The Lottery of Life

The sense in which life is a lottery:

First, none of us chooses our parents, yet who our parents are is the most important fact about us. It was our parents who combined to contribute to the genetic material which uniquely was our point of beginning. This determined not only a host of biologically describable properties true of us, for example, our sex and coloration and physiognomy (remember 'race,' biologically speaking makes little sense) and a host of potentialities, for example, how tall we might be become, but as well, it determined our time and place in global history. I might have been a relative of Julius Ceasar or born in the Sudan during a famine. (Of course, the referent of 'I' is exactly 'Peter T. Manicas,' son of Theodore and Esther Manicas, born in Binghamton, New York--and so with all of us.)

Second, the people who nurtured you (perhaps the same pair who combined to 'create' you and perhaps not) made a host of decisions which profoundly affected you. There were 'big decisions' and 'little ones.' For example, they immigrated to the US, they moved from LA to Honolulu, they took you regularly to Church, they overcooked spinach, etc., etc. At first, we had no say in this and then gradually we acquired some. At some point, presumably, we were each 'our own persons'.

Most (and perhaps all) of these decisions were voluntary in the sense that (a) your parents (and later you) could have done otherwise; there were some alternatives and (b) these choices were not coerced. That is, when they choose voluntarily, they were not threatened by guns or other instruments of coercion; they were not, like the first African-Americans who came to America, in chains.

But the contexts in which these many decisions were made and the range and sort of alternatives which were available were profoundly structured, and among us, they were profoundly different. It is easy to identify at least the following sorts of enabling and constraining structures.

1. The nature of the existing level of 'development' of the society.
2. The nature of the existing class relations and your place within these. (Thus, your parents were slaves, Brahmins, coal-miners, landed aristocracy, capitalists.)
3. The existing 'race' relations.
4. The existing gender relations.
5. The existing political relations.

Evidently, each of these, separately and conjointly make for enormous differences in what choices are available at any time for any particular person. Take the most obvious sort of example. If the law forbids immigration, you are not 'free' to immigrate. Of course, you can still leave, if at great risk. If, on the other hand, you have no money and no way to get some, you can't leave, even though you may have the 'right' to leave. When you were born, your place in these structures was entirely out of your hands. At some point, of course, it was possible for you do something to change your place. That there are some things you can do is true of any society. Because you cannot change your sex or 'race,' this shows why racism and sexism are so horrible. Similarly, it shows why we find 'caste' societies so unjust. On the other hand, it is very easy to be ideological about, e.g., American society: 'If you're so smart, why ain't you rich?'

But there are still further elements to the lottery. Biographies are full of further contingencies, what we call 'chance,' a 'lucky (or unlucky!) break.' For example, somebody starts a war or prices escalate. New choices become possible and they will vary according to who you are. Consider, e.g., a Palestinian who is
displaced and loses everything, the Corporation moves to Alabama and you lose your job, you meet somebody in a bar who likes you and offers you a job, the inhabitants of Kosovo are shot by paramilitaries, you get hit by a car or get cancer, etc., etc.

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