In other words, with respect to articulating what democratic socialism *should* be, it dodges most of the harder questions about *how*. This is most evident in Hägglund's treatment of forms of redistribution that don't also grapple with value in production. *This Life* rightly argues that transformations in the mode of distribution would still require wage labor time to generate the value to be redistributed. Though Hägglund never argues that we should abandon redistributive reforms, he suggests that they can't offer democratic socialists a programmatic long-term vision.

We can see this in Hägglund's critique of a universal basic income (UBI), which, in his words, "cannot even in principle overcome the dependence on wage labor." Somewhat boldly, he says that advocates of the UBI "never question the measure and production of value under capitalism but focus only on the distribution of wealth across society."

Hägglund is exactly right to focus our long-term vision on a fundamental transformation of society and to set the sights higher than the Nordics, but his analysis of spiritual freedom itself loses something by failing to appreciate how central redistributive forms of justice are to expanding freedoms. Spiritual freedom is not merely tied to the social form of production but is fundamentally bound up with distributional concerns. It requires both the capacity for equal participation in the polity and equal access to the means of self-realization.

The core of a Marxist morality is not that everyone will use their freedom to maximally realize their capacities and abilities, nor that everyone will be maximally free. An achievable democratic socialism is not a perfect world with perfect architecture, perfect music, perfect art, and perfect people. Neither is it one where everyone is free to do as they prefer all the time. Instead, an achievable democratic socialism offers the most equal distribution in the capacity for self-determination that is institutionally and socially possible. Capitalism is unjust precisely because a better distribution of this capacity is available.

This is the rub with respect to the question of redistribution versus a revaluation of value. The distribution of resources both within and beyond capitalism is key to our capacity for self-realization. Indeed, a core principle of Hägglund's vision of democratic socialism, the socialization of the means of production — one I would defend — is itself nothing more than a redistribution of wealth. Therefore, redistributive reforms aren't simply a means to gradually untether workers' needs from the market, decommodifying them, and making an exit from the labor market easier, but also a way to more fairly distribute the freedom to realize the dreams and goals we have, here and now, in this *capitalist* life.

As Hägglund correctly writes, we should not conflate these reforms with "a solution to the basic problem of value under capitalism." But their relation to spiritual freedom is far more intimate than he lets on, carrying with them the power to enhance people's capacities, albeit in marginal ways that might be reversed. After all, it was Marx and Engels who advocated in *The Communist Manifesto* for "inroads upon the old social order" such as a heavy progressive tax, abolition of rights of inheritance, public banking, public communication and transport, and free education. These are merely distributional reforms within capitalism, but reforms that better *this life* nonetheless.



The heroic historical figure of *This Life*, Martin Luther King Jr, recognizes the deep causal connection between distribution and spiritual freedom. King was not merely concerned with the revaluation of values; he moved his second phase of the civil rights movement into an area of work that aimed to eradicate poverty precisely because he understood that it made people less free. As the sanitation workers on strike boldly asserted on stark white-and-black placards, "I AM A MAN."

King himself advocated precisely for a universal basic income as one means to a fairer distribution of freedom, albeit one situated in capitalism. In his 1967 book, [\*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?\*](#), King writes, "I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective — the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed income." In a passage profoundly committed to spiritual freedom, King says, "The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement." Though, as Hägglund identifies, King is concerned with an even deeper problem of value under capitalism, he is also keenly aware of how deeply the equal distribution of freedom is tied up with the redistribution of resources.

*This Life* is a profound tour of our inner life and purpose that deftly weaves in religion and political economy, with an eye always to the future. But it fails to appreciate the profound worth of institutional changes that might reallocate powers and capacities to exploited people here and now for its chief goal, spiritual freedom. In looking toward "the new Memphis," Hägglund sometimes forgets about Memphis itself. He marks a clear line in the sand, insisting that "The reformation of capitalism through the redistribution of wealth can never achieve such a transformation of society, since the wealth to be distributed is produced by the social relations of capitalist exploitation and commodification. The more we restrict exploitation and commodification, the less wealth we have to distribute." Hägglund's revaluation of value is itself a powerful Polaris to help navigate the political projects that we set ourselves to embracing. But on its own, it ignores the journey for the end point. And those less socially transformative changes can begin here in this life.