

T. H. GREEN AND THE LIMITS OF LIBERALISM:  
A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR LAWLESS

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Professor Lawless has provided an interesting and intelligent critique of my article on T.H. Green's political thought. Among the several virtues of his paper are a generally cogent analysis of the Utilitarian tradition of political economy against which Green directed most of major political and philosophic arguments; and a shrewd assessment of the problems that the concept of positive liberty — Green's chosen vehicle for ameliorating the class conflict engendered by and through market social relations — has posed for modern liberal theory. Taken together, these two features of Lawless' critique define what I think is his understanding of the key strengths and ultimate limitations of British liberalism: both are rooted in political economy. On the basis of his position, Lawless argues that I have to a large extent misconstrued Green's defense of capitalism and hence overestimated his importance for the British liberal tradition. While claiming that in many ways his views accord with mine, and that some of our differences are merely matters of emphasis, Lawless also implies that we disagree in more substantive ways about the purpose and character of Green's work. It is because of those disagreements, based for Lawless on our seemingly different positions on the role of political economy in Green's writings, that in his eyes we offer radically different assessments of Green's significance.

But I wonder if perhaps Professor Lawless himself overstates our allegedly "real" differences, and hence misses those points on which we actually *do* differ more substantially? More specifically, I wonder if both he and I do not share a similar perspective on the nature and importance of Green's explicitly *philosophical* writings, whatever our supposed differences in interpreting his *political* work? I suggest we do in fact share such a perspective, but that while Lawless sees Green's philosophy as distinct from and in a sense superior to his politics, I find the two to be so inextricably intertwined that it is impossible to consider either separately without, in the context of Green's work, distorting both. It seems to me that *this* difference, and not so much our respective evaluations of Green's understanding of political economy, accounts for our divergent interpretations of Green's role as a thinker.

And there is more to the matter than simply the question of Green's status. At issue here is the problem of how the vulnerabilities and limitations of

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liberalism may best be understood. For Lawless, liberalism must be unmasked at the level of political economy because it is only in the realm of political economy that the real character of market society's relations of domination can become clear. For my part, while the critique of political economy is a necessary component of any attack on bourgeois hegemony, it must share the load with a *philosophical* critique: an examination of how advanced capitalist society is reproduced by and through the administration of the relations of everyday life *beyond* the work-place. Such administration is almost total: the very sense perceptions of society's members are moulded and shaped so that it's class relations are seen as "natural". That this totalization is not, however, without problems for the maintenance of social control suggests that liberal society, and liberalism itself, are peculiarly vulnerable not only at the level of political economy, but also, and perhaps more importantly, at the level of culture, i.e. morality. It was because he sensed the increasing *moral* inadequacy of what was, even in Green's time, a rapidly changing market economy that I think Green occupies an important niche in liberal thought. I titled my article, "T.H. Green and the *Moralization* of the Market", and gave much attention to Green's philosophical critique of Utilitarianism, for that very reason.

Putting it another way, Lawless and I view the problem of what constitutes a sound liberal defence of liberalism from different vantage points. It seems to me that as liberal society changes, so too must its legitimating ideology change. Stated simply, the main problem now confronting liberalism is the adequacy of the bourgeois account of human nature. Green saw this and his defence of bourgeois values (and bourgeois society) must be seen in that light. As Lawless himself argues, Green's "essentially Hegelian psychology offered Britain a fuller portrait of the individual than the one the associationist psychology of the Utilitarians could provide." Surely this *psychological* issue has significant *political* implications. Lawless wants to reproach me for supposedly implying that Green somehow successfully defended liberalism while ignoring (and displaying ignorance of) the essential features of political economy — a "blind" defence at best. But this is precisely what liberalism has had to do. Green did not so much ignore political economy as assume the universal permanence of the market relations it subtends. His aim, rather, was to make explicit at the level of self-consciousness the moral (teleological) content of economic behaviour. In order to do that successfully, Green saw the need for liberalism to transcend Utilitarianism. That such a project is doomed from the outset was the main point I tried to make in my article, but the importance of that attempt cannot be overlooked.

In a certain sense, history has been much kinder to Green than philosophers have been. As the work of thinkers such as Marcuse and Lefevbre suggests, capital has succeeded where Green failed. Among other things the triumph of the consumer ethic has flattened the distinction between property in capital

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and property in goods for consumption, with important consequences for class consciousness. A kind of "positivist liberty" has emerged and with it the moralization of the working class in Western liberal democracies — one of the main purposes of Green's work. The process of capitalist development has made Green a success. What liberal thinker could wish a better epitaph?

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