

Lebowitz, Michael A. 2010. *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*. New York: Monthly Review Press, ISBN-13: 978-1-58367-214-3. Paperback: 15.95 CAD. Pages: 160.

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“Marxism encloses man within history, so that it is unable to confront man with the external world and thus can only deal with historical, not existential, problems.”

-- Milan Prucha<sup>1</sup>

Given the zeitgeist of global protest, Michael Lebowitz's book *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development* would seem to be an important touchstone for mapping the wills and wants of occupy protesters from Wall Street to the Brazilian rainforest.<sup>2</sup> Yet, many in the Occupy movement seek not an alternative to capitalism, but a form of capitalism that is more compassionate – capitalism with a human face. For these people, capitalism would create new ethical frameworks from which to work from. The intensification of work and the extraction of surplus labour would still exist only this time it would be done with a “fair” wage and ethical standpoints that are ecologically sensitive to the global scourge of past capitalist practices. Such an idea however is a scandal to say the least, a ruse that mystifies the true social relations under capitalism. To this end, the ideological deficiency of the global Occupy movement is one of its greatest weaknesses. For instance, we live in a moment where many progressives turn to aid agencies, among other things, in an attempt to eradicate poverty despite such aid agencies promoting the goals of empire.<sup>3</sup> As capitalism continues to creep amidst progressive liberal malaise and confusion, ideologically and pragmatically speaking, where do we go from here? To this question, *The Socialist Alternative* attempts an answer.

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<sup>1</sup> Prucha, ‘Marxism and the Existential Problem,’ 152.

<sup>2</sup> I do not wish to classify all current global protest as being inspired, influenced, or connected to the Occupy Movement. I simply see the Occupy Movement as a sub-stratum of global resistance against capital, resistance that might aptly be seen as part of the “multitude.”

<sup>3</sup> Here I define empire as the hierarchical ordering of society, whereas a nation-state features a horizontal ordering of society.

As Lebowitz clearly states in the preface, the purpose of the book is ‘to point to an alternative’ (p. 7), an alternative that confronts and negates the eco-social distress that the capitalist project has facilitated. Aside from an alternative, *The Socialist Alternative* is also a reclamation project of sorts, for Lebowitz implicitly is attempting to clarify and recuperate the falsification of Marx’s understanding of human development in particular and by extension socialist thought more generally. Put slightly differently, the book serves not only as a vision, a mapping of sorts, but also as a corrective to tendentious readings of Marx and the misuse and application of socialist concepts. According to Lebowitz, the socialist project is incoherently stumbling and staggering into the future. He attempts to renew interest in socialism, as well as redirect it, by distancing it from its historical past and by fleshing out the ambiguity and vagueness that so often revolves around its many lexical constellations. For Lebowitz, the word socialism and the material realities it designates are often weighed down by the substance of an epoch, particularly the trace of the Cold War. To this end, the socialist framework developed in the book is distinct from what Lebowitz calls “real” socialism – that is, the socialist projects of the USSR and Yugoslavia for instance. It is clear that Lebowitz’s time in Venezuela, a place he has lived with his partner Martha Harnacker since 2004, has left a strong impression on his understanding and explication of socialism. However, *The Socialist Alternative* is by no means a book about the Chavez-led Bolivarian Revolution. Lebowitz stresses that socialism much like capitalism must be organic. Socialism must come from ‘revolutionary practice’, the self-activity of the masses wherever they may be located. Lebowitz does, however, advocate for a rigid system, what he calls ‘socialist triangle’, but understands that all good things have a basic structure and the nuance and ‘particularity comes from the context and to this he emphasizes; that each country must invent its own path’ (p. 128).

Socialism’s basic structure is triangular. The three sides include: ‘the wealth of people,’ ‘the production of people,’ and ‘the solidararian society.’ To this end, the book is broken into two parts: the socialist triangle and building the socialist triangle. Again, real human development is at the center of Lebowitz’s argument. Lebowitz begins to develop his socialist geometry in and around social ownership or ‘the wealth of the people.’ Social ownership ‘implies a profound democracy from below rather than decisions by a state that stands over and above society’ (my emphasis p. 41). Emphasis is not placed on the division of labour, that is, workers, bosses, and bureaucrats, but on ‘the combination of labour– its character as social labour (p. 33).’ It also implies a diachronic approach to understanding past social labour. In fact, the book itself is a product of social labour – part of the social brain of society, the result of past immaterial labour. Socialism reclaims what has been taken; it remedies the theft that started when private ownership of the means of production became *de rigueur*. It requires that the means of production be in association with past and present forms of social labour and social property, thusly, establishing a genealogical understanding of contemporary forms of sociality and human

interconnectedness. Social ownership, then, is necessary to satisfy the needs of all people, rather than just the needs of private owners. As many of us know, 'In capitalism, human beings are not the end; rather, they are means for the expansion of capital' (p. 44).

