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Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*
New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010, 191 pages.

It has been a while since I read a book which I disliked as much as this one. More than dislike: disbelief, bafflement, exasperation, anger. The first thing to puzzle out is who on earth could Michael Lebowitz possibly be writing for? How many contemporary anti-capitalist revolutionaries are going to be impressed by favorable quotations from Comrade Lenin? Lenin destroyed one of the greatest peasant and worker revolutions in history. He systematically dismantled the Workers Councils (Soviets) and betrayed and smashed the peasants' drive for autonomy. He established a secret police (Cheka) and suppressed all opposition to his policies, including that of the Mensheviks, left socialists, and anarchists. He sent the Red Army against the anarcho-communist revolution in the Ukraine. He crushed the Kronstadt Revolt, the last gasp of the revolution in Russia. The Bolsheviks were vigorously

repudiated almost immediately by anarchists, left libertarians, and council communists. Lenin was thoroughly demolished as a revolutionary thinker by Anton Pannekoek (among many others) in his little masterpiece, *Lenin as Philosopher* (1937). Twenty years ago, Lenin's creation, the USSR, disintegrated and simply vanished from the world, a massive historical failure. Who gives a damn anymore about what Lenin thought? The fact that Lebowitz thinks he can score points by quoting Lenin with approval shows what an extremely restricted intellectual and political world it is that he inhabits.

But these few Lenin quotes were just tossed-off side remarks (one critical citation, it's true). What is Lebowitz's primary methodology? Karl Marx. Everything derives from Marx, if Lebowitz is to be believed. There is hardly a paragraph in the book where he doesn't quote or cite Marx. He has set himself the task of reinventing socialism for the twenty-first century. He just assumes that the way to go about this is to go back to Marx for theoretical guidance, both as to the goal and the strategy for revolution.

Go back to the "real" Marx, that is. My god! As if we needed another exegesis of the "real" Marx, an endeavor that began with Marx himself who declared in 1883 "I am not a Marxist." Thousands of others have gotten in on this fun during the 128 years since then. Already in the 1890s Antonio Labriola in Italy put forth a Hegelian Marxism that was much at odds with the positivist Marxism of the Social Democrats in Germany. But the main effort to recover the "real" Marx began in earnest in the 1920s with the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukacs and with the Left Communists in Germany and Holland (Karl Korsch, Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter), to be followed thereafter by the Frankfurt School, French Hegelian Marxism, the *Socialism or Barbarism* group, the Situationists, Italian autonomous Marxism, and, more recently, Open Marxism (to mention just a few currents within Marxism itself, leaving aside left libertarians and anarchists).

Lebowitz seems oblivious to all this. He cites Oscar Lange and Eugeny Preobrazhensky, as if these debates from the 1930s are the most relevant ones for today's concerns. The main contemporary theorist he turns to for help, citing him several times, is Istvan Meszaros, author of *Beyond Capital*. As is apparent from this brief survey, Lebowitz's methodology, and the skewed scholarship it is based on, is seriously flawed.

But anyway, what were the results? What did he come up with? Lebowitz calls his reinvented socialism "The Socialist Triangle," the three pillars of which are: (1) the assertion that all wealth is socially created; (2) the demand for common ownership of the means of production; and (3) the goal of full development of human potential, both individually and socially. Is it just me or is this actually old hat? Sure sounds like it to me. This is not reinvention; it is regurgitation. These principles have been part of the anti-capitalist movement from the beginning. Half the book is devoted to spelling out these principles. It is an adequate, if not very inspired, description of a society liberated from the yoke of capitalism.

The trouble begins in the second half, which is devoted to strategy: How do we get there? Believe it or not, Lebowitz tries to refurbish and re-launch the by-now thoroughly discredited two-stage strategy for getting to communism: first capture the state and then use the state to get to communism. Except that he spurns use of the word communism because it is too soiled, preferring instead to name the final end of the revolution "socialism."

How does he go about such an anachronistic exercise? By my measure, through a sleight-of-hand. He pulls a definitional fast one. He simply redefines as a state something that is not a state. So he ends up with two kinds of state, the old one and the new one. The new one is democratic, participatory, and decentralized. It is based on workers councils and neighborhood assemblies. It is a self-governing, cooperative society.

Well, this is not a state. It is anarchy. How is it that Lebowitz does not recognize this? I would guess that it is because he

probably suffers from the typical Marxist disease of hating anarchism, and so has not studied its literature or history, and is therefore probably ignorant and unaware of it.[1] Yet workers self-management is a theme of his book, as are neighborhood assemblies. Both these practices come from the anarchist tradition, not the Marxist. There is a vast literature about workers self-management created by anarcho-syndicalists, council communists, and guild socialists. There is a similarly vast literature about community self-government created by anarcho-communists.

