

A Better World in Birth - On Michael A. Lebowitz's works

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I READ PLENTY of articles, short and long, on all sorts of topics, but — I hesitate to mention this to ATC readers — I rarely read full length nonfiction books. But those by Michael A. Lebowitz, including his recent *The Socialist Imperative: From Gotha to Now* (Monthly Review Press, 2015), have been an easy exception. It is a pleasure and a relief to read theory that has such practical application to the questions socialists must address in our work to transform the world.

While not attempting to draw a blueprint for socialism, often scorned as impossible because an alternative system can only emerge through the struggles of those who bring it into being, still Lebowitz's writing provides both glimpses of another world that could be, and some guidelines about how to get there and make it work.

These ideas are relevant to what we do today, helpful when considering socialism in the last century, and provide almost a checklist of necessary elements for creating the socialism we want to live in. I'd be only a little tongue-in-cheek to call his work a how-to guide to successful socialism.

In *The Socialist Imperative* Lebowitz revisits ideas he has explored in many previous books, including *The Contradiction of Real Socialism: The Conductor and the Conducted* (2012), *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development* (2010), and *Build it Now: Socialism for the 21st Century* (2006).

The *Socialist Imperative* is a collection of essays and talks on a range of ideas central to Lebowitz's conception of what socialism has been and what it should be, organized more or less from the general and analytical to the practical and prescriptive. Many elements are repeated from one piece to the next but the context or focus is shifted, so the reader's understanding and fluency in these components of his thinking develops throughout the book.

While his ideas come more or less from Marx, Lebowitz focuses directly on what will help to build socialism. Some concepts he returns to repeatedly include: economic systems produce people as well as things; producing fully developed human beings should be our goal; only socialism can produce fully developed human beings; successful socialism requires three elements, known as the "socialist triangle;" transformation from one system to a new one will inevitably mean that elements of the old system and new interact in ways that deform both; "capitalist logic" opposes "working class logic;" products of the "social brain" and "social hand," i.e. just about everything humans produce including

the means of production have social origins and so should be social property; humans' capacity to be protagonists needs to be developed through struggle and systemically nurtured; and capitalism is an ever-expanding system in a finite planet and therefore must be stopped.

Charter for Human Development

For Lebowitz everything comes down to creating a society where people can become fully developed human beings. Quoting Marx in the *Grundrisse*: "the development of all human powers as such the end in itself." To this end, in *The Socialist Imperative* he repeats his "Charter for Human Development" that he first proposed in *The Socialist Alternative*.

1) Everyone has the right to share in the social heritage of human beings — an equal right to the use and benefits of the products of the social brain and the social hand — in order to be able to develop his or her own potential.

2) Everyone has the right to be able to develop their full potential and capacities through democracy, participation, and protagonism in the workplace and society — a process in which these subjects of activity have the precondition of the health and education that permit them to make full use of this opportunity.

3) Everyone has the right to live in a society in which human beings and nature can be nurtured — a society in which we can develop our full potential in communities based upon cooperation and solidarity.

Besides the importance of human development, other elements central to his thinking are found here. "Protagonism," or workers acting upon their circumstances, comes up in point two. Workers need to become protagonists to successfully bring about socialism, and protagonism is also the outcome. "If we are to satisfy our needs, if we are to be able to develop our potential, we must struggle against capital and, in doing so, we working people create ourselves as revolutionary subjects." (144)

Lebowitz's starting point is nature. "[T]he clash between capital's tendency to expand without limits and the existence of the limits given by the natural world has now brought humanity to the point where the need to act upon the socialist imperative is immediate."

Capitalism's tendency to push past any barrier it encounters means it can never work within the given parameters of the global ecosystem, or the life forms therein. Referencing Marx, and with a nod to David McNally, Lebowitz considers the nightmare that is capitalism: "Like the vampire, it seeks the last possible drop of blood and does not worry about keeping its host alive." (25)

Although the host referred to here is the worker, he then draws a parallel to capitalism's approach to nature and Marx's examination of "the disturbance of 'the metabolic interaction between man and the earth,' resulting in 'a squandering of the vitality of the soil.'"(17)

If for no other reason than because humans depend on nature, socialism is needed so that both "human beings and nature can be nurtured," to return to the Charter.