The second side of the triangle features 'the production of people.' In other words, social production organized by associated interdependent workers. Under capitalism, production is organized by capital which exploits workers and transmogrifies their creative potentiality. Here Lebowitz argues that:

The implication is obvious – every aspect of production must be a site for the collective decision making and variety of activity that develops human capacities and builds solidarity among the particular associated producers. When workers act in workplaces and communities in conscious cooperation with others, they produce themselves as people conscious of their interdependence and of their own collective power (p. 60).

In other words, when workers organize production, they develop their human capabilities in solidarity and commune with others, which presupposes the third side of the triangle and is ultimately necessary for socialism.

The third part of the triangle is the elimination of material incentives, worker competition, exchange relations, and the market economy, in order to distribute goods according to communal needs. With communal production 'where the associated producers engage in productive activity for the needs of the community, there is the continuous process of development of the capabilities of producers' (p. 81). According to Lebowitz, in privileging communal needs over self-interest it 'guards against worker-managers viewing their labour power as property and as the basis of an exchange with society, and it checks a tendency to treat social property as group property' (p. 88). Without the goal of producing for communal needs, any attempt at socialism can lead back to capitalism. To this end, socialism means the overcoming of the separateness and antagonism between subject and object. The socialist triangle leads to a society which permits the actualization of the human; Marx's species-being. In other words, socialism is just as much an economic and material project as it is also an existential and ontological project. The relationship between social structure and consciousness is ultimately at the core of the socialist project. Socialism in this instance is not just about fulfilling the basic needs of society, such as food, shelter, and medical care, although these are the bedrock of the system. As Che reminds us:

It is not a matter of how many kilograms of meat one has to eat, or how many times a year someone can go to beach, or how many pretty things from abroad you might be able to buy with present-day wages. It is a

matter of making the individual feel more complete, with much more inner wealth and much more responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

It is about people enjoying the kind of freedom that is simply beyond the capability of the capitalist system to deliver. Lebowitz's project in many respects is more about organization and social empowerment than it is economics, that is, the forms of social empowerment and social development necessary for transcending capitalism.

But herein lays the fundamental problem with the book. In his attempt to unsettle the power and fortitude of capital, Lebowitz fails to extend his argument to all people. What about those outside of humanity? What about the supernumerary? In other words, can socialism speak for and represent those not recognized as human – that is the non-human? In many ways the book lays claim to a universal applicability. Lebowitz's assumptive logic is predicated upon the authority of whiteness. In other words, Lebowitz's subject, read human, is 'overrepresented as the generic, ostensibly supracultural human.'<sup>5</sup> As Wilderson has clearly illustrated, the black subject is the scandal within historical materialism: 'the black subject position in America is an antagonism, a demand that cannot be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organization of existing rubrics.'<sup>6</sup> This illustrates the limitations of Lebowitz's socialist triangle. For instance, how would blacks fair under worker cooperatives? Does a solidarist society, based on worker cooperatives axiomatically become anti-'anti-black'? Does a syndicalist system restore humanity back to the black? The universal (hu)man is still European and western. It is from this commonsensical standpoint that Lebowitz elaborates and maps out the socialist alternative. What is crowded out, due to the perceived universal applicability is black particularity; the singularity of black suffering, not just black exploitation. Again, to quote Wilderson, 'Work is a white category.'<sup>7</sup> We could explain Lebowitz's general neglect of race and how it might confound his socialist triangle as simply 'misrecogniz[ing] the nature of racial slavery: as a brutal regime of labour exploitation.'<sup>8</sup> Lebowitz's only reference to race is featured in a footnote, where he observes that 'other inversions of human development such as patriarchy, caste society, and racism (p. 183)' need to be explicitly dealt with in order for real human development to occur. But to pair racism in its most general banal constitution with patriarchy and caste society again undermines the import of race; it makes such 'inversions of human development' seem similar when in fact they are not. Capitalism splits the body, but paired with white supremacy and antiblackness, the body becomes quartered.

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<sup>4</sup> Guevara, 'Che Guevara on Global Justice,' p.43.

