

Money Capital versus “Life Capital”. Prof. John McMurtry

The War of Values We Live or Die By

By [Prof. John McMurtry](#) and [Dr. Jeffery Klaehn](#)

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Theme: [Global Economy](#), [History](#)

Author of UNESCOs ‘Philosophy and World Problems’, Professor John McMurtry is questioned on the planetary life-system crisis by media critic Dr. Jeffery Klaehn.

Klaehn: You have stated that ‘the war of values is what is least comprehended in our multi-level world crisis’. What is this war of values?

McMurtry: The blind spot at the highest levels of critical thought is on the underlying value system we are ruled by. The dominant assumption is that ‘moral compass’ and ‘values’ are a matter of individual preferences, or are ideological masks for ruling-class interests. The value system we in fact live by is presupposed as economic necessity and inevitable. We are in this way trapped within a life-blind value program conceived as laws of nature. The Covid-19 crisis is a test of how deep the disorder is.

JK: What is this ‘life-blind value program’?

JM: Under the name of ‘growth’, self-multiplying private money sequences turn all that exists into ever more of their own demand with no life necessity regulating them. We now know a few billionaires own more than the majority of the world. What is not tracked is how they exponentially increase their fortunes by massive pollution and depletion of all that supports life to auto-maximize their profits – from the air and the water to the ice-caps and the biomes of our soil and guts. This is shamefully called ‘the free market’, and ‘overpopulation’ of the poor is still blamed for the results.

JK: Where does climate warming fit in?



JM: ‘Climate change’ and warming’ are euphemisms for ever greater climate destabilization and extremes. But as overwhelming a problem as it is, climate is only one of the life support systems despoiled for external profits in a feeding frenzy which only Covid-19 has slowed down. Public health crisis is the test of a

society's social immune system, its life security system. But even in the Covid pandemic, the money-sharks are after more, and in the Trumped US and Brazil the pandemic has run out of infection control. Wall Street churns the NY stock market up and down daily to swallow small fry while fixing financial pathways for big corporate customers to capture hundreds of billions of public dollars. Amazon, Big Pharma and HMO's, and telecommunication giants profit more than ever on the back of the disease and low-wage workers. No-one knows how much more debt will be owed to Wall Street by an already skinned public. US society collapses just when it could re-set to a universal health system, life-protective law, energy economy, and public banking. All are more necessary and possible than before.

JK: But as we know, this global system is thought to be driven by unavoidable 'economic laws'. How do we begin to re-set at the conceptual level?

JM: The starting point of understanding is beneath what is mis-called economics. It is the *life capital base* that all economics and other value systems have presupposed away.

JK: What is life capital?

JM: Life capital denotes the ground of all life value through generations, and what every breath we take depends on *-life wealth that produces more life wealth without loss and cumulative gain through time*. Not more money demand, but more life capacity producing more – for example, your own life capacities becoming more fit and able through time, or a society becoming more disease-free, literate and ecologically biodiverse than before. The money-capitalist society steers in the opposite direction. It is structured only to produce more profitably priced commodities whose cycles cumulatively degenerate all life systems.

JK: Can you contextualize this in relation to the concepts of 'progress,' 'development' and 'growth' as they're typically utilized in contemporary public discourses?

JM: These are cover-up slogans which refer only to more profitably priced commodity outputs and all the looting, polluting and waste that goes with them. They are the opposite of flourishing life and support systems. The ruling axiom of rationality here is *atomically self-maximizing private money value positions who take nothing else into account*. But only collective life capital gain or loss measures real economic development or decline. Don't take my word for it. Try to find any other metric that can do the job.

JK: In terms of our paradigmatic understandings of these issues and the language and concepts used to discuss them, is the dominant system of thought merely parochial?

JM: The lenses are parochial in narrowness, but they are life-blind at the global level. Game theory is the perfect example. It is used everywhere across disciplines and great powers. But like so-called economics, it excludes any common life ground a-priori.

JK: You recently published an article – 'Will Covid Awake Us? The Unconscious System Plague' – in which you wrote of 'the emergent principle of life-coherent government.' Can you elaborate on this here?

JM: Life coherent government seeks to protect and enable life capacity development at organic, social and ecological levels. If it effectively regulates for life security and against commodity carbon pollution and extinctions of species and habitats, it becomes life-coherent. It is *not* government as now in service to more money demand and private

commodities as society's 'growth'. Anti-growth activists understand this, but lack any life capital measure to replace GDP.

JK: Has your thinking here been influenced by Karl Polanyi?