Lebowitz appropriates these ideas (without crediting anarchism) but distorts them by forcing them into a Marxist, social democratic framework. The councils will only "take increasing control over matters directly affecting them," he says. He sees "these councils as the elemental cells of the new socialist state" (p.139). How weird is this!

Lebowitz's strategy is to use the old state to bring this new "state" into existence. What about the near century-long failure of numerous social democratic governments in Europe and elsewhere to do this very thing? What does he have to say about that? He says it was due to "the process of yielding to and thereby enforcing the logic of capital." (p.133)

[1] There is a curious sentence on page 132. "Marx understood that you cannot change the world without taking power." This can't be a coincidence, I thought. It's got to be an allusion to John Holloway's book, *Change the World Without Taking Power*. My suspicion was confirmed when I came across a footnote on page 183 (#18) where Lebowitz writes: "One can only laugh at those who think that this is possible without taking the power of the state away from capitalists." He laughs because for him Marx is God and Marx admonished workers to seize political power (see p.112). Holloway's book provoked a storm of protest from orthodox Marxists, so Lebowitz could hardly have missed it. He can laugh all he wants, but it is the laughter of a deluded man. Holloway's book is brilliant, cutting edge, important. It resonates with the living anti-capitalist movement. Whereas Lebowitz's book is antiquated, and speaks only to the dead past, to the moribund remnants of sectarian Marxism-Leninism.

In closing, I am bothered and saddened to trash a man's work like this. There are so few anti-capitalists left in the world. I'm sure Michael Lebowitz is a sincere revolutionary and wants to get out of capitalism and into a better world. It's just that the strategy he is pushing is a proven failure and has done and continues to do enormous damage to the anti-capitalist struggle. It is way past time it was buried and put to rest. We must, at long last, as anarchists have always insisted, simply bypass the state in our fight against capitalists and for a free society.

"An Antiautoritarian-anarchist perspective about Venezuela's situation," online at:
<http://www.nodo50.org/ellibertario/english/venezuelasituation.pdf>.

Michael Staudenmaier, with Anne Carlson, "Of Chavistas and Anarquistas: Brief Sketch of a Visit to Venezuela," online at:
<http://www.anarkismo.net/article/839?print_page=true>.

"Refuting the deaf: Chavism and anarchism in Venezuela," online at:
<http://libcom.org/library/refuting-deaf-chavism-anarchism-venezuela>.

socialist person. I found this extremely annoying. It is the baggage of Leninist vanguardism which Lebowitz is still loaded down with.

Third, when oh when will Marxists stop claiming the Paris Commune as their own (see p.115), when in fact they had almost nothing to do with it? If there was a dominant political tendency among the eighty-one delegates who made up the Paris Commune of 1871, it was anarchism, in the mutualist tradition of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Michael Bakunin wrote more insightfully about the Paris Commune than Marx did, but I doubt if Lebowitz is even aware of the essay, or of the other numerous anarchist accounts of the event.

Now back to the Venezuelan anarchists. They call themselves the Commission of Anarchist Relations. They have been publishing *El Libertario* (*The Libertarian*) since 1995, with 61 issues so far. The web site for this periodical is <http://www.nodo50.org/ellibertario/>. I urge you to check it out. For those who don't read Spanish, there are more than sixty articles in English dating from 2005. There are also translations into French, Italian, Portuguese, and German. In general, they are critical of both the Hugo Chavez government and the US-backed opposition, as well as orthodox leftist parties. They call attention to the deals Chavez is making with transnational corporations, to the inherent contradiction between top-down, state-sponsored initiatives and genuine, autonomous self-government at the grassroots level, to the gap between the regime's rhetoric and the reality on the ground, and so forth. But I can't possibly give here even a sketch of their perspective on Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution. I urge you to check it out for yourselves. The critiques are just a click away. I've provided a list of the more substantive articles in a footnote.[3]

[3] "Introducing El Libertario," online at:
<http://www.anarkismo.net/article/14405?print_page=true>.
"The Revolution Delayed: 10 years of Hugo Chavez's Rule," online at:
<http://thecommune.co.uk/2009/02/09/the-revolution-delayed-10-years-of-hugo-chavezs-rule/>.

