

Beyond progressive liberalism: the need for a social bioethics

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In our society most political debates are defined by the polarities of liberalism and conservatism and most leftists and social critics unthinkingly base their politics on progressive liberalism. Debates about human genetics are framed particularly strongly in this way. In this article I will argue that we need a new third way that recognises that progressive liberalism is part of the problem, whilst not falling into the trap of conservative politics.

We live in a society that is best described as scientific capitalism. Since the Scientific Revolution a major source of expansion and modernisation of capitalism has been scientific discovery and technological innovation. The role of science is to expose the secrets of nature and thereby control and rationalise it; this serves mainly to create wealth, improve social control and develop new weaponry. The rationalisation of nature is seen very graphically in industrial farming systems. In the 20th Century scientists and doctors developed a series of technologies for the control of the natural process of human reproduction with gradually increasing power, starting with surgical sterilisation, contraception and donor insemination, followed by IVF and PGD, and potentially including cloning and genetic modification.

This process is a typical example of capitalist modernisation has been accompanied by an ongoing modernisation of social attitudes, ideologies and ethics: it is an intergrated process of social change in which scientific and technological developments shape society and society (especially the needs of Capitalism) in turn shapes science and technology. As Marx noted in *The Communist Manifesto* the experience of life in capitalist societies is of continual economic, technological and social change, as “everything solid melts into air”. In our society politics is generally defined by the clash between those who welcome this process of capitalist modernisation, and those who wish to resist the process of constant change and to conserve older ways of life and ethical frameworks. Progressive liberalism is the ideology of the middle class managers and professionals who are responsible for managing capitalist modernisation, and it therefore justifies and valorises this process and defines it as progress.

An example of the problem with progressive liberalism is the support given by many liberals and feminists to the eugenics programmes of the early 20th century. Such people viewed the elimination of disabled people and people with learning difficulties/mental health problems as a form of kindness and humanitarianism. The essence of eugenics is an attempt to rationalise and control the randomness of natural human reproduction: eugenisists always argued that we should take no less care in controlling human reproduction than we do in the breeding of livestock. In many European countries, eugenics programmes were supported and implemented by social democratic parties, who saw it as part of their ideology of progressive social planning.

The essential problem with progressive liberalism is that it naively believes that more knowledge and technological control of nature is necessarily a good thing. It lacks a critical understanding of the fact that this process is a central part of capitalist development, and thus nearly always serves the needs of capitalism, often with very harmful consequences for society. Progressive liberals, including most scientists and doctors, have so much invested in the idea of themselves as 'nice guys' that they are generally unable to consider whether critics of technology might not have a point. The unquestioning support of liberals for science and medical research, and the climate of emotional blackmail that has been created around these issues make it nearly impossible to have a rational debate about the direction of medical research and to weigh negative social consequences against medical benefits: medical benefit, however minor, seems to automatically trump arguments about social consequences. In the late 20th Century as there was a shift within progressive liberalism away from overt managerialism and towards a greater emphasis on individual liberty, this became the ruling value of ethical and political discussion. A more aggressive form of progressive liberalism is the basis of transhumanism and related ideologies. This more aggressive liberalism is also the basis of a series of well funded and highly effective lobby groups working around issues of science policy, which essentially serve as cheerleaders for medical research and the IVF and biotechnology industries.

A Social Bioethics

At the point at which these technologies are becoming capable of radically re-writing human biology, we need a politics which goes beyond a naïve belief in progress - a politics, which explicitly criticises progressive liberalism, but does not totally abandon it. We need a politics based on the Enlightenment, which is capable of self-criticism, and which has a more sophisticated understanding of the double-edged role of science in our societies. In order to combat the way in which, in the name of medical progress, accepted ethical rules are constantly being rewritten, we need to develop a new bioethics based not on academic philosophy, but on a sociologically and historically-based understanding of society; in short, a social bioethics.

Some principles and values of a social bioethics might be:

- Justice and the impacts of technology on society at large should have equal weight to individual autonomy and medical benefits.
- The individual and her interests must be considered in a social context. Peoples perceptions of their interests are shaped by society in ways which do not reflect their true interests. For example, it is not in womens interests to submit themselves to surgery in order to conform to sexist ideas of how their bodies should look. Likewise, technologies that worsen existing inequalities or create new ones, or are designed to help people become more "productive" workers are not in the interests of society or the individual. A social bioethics does not surrender its analysis of peoples true interests in the face of demands for autonomy.

- A social bioethics is based on an understanding that science and technology are shaped by social forces rather than simply accepting the accounts of scientific “facts” propounded by scientific authorities.
- A social bioethics is based on a respect for nature and a rejection of the imperialist attitude towards nature embodied in the existing system. This does not mean a naïve equation of “natural” with “good”. Instead it seeks an ethical relationship between humanity and nature that can both provide for real human needs and sustain the integrity of eco-systems.
- People first: in contrast to the prevailing bioethical emphasis upon autonomy and upon a “humanism of becoming” a social bioethics is based on a “humanism of being”, an emphasis on the good-enoughness of ordinary human beings. A key value of a social bioethics is interactiveness and care, rather than autonomy.
- A social bioethics does not pretend to be apolitical as contemporary academic bioethics does. Because it is based in a historical and sociological understanding, which recognises that amongst the basic conditions of people’s lives are systemic inequality and oppression, it recognises that such ‘neutrality’ is both spurious and amounts to taking the side of the powerful. The fundamental move in ethics must be to take the side of those who are oppressed and exploited. Taking sides is not the in least in contradiction with either intellectual honesty and rigor or being fair to one’s opponent.

An example of how such a social bioethics might operate concerns so called enhancement of human capabilities.

Since the word ‘enhancement’ by definition implies something good, we need to change the language that we use. The idea of ‘enhancement’ is based on liberal philosophy, which focuses on the individual and ignores social context. In this model ‘enhancement’ is driven by competitive individualism. We need to explicitly argue that the individual can only be seen in their social context and that trends which harm society, harm the individual and their children. From this perspective we can say that ‘enhancement’ is bad news for a number of reasons:

1. It is a radicalisation of competitive individualism, which will entrench social inequalities. There is much evidence that people’s wellbeing and happiness is greater in more equal societies.
2. ‘Enhancements’ as they exist today are nearly all aimed at helping people conform to oppressions such as sexism, racism, disability oppression and ageism. There is a need for a frontal attack on the cosmetic surgery industry that preys on people’s insecurities which derive from social oppression. We need to encourage people to respect themselves and to fight these oppressions. We can exploit the liberal discourse by encouraging people not to be conformist; I propose that instead of referring to ‘enhancement’, we should use the term ‘conformism engineering’.
3. Other ‘enhancements’ are geared to making people more productive workers (e.g. use of Ritalin as a ‘cognitive enhancer’). Here we can use

similar arguments: do you just want to be a more efficient cog in the corporate machine?

In summary, we need to argue that 'enhancement' is no enhancement and that people need to stand up for their rights to be accepted as they are.