JM: I originally dismissed Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* as class-evasive and vague on its anchoring concept of 'the human and natural life substance'. I was then working out *The Structure of Marx's World-View* in a decade-long research published by Princeton in 1978. I scoured his entire corpus to provide a *life-ground* for his theory, but productive force development is undeniably his determining independent variable of history. I think this technological determinism accounts for Marx's justification of the destruction of pre-industrial peoples and classes. His lack of any defined life-grounded ethic has allowed for subsequent Stalinist mechanism, theoretical anti-humanism, and ecological ruins in worship of industrial mass production. I seek to expose and overcome this problem in a recent monograph online '150 Years after Capital: Reading Marx as Life-Grounded'.

JK: 'Life-ground' and 'human and natural life substance' sound a lot alike, and Polanyi like you departed from Marx. What is the ultimate difference?

JM: Technological determinism is where I see the problem unsolved by any deeper life-value principles to guide it. It is the primary failure of our entire epoch. Many like Ellul and Heidegger recognize the technological juggernaut, but lack any demystified and life-based alternative to it. Karl Polanyi fleetingly grounds in the 'human and natural life substance', but with no criterion, no normative framework beyond the past, and no governing relationship to industrial production. It is by what his work *lacks* while appearing to provide what is missing, and I would say much the same of eco-feminism. Each is an historic marker on the way to working out a principled understanding of a life-coherent industrial society.

JK: You think then that life capital is the key to solve the world crisis. Are there examples of life capital in action now to draw on?

JM: Life capital is the universal value unit across individual, social and ecological systems, the missing baseline and measure of all lasting worth on the planet. But it is repelled by the ruling economic mind-lock, including the Marxist heresy, like the Church refused to admit the moving earth. Once understood, it becomes self-evident. Life capital is what any person, society or ecosystem must reproduce through time for any true sustainability. The examples are everywhere, but their unifying principle is not penetrated.

At the most general level, the public and scientific knowledge base of a society is collective life capital. So too are all of society's natural resources and support systems, as well as every species and the biodiverse environment and the biosphere itself. *Everything and every process that produces more of itself through time without loss and cumulative gain is life capital*, and it is the only concept that can capture this meaning at the individual or collective level. Its principle is most revealing in connecting across domains what is being cumulatively looted, polluted and wasted by the private money-value system. Only this concept finds the universal line of life versus death in process.

JK: Do you think it is a case of the ruling paradigm in collapse?

JM: Yes, and at the most general level. Our philosophies and sciences have no concept of the life-ground itself, no generic measure of life value, and no life-need economics. At the

same time, private money-value maximization is masked as ever more 'goods' at lower prices while in fact poisoning, depleting and destroying primary life capital in every form – the breathable air, the potable and life-giving water, the forest habitats, the arable soil, the fish-stocks, oceans and rivers, the ice-cap towers, even our cellular reproduction. There is no end or limit to this moving line of life-system depredation. Yet media, states and specialist sciences do not connect across catastrophes except to inanely blame human nature itself or 'the anthropocene'.

JK: So the 'war of value systems' is ultimately between money capital and life capital. But it seems to be an *unconscious war* if no-one recognizes the life capital that is everywhere at risk and warred upon.

JM: It is like a cancer not recognized by its life host. This is the model I use – *not* a metaphor – to explain the disorder at all levels of life organization. Every life capacity that produces more life capacity through time – life capital – can be measured as *more or less in the present compared to the past*. For centuries, we have paid attention only to aggregate money-value demand and supply for profit as the bottom line. Life carrying capacities and functions across domains have no value in this pseudo economics. Every form of life can be under attack with no received science connecting the degenerate life trends and their common cause. Even ecological economics does not distinguish between sustaining a biodiverse forest habitat and a tree-plantation resource for the market.

JK: But what the social agency to respond? There seems to be no historical agency like 'the working class' to stand for the 'common life-ground' itself.

JM: Collective meaning does not exist in the ruling economics. Only aggregates of atomic individuals compute. Marx goes beyond this in understanding collective agency in class terms. But the life foundation of society is beneath class. It is the civil commons which distinguishes the human species from all others in its evolution – *all social constructs which enable universal access of its members to life goods*, from language and knowledge transmission across generations to water, food and shelter provisions organized for all members of the community.

The tribal and village commons have been stripped of all this by the private money-capital system which underlies ever-mutating technologies and semiotics. But societies have still historically instituted civil commons with no profit take – from non-toxic water supplies, waste disposal and minimum incomes to universal healthcare, public paths, arts and libraries, to common knowledge bases and higher education. Yet all of these civil commons are under attack in the false name of 'efficiencies', 'cost-saving innovations' and, most revealing of the system superstition at work, 'the magic of the free market'. Mass media, privately funded think-tanks, the corporate academy, and bought political parties then narrate it all as rational and necessary. Ever more labyrinthine financial drains are devised to draw out the lifeblood of society and nature's reproduction. Yet the levels and domains of disbelief, de-legitimation, resistance, reclamation and alternative multiply so that what was publicly assumed months ago is now history.