I'm sorry, but this just doesn't cut it. The strategy of social democracy failed not because the socialists who came to power weren't smart enough, dedicated enough, or revolutionary enough. It failed because the nation-state system is an integral part of capitalism and always has been. That is one of the ways capitalist ruling classes are organized, through their states. They are completely enmeshed in and depend on their states to define and defend property rights, destroy the commons, enforce wage-slavery, adjudicate disputes between corporations, maintain the market, build infrastructure, operate the international financial system, protect trade, stop theft, expand the enclosures, deploy armed forces to seize lands and resources, assist in the commodification of everything, suppress all opposition to profit-taking, block the emergence of real democracy (direct democracy), and a host of other things. They are not going to allow their states to be turned against them.

Yet Lebowitz thinks otherwise, that this state, which is a creation of capitalists, and is owned and controlled by them, can be captured by "workers" and turned against capitalists. He seems to think that the state is something separate from capitalism, rather than integral part of it. He has a long list of things this worker-captured state is going to do to undermine capitalism and to bring into being the new "state" (i.e., the self-governing society), things like taxing surplus value, forcing businesses to open their books to workers, transforming the working day, setting aside time on the job for workers to study management, and so forth (p.133 ff). Fat chance, I'd say.

How is it, by the way, that "workers" are able to get control of this "old" state? Throughout most of the book Lebowitz takes it as a given that they have done so. The discussion is about what to do then? But in the last chapter Lebowitz finally gives the game away, in a section called "Finally, The Party." A party, it seems (or a "political instrument," his preferred jargon), will after all be necessary to provide leadership and vision, and to build unity, because a popular movement "by itself … cannot develop a concept of the whole

– that is, it cannot transcend localism" (p.162). Uh oh! We've heard this before, haven't we?[2] He is at pains to persuade us that this will be a party of a new type, but I wasn't persuaded at all. How will this new party capture the state? He doesn't say, but given his general orientation, we can surmise that it won't be through armed struggle but by winning elections. So this puts us smack dab back into electoral politics: not a good bag to be in these days, when the era of representative government is rapidly drawing to a close.

Moreover, the era of the capitalist welfare state is also rapidly coming to a close. Forty years of neoliberal counter-revolution has dealt it a serious blow. Can it be revived? I doubt it. It seems clear that this phase of capitalism is done and gone, and it will not be coming back, except perhaps for brief periods in anomalous places. It was possible to begin with only because of massive labor movements which were rooted in communist, socialist, and anarchist working class cultures. But also, it was possible because capitalists were rolling in cash from one of the biggest boom periods in the history of capitalism. So they could afford a bit of welfare for the masses. But now the labor movements are gone, the radical cultures are gone, and the surplus profits are gone. So the welfare state is being rolled back even in Europe, where it was strongest.

Michael Lebowitz disagrees, however. He thinks that anti-capitalists can still capture the state and use it to improve the lot of workers, and even to start building a self-managed society from below, using state resources. Where in the world are all these beliefs coming from? Venezuela. Michael Lebowitz, an economics professor at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, has served as a consultant to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. *The Socialist Alternative* is sort of a rationalization, an intellectual justification, for Chavez's programs. Chavez's government is fostering worker

[2] Vladimir Lenin, "...the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness..." from *What is to be done?* [1902], *Collected Works of V.I. Lenin*, Volume IV, Book II, page 115, New York: International Publishers.

and community councils. It has also greatly improved the lives of average citizens with vigorous health and education programs. This is the basis for Lebowitz's rosy revival of social democracy.

The question is: What will come of it all? Is Venezuela just an anomaly, a throw back, or is it the wave of the future? Will Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela finally succeed in getting to true socialism, thereby breaking the century-long record of failure chalked up by social democratic regimes the world over? Is it possible to realistically look forward to the dismantling of the Venezuelan state? And its replacement by an association of autonomous, self-governing workplaces and neighborhoods?

There is a small group of anarchists in Venezuela which offers a rather different perspective on these questions than that of Lebowitz. They publish a periodical called *El Libertario*. We'll take a quick look at some of their work shortly. But first I want to lodge a few more complaints about Lebowitz's analysis.

First, following Marx's definition of communism as a free association of producers, Lebowitz speaks throughout the book only about "producers." Not free human beings, not citizens, not neighbors, but only producers. So he extends the identity of "worker," as defined by capitalists, into a general social analysis. We've got to stop doing this. One feature of a society without capitalists is that the distinction between work and not-work would be erased. Our life activities would become whole again, integrated. We need to start thinking this way now. Actually, capitalists themselves have given us a leg up on this because they have managed to turn the entire society into the means of production, into a social factory, to accumulate capital, so the distinction between production and everything else is no longer relevant anyway.

Second, Lebowitz has a strong tendency to write from the stance of a social engineer. He is constantly talking about "producing new humans" who are capable of self-government. His strategy proposals are designed, he insists, to "produce" the new