<sup>5</sup> Wynters, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,' p. 288.

<sup>6</sup> Wilderson, 'Gramsci's Black Marx,' p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 238.

<sup>8</sup> Sexton, 'Race, Nation, and Empire in a Blackened World,' p. 251.

Might I suggest, as Hardt has,

to look... outside this alternative. Too often it appears as though our only choices are capitalism or socialism, the rule of private property or that of public property, such that the only cure for the ills of state control is to privatize and for the ills of capital to publicize – that is, to exert state regulation.<sup>9</sup>

The freedom to labour under different conditions, that is, exempt from exploitation is not true freedom, for the violent underside, featuring both terror and horror, still is present. There comes a point when it is no longer about capital exploitation at all, but also general global terror and violence. As Wilderson has observed, there comes a time when one needs to deal with the ‘relations of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony.’<sup>10</sup> This paradigmatic shift is often neglected and/or omitted, intentionally or unintentionally, because many on the Left continue to work within the ‘tradition of unracialized positionality.’<sup>11</sup> To think of the worker, whether exploited or working for him or herself, as unracialized is absurd to say the least, for the ‘we’ is really a synonym for a canonized whiteness. The Socialist Alternative says nothing about race, particularly blackness as both an identity and structural positionality. As Charles Mills has observed, ‘If the white workers have been alienated from their product, then people of color, especially black slaves, have been alienated from their personhood...’<sup>12</sup> If The Socialist Alternative is really about socialism proper, it must deal with anthropological, axiological, ontological and existential problems. It confronts the bourgeois problem, but neglects the racial and colonial problem.

Lebowitz fails to provide what Lewis Gordon has characterized as a ‘conjunctive analysis,’ that is, an analysis that is critically and not reductively engaged with racism, capitalism, and colonialism.<sup>13</sup> As a result, Lebowitz’s suggestions for an alternative can only be stretched so far; they reach a sociogenic and ontogenic limit. Lebowitz is still in Europe. As Fanon observed, ‘Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth.’<sup>14</sup> To recapitulate, Lebowitz’s text suffers from a universalist, canonized whiteness approach, thusly subsuming a type of particularity. Any development must be simultaneously particular and universal. To

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<sup>9</sup> Hardt, ‘The Common in Communism,’ p. 346.

<sup>10</sup> Wilderson, p. 230.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 229.

<sup>12</sup> Mills, *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism*, p. xviii.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*.

<sup>14</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 313.

echo Nahum Chandler, 'the black is a problem for socialist thought.'<sup>15</sup> In relation to Prucha's statement in the epigraph, even if one is enclosed in history, one must confront the existential and ontological, for it is the historical enclosure that sets the stage for existence or non-existence and, thus, inclusion or exclusion from projects for real human development. Lebowitz attempts to reinsert the (hu)man back into an alternative approach to human development. Yet, the main defect of Lebowitz's book is the presupposition that all sentient beings are (hu)man.

Nonetheless, at a time when protest is common, Michael Lebowitz's *The Socialist Alternative* can serve as a timely intervention for those wondering what to do next, how to envision or map a new future. This book not only provides an important philosophical and ideological framework, but also outlines ways of creating a new (hu)man and by extension new human relationships particularly from the register of political economy. In other words, Lebowitz not only provides a conceptual mapping of socialism to come, but a practical and concrete mapping that can contribute to making socialism a reality. Throughout the book socialism is explicated as a tool, a method, not a tenet weighed down by the dogmatism of yesteryear. Students of struggle should read *The Socialist Alternative*. However, they should do so with a critical eye, for his 'new human' is fraught with defects as previously mentioned. Put slightly differently, students of struggle should always remain critically maladaptive even to that which is understood to be socialist or socialist-orientated. To this end, socialism is not a panacea, for it often excludes any need to negate the negation of white supremacy and antiblackness, that is, black absences when thinking of possible futures. I am not calling for a complete rejection of Lebowitz's argument, again I am sympathetic and thinking in solidarity with it, but his archive and paradigm is limited, for it excludes motifs that illustrate the significance of race in its most general constitution, and more importantly antiblackness. To pair the methods found in the book with the best of the black radical tradition surely will point to a new human. As Steve Biko cogently observed many years ago, 'problems are not solved completely when you alter the economic pattern, to a socialist pattern. You still don't become what you ought to be.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Chandler, 'Of Exorbitance: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought.'

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in Fatten, *Black Consciousness in South Africa*, p. 79.

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