JK: Why is this not twenty-first century Marxism in different words?

JM: Besides the fact that the historical agency of the civil commons goes underneath class, Marxism has no concept of life capital. It argues that capitalism itself will develop productive forces to negate itself in an inevitable socialist revolution. It is striking how both orthodox

and revolutionary economics believe in opposite ways that the system necessarily produces the best of possible worlds in the end.

JK: So what then of technological development reaching a stage that 'breaks the fetters of the capitalist integument'?

In reality, technological advances now only make money capitalism stronger and the working class objectively weaker. But civil commons agency has in recent decades been enormously empowered by electronic communications outside ruling control – why the Wikileaks founder is being tortured, and why the reader can access this text now. More deeply, there is no life base in any other model to steer the economy in accordance with the universal life necessities of society and nature. Without a life capital base, nor community deeper than the proletariat, the worst can still happen.

JK: Following from this, how does the political economy of the media keep the system and the public 'life-blind'?

JM: The old saw that the free press belongs to those own one is a good starting point. A few multinational corporations control over 90% of the news-feed and public commentary on it, and all are governed by an underlying syntax of censorship. In whatever language these media speak, any fact or argument contradicting or conflicting with this control of the media – or of the wider economy – is *selected out* in one way or another. *Determinatio est negatio*. Determination is negation. Since the media are advertising vehicles in which all major corporate interests come together as one, they are a unifying public relations chorus for the ruling value system. Censorship of whatever is opposed to it is built into their function.

This selection/exclusion syntax of the media is thus predictive. In foreign affairs, one will not read that the US is the aggressor state in the past or next wars it leads, or that it holds the world record of killing civilians by terrorist acts and sponsorship. These grim realities are not only selected out in the corporate media, but this second-order fact is itself unspeakable. So too is, for example, the undeniably true report that Israel's occupation of the West Bank is an ongoing war crime and its daily actions are crimes against humanity under international law. Less known is the fact that the 'humanitarian' US-NATO bombing of defenseless Serbia and Kosovo was a cover for the US-supported 'free Kosovo' criminal gang put in government to murder hundreds of people to sell their internal organs on the international transplant market (as the International Criminal Court has finally charged President Thaki and 9 others after 12 years of investigation- see [this](#)). One can go on a long time with life-and-death examples of what the media predictably silence or gag. A good overview source is [this](#).

All demonstrate the underlying general principle of selection and exclusion of fact, narrative, and – most insidiously – *point of view* of those warred upon which is always suppressed or presented as irrational. When any of this does get out in the media, it operates as an inoculation to sustain their credibility. My original 1988 analysis of the underlying selection/exclusion system of corporate and state media across lines of enmity is found [here](#).

JK: How about the language of the media and what you here call 'validating and invalidating predicates' of so-called 'objective reporting'?

JM: The most pervasive operation of selection lies in the language itself. Societies and leaders opposing the surrounding system are portrayed as irrational, reckless, dictatorial,

hard-line, brutal, and so on. There is a list of stock abuses to invalidate opposition—‘communist’ has been a civil death sentence in many places and times. On the other hand, those supporting US empire are characterized as strong, no-nonsense, courageous defenders of the free world, bulwarks against communism or Islamicism, and so on – even if they rule by mass torture and persecution of organizing community leaders, workers and environmentalists. Only validating predicates are used, unless for geo-strategic advantage the favored dictators are later demonized (like Noriega and Saddam formerly on the CIA payroll, and bin Laden earlier leading the Islamic ‘freedom fighters’ against the USSR).

This is where borderless money-capital multiplication backed by bombs against all limits and oppositions is covered up as ‘defense of the free world.’ Perhaps the deepest examples of invalidating predicates and exclusion of evidence in the US mass media today are on universal health-care (which centrist David Brooks of NYT attacks as ‘frightening’ on PBS), public banking (which is taboo to track in US media even though the 1776 Revolution was fought for it), and government by ‘the general welfare’ clause of the Constitution (which remains inconceivable even in an uncontrolled pandemic).

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John McMurtry is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada whose work is translated from Latin America to Japan. He is the author of the three-volume Philosophy and World Problems published by UNESCO’s Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS), and his most recent book is [The Cancer Stage of Capitalism: from Crisis to Cure](#).

Jeffery Klaehn holds doctorates in Sociology and Communications, has edited or co-edited seven books, including The Propaganda Model Today, and has published articles in numerous scholarly journals

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