The Socialist Triangle

The three sections of the *Charter* make a parallel to a framework Lebowitz relies on in much of his

thinking, although apparently Hugo Chavez was the first to call it the “socialist triangle.” The three sides are social ownership of the means of production, social production organized by workers, and producing for communal needs and communal purposes.

Lebowitz points out that the means of production are, in fact, social in origin. The tools workers use are the “product of the combination of labor. Those tools, machines, improvements to land, and intellectual and scientific discoveries that substantially increase social productivity are available for use by living labor because of the previous allocation of labor to those activities.” (*The Socialist Alternative*, 33)

But because capitalism is so adept at disguising the social nature of these means of production, the labor power of the workers and the tools and processes they apply to their labor all appear as the property of the owner, hiding their social nature.

Capital’s investments, coordination, etc. appear to be what makes production possible. And “[a]s long as our social heritage, the product of generations of workers, belongs to capital, workers remain under the control of capital. They remain (like nature) mere means for capital’s thrust to expand. As a result, capital tends to destroy those original sources of wealth. Driving down wages to their minimum, extending the length and intensity of the workday to the maximum — all make sense for capital in its drive for profits.” (*The Socialist Alternative*, 40)

The second side of the socialist triangle, social production organized by workers, is important for one obvious reason, and one less so. It is clear that if workers organize production they will have greater control over their working conditions and can apply their direct knowledge of how to work effectively and efficiently.

But there is another benefit to workers organizing production, As Lebowitz puts it: “[I]n every process of production, every process of human activity, there are two results, joint products. These are the change in the object of labor and the change in the laborer herself

“To understand Marx’s rage against capitalism, it is essential to recognize explicitly that, for him, workers are not only exploited under capitalist relations of production. They are also deformed. The social metabolism of capital does not only convert natural materials and human beings into surplus value. It also produces a particular kind of worker, a crippled human being.” (21)

And here is where the possibility for fully developing human potential comes in. If workers control the process of production, instead of a crippled human being there will be produced a more fully developed human being along with the object or service.

Under capitalism the product of our labor is alienated from us; physical labor is divided from intellectual labor and each broken up into meaningless fragments.

Instead, Lebowitz (and Marx) propose, “Head and hand must be reunited. For the development of rich human beings, the worker must be able to call ‘his own muscles into play under the control of his own brain.’ Expanding the capabilities of people requires both mental and manual activity. Not only does the combination of education with productive labor make it possible to increase the efficiency of production; this is also, as Marx pointed out in *Capital*, ‘the only method of producing fully developed human beings.’” (*The Socialist Alternative*, 58)

And beyond combining physical and mental labor, developing the capacity to manage production produces people who are “conscious of their interdependence and their own collective power.” (*The Socialist Alternative*, 60)

A Solidarian Society

Regarding the third side of the socialist triangle — producing for social needs — Lebowitz talks of a “solidarian” society where people would not see themselves as separate, each a means for the other to meet their individual needs. In this communal society our association becomes an opportunity to meet our needs by meeting each other’s needs.

Lebowitz points out how this gives meaning to the concept, “from each, according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” While the second half is usually the focus, looked at from this perspective they are integrally linked. In a solidarian society, where developing human potential is the starting point, “ability” takes on a different meaning, as does “need.”

Of course, the interdependence of the sides of the socialist triangle quickly becomes apparent. Without social ownership, producing for communal needs will not be prioritized and organization of production by workers will not be possible. Keeping ownership social will depend on developing the capacity of all workers so that no management caste emerges above the rest.

