

Lebowitz, Michael. 2015. *The Socialist Imperative: From Gotha to Now*. New York: Monthly Review Press. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-5836754-6-5. Pages: 224.

Mészáros, István. 2015. *The Necessity of Social Control*, New York: Monthly Review Press. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-5836753-8-0. Pages: 328.

### **Reviewed by Ken Collier**

Monthly Review's six decades of publishing remains dedicated to placing before us practice and theory that are not divorced from each other as in the liberal fashion. In true exercises of Marxian praxis, recent books by István Mészáros and Michael Lebowitz help readers to take up theory as it is exercised and practice as it delivers data and lessons on working toward a socialist alternative. These authors deliver on the tasks of thinking and doing, each in their own spheres. They are complementary treatments of the overarching and the specific.

István Mészáros's *The Necessity of Social Control* and Michael Lebowitz's *The Socialist Imperative: From Gotha to Now* share a dedication to practical application to real-world political and economic problems. They also share an advantage most activists don't have – arenas in which to exercise their ideas – arenas they helped to build themselves, and into which they were invited. Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, as one example, read their materials, questioned them on theory and use of concepts, and in fact contributed details and aspects to arguments in these two books.

While both authors have histories and publishing lists spanning decades, these publications are not merely rehashes or compilations of previous material. They are both examples of summing up, drawing threads together and responding to arguments and criticisms. Both make efforts to focus and specify ideas and examples drawn from experience as well as exchange with other authors. In some cases, they engage with political parties and movement organizations. Audiences they wish to address are sought out and identified, knowing that other readers will benefit from the mutuality of the process of writing, acting and problem-solving.

Lebowitz's chapter 7 is about the working class as a revolutionary subject, and is new text. It may sound like an old idea well covered. But Lebowitz combs over grounds that he opens to new interpretations. He also takes care to look at the working class in agriculture under landed aristocracies, then explores its reshaping as industrial capital transformed class relations. Finance capital rising to dominance brings us to current conditions, and Lebowitz lays on the table the sometimes eroding, sometimes shattering conditions workers face. The rest of the book takes us to different urban and rural locales where class struggle is a reality, not just a concept and idea for intellectual ferment.

Valuable additions are made by including commentary about conferences where he presented papers or sat on panels. Contexts for the presentations and themes that grew out of them tell readers where avenues are now open and forces at work can be identified.

It is a source of wonderment that Mészáros took up his theme more than four decades ago. “The Necessity of Social Control” was the title of his Isaac Deutscher Memorial Lecture in January, 1971. That early in the game, he laid out ideas springing from his earlier book, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*. Most Marxists took the collapse of capitalism more or less on faith, thinking that downfall would occur of its own accord, or with a push from revolutionary forces. Mészáros presented evidence that structural features press relentlessly toward disintegration of the capital order. He firmed up the argument by showing that capital is not just a set of ideas and beliefs – an “ism,” as in capitalism – but is a structure known as capital that can be examined and analyzed. Flaws and gaps can be discovered, and perhaps hastened by political activity if progressive forces are ready, alert and prepared to take action.

Mészáros resolutely researched, wrote, argued, campaigned and published through to the present. Most of his writing is rather academic, as it must be to marshal the evidence and support his arguments. As a result, this book (*Social Control*) is an effort to draw his themes and evidence together in a more popular and readable form, without losing the persuasive thread. This was a conscious decision, based on a discussion he had with John Bellamy Foster, editor of *Monthly Review* in 2013. Mészáros was already recognized as the “pathfinder of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism” by Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela. Chávez consulted Mészáros and Lebowitz about socialist philosophy, strategy, tactics, and sheer political direction. Sometimes Chávez assigned tasks or asked them to answer questions about their own work, or that of Marx, Engels and other socialists, with the aim of applying the answers to issues at hand.

Here is where the connection is made. Lebowitz and Mészáros draw on each other. They know each other’s work. They supply ideological fuel to Chávez, the Castros, Morales, Correa and other progressive leaders of the Americas, as well as to their officials, their publics, and their communities. But the influence does not stop there. They are both listened to at European and Asian conferences and in political halls of decision. They are both read by those on the face of the globe who want to contest the capital class.

States and their roles are treated in different ways by these two authors. Lebowitz draws on innovative writers and experiences to lay out a type of state that grows from the local realities and people. That kind of state is not an elected (or selected) elite citizens must approach as supplicants. Instead, it is a series of layers and mechanisms of response to needs identified, negotiated and discussed with neighbours. That kind of state almost certainly has a pinnacle, but there we find those pushed to that level by their abilities and trust, not those who have sold themselves to us or to other invisible powers.

Mészáros comes at state role from another direction. His book title about the Necessity of Social Control might easily lead one to conclude it is the state that does this. However, he is too canny an analyst to just assume the state should be wielded for that purpose. Instead, he pries open the actual control mechanisms now in use pretty much around the globe and shows that many of them are in fact operating within corporate structures and through media outlets to get results in the social sphere. In his book he lays out the state as conductor of a more or less single ideology across the world's governments.

As Lebowitz says, that kind of state is familiar to us. The kinds posed as alternatives open the way for us to no longer be “trapped by the categories of old societies.” They both examine how the political party could take shape in new circumstances. Carbon copies of political parties of the past will not serve.

What are the key ideas that connect these two writers? The “structural crisis of capital” is one, in which they describe the niches into which levers can be inserted to pry apart the power centers of oppression. Instruments that can take up those levers are the non-owning class, the workers; women; youth and students (of any age); ethnic groups; anti-imperialist and some nationalist groups and organizations; and certain formations that arise in unique circumstances where avenues open to those specific gatherings. Social forces that can be exercised in the pursuit of socialism are described by both authors, though it is understandable that their intellectual tasks in these two books are not the same. Philosophical underpinnings form the foundations for their arguments, and they are offered in accessible language not aimed at specialists.

Tuck these facts into the broader arena of Marxist and more general progressive theoretical and practical work and there is discovered the breadth of ideas represented by such key activists and writers as Walden Bello, Marta Harnecker and Martin Hart-Landsberg. Naturally, a longer list would gather up others known for their contributions to Marxist and socialist theory, but the point is made that these are people in a context, one we all know and appreciate.

These books are tools. They can be used. By us.

## References Cited

Meszaros, Istvan. 1970. *Marx's Theory of Alienation*. New York: Merlin Press.