

A NEW VISION

'The Socialist Alternative...