Lebowitz uses the socialist triangle as a framework to assess socialism. He often considers the successes and failures of what he refers to as “real socialism,” such as existed in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

In the Soviet Union, side one of the triangle, social ownership of the means of production, was only faintly present. In practice, workers had access to the means of production in that there was a social contract that more or less guaranteed job rights, including the right to employment. “Workers thus have an undisputed right of access to means of production.”(79)*

This was a far cry from ownership, but in Lebowitz’s view incrementally closer to it on a continuum than workers under capitalism. But the second side of the triangle was even more lacking, in that production was not socially controlled. And, regarding the third side, it would be hard to say that production was organized around fulfilling social needs.

In the case of Yugoslavia, there was more of a real ownership of the means of production, within worker cooperatives. However, the second side of the triangle was again weak, as managers took on a strong role under Yugoslav market socialism, so that workers did not organize and control production. And as workers’ cooperatives competed in the market, production was not focused on fulfilling social needs, but on market success.

Competing “Logic”

When he considers socialisms past and future, Lebowitz often refers to what he calls the logic of capitalism, the logic of “the vanguard” (as operated in the Soviet Union), and the logic of the working class.

As Lebowitz points out, Marx argued that when capitalism is thoroughly established it produces a working class that “sees capital’s logic as self-evident natural laws.” (8) Some of what appears self-evident includes capitalist ownership of the means of production, in spite of the fact that the means of production is a social product, the embodiment of the efforts of many human beings over many generations.

Other elements of capitalist logic include the idea of exchange equivalencies, whether labor power for a wage, or medical treatment for a given payment. In contrast, the logic of the working class

includes solidarity, a focus on communal needs, and a “gift economy,” where people are given what they need, as opposed to an earned equivalency.

Lebowitz wields these ideas to illuminating effect, including his explanations for the failures of “real socialism” and market socialism (again, think of the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia). Real socialism, at least according to Lebowitz, was often relatively egalitarian (there is evidence to suggest otherwise) with a degree of social ownership of the means of production, at least in that access was guaranteed.

However, following the belief that increased production was the key to success, when other means failed, bonuses were offered to managers who improved production for its own sake. So although workers in the Soviet Union had guaranteed access to the means of production (the right to a job, no matter what), workers’ control of production, the second side of the socialist triangle, was missing.

Capitalist logic and “vanguard” logic combined with the result that “it was rational to interpret quotas in such a way as to increase recorded output, as in ‘gold-plated’ products for which the quotas were stated in value terms, and the heavy chandeliers for which weight was the criterion for achieving bonuses.” (96)

In the attempt to fix such irrationality, the vanguard chose the logic of capital over the logic of the working class, leading to real socialism’s complete downfall.

Rather than putting production decisions in the hands of workers for social purposes (sides two and three of the socialist triangle), the managers were “freed.” Choosing to blame workers for economic problems, they began to limit their access to the means of production, based on the capitalist logic that “the real danger of losing a job . . . is a good cure for laziness, drunkenness and irresponsibility.” (100)

For Lebowitz, Yugoslavia’s cooperative enterprises under market socialism were less deformed by vanguard logic, but were infected by the logic of capital.

Instead of nurturing workers’ capacity to organize production (again, side two of the socialist triangle), workers saw that increasing the success of their enterprise would allow them greater market share, maximizing the income of all the workers in the enterprise at the expense of those in competing enterprises.

This encouraged reliance on the proven expertise of existing managers, interrupting the working class logic of solidarity and egalitarianism. Competition and maximization of income were chosen over solidarity and developing the capacity of all workers.

The Challenge of Building Socialism

The socialist triangle and the existence of various contesting logics are also effectively used by Lebowitz when discussing what we as socialists need to do in our work to build socialism. Taking them one by one, he examines in turn what steps would be needed to move from statist, cooperative, and capitalist enterprises toward socialism.

Statist enterprises would need new structures such as workers and community councils as they shifted emphasis to producing for social need and with the goal of the full development of human potential. Cooperatives would need to shift from maximizing income of workers in the enterprise to developing broader social links with other cooperatives and community councils “as a way of moving toward production for communal needs and purposes.” (118)

Most challenging, of course, would be shifting a capitalist enterprise to a new logic. A first step would be transparency, so that all working aspects could be monitored for their social impact.

Surpluses would be socially controlled and could be “siphoned off to other sectors (such as new firms) and to the support of social programs,” (119) whether through taxes or administered prices. And a new emphasis would be placed on worker education and time to participate in workers’ councils or some form of decision making.

Of course, this all begs the question of why capitalist firms would be open to these steps. Lebowitz, who worked with the government of Venezuela from 2006 to 2011, is thinking of conditions such as existed during that country’s Bolivarian Revolution, where the state supported and could make such directives.

The United States is a different story. What might Lebowitz suggest for circumstances such as ours? Of course, the starting point is with the working class, which he points out includes “not only those who sell their labor power to capital but also those unable to sell their labor power to capital. Not only the exploited but also the excluded.” (145)

The more workers fight, even if initially around wages or reformist goals, the more they learn their power and what is possible. “The working class makes itself a revolutionary subject through its struggles — it transforms itself. . . . It makes itself fit to create the new world.” (143)

Lebowitz discusses how struggles commonly develop in response to a deterioration in current norms of exploitation. The status quo in exploitation is not itself questioned, but a change for the worse is seen as “unfair.” As he puts it, if we can begin “to redefine the concept of fairness and to build a new moral economy based upon the political economy of the working class, then instead of NO’s that look backward to a good old past, we can struggle for a YES based upon a vision of socialism for the twenty-first century.” (174)

Part of Lebowitz’s prescription for building socialism, or at least the path to socialism, is fighting what he calls the “Battle of Ideas,” including replacing the logic of capitalism with working class logic. And that will take a political instrument, a concept much on the minds of U.S. socialists today — with struggles spreading around the country, and our own feeble and fragmented capacity to influence them.

“Unless one believes that a spontaneous eruption of the many stifled volcanoes will end the capitalist nightmare and introduce the socialist dream it is essential to understand that we need a socialist party, one that can ‘mediate among parts of the collective workers, provide the welcoming space where popular movements can learn from each other and develop the unity necessary to defeat capital.’” (Lebowitz, quoting himself from *The Socialist Alternative* in *The Socialist Imperative*, 218)

This socialist party, which Lebowitz says could be “a single body with multiple tendencies or a front of socialist bodies” (219), could cultivate development of socialist consciousness, which, “while essential, does not come automatically.” It could connect issues, so that workers were not limited to trade union consciousness and environmentalists would see that addressing global poverty and inequality needs to be part of the struggle to protect the environment, and so on.

A socialist party can also encourage the organization of new democratic institutions such as workers’ and communal councils, where people can develop their capacities. It could work to expand what Lebowitz calls the “moral economy” of the working class — solidarity, community and concerns for others and their needs.

It can articulate the “need for decommodification and expansion of the commons” by making

demands for “free education, free health care, free transit, free social services, and free distribution of necessities . . . and to create conditions for the ‘free development of all.’” (225)

Lebowitz asserts that socialists need to think not simply in terms of taking state power. As he puts it, “Twentieth-century states characterized by social democracy and ‘real socialism’ prevented the development of those capacities. Those states maintained the weakness of the working class and ensured that others would rule, whether it was in the name of the working class or in the proclaimed interest of all the people. Precisely because workers did not develop the capacity to rule in the workplace and society, sooner or later capital openly assumed the driver’s seat.” (213)

As I said at the start, Michael Lebowitz’s writings, including *The Socialist Imperative* and earlier works, have appealed to me because they include both theory and practical application. The theoretical, usually directly drawn from Marx, has such explanatory power, while the focus on the path to socialism and on building socialism provides practical guidelines for assessing what to do.

Reading Lebowitz has also given me a greater fluency in talking to people about what is wrong with capitalism and how socialism could really work, how the flaws in its past could be avoided, and what is necessary for its success.

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P.S.

* “A Better World in Birth”. *Against the Current* n° 186. January-February 2017:Retour ligne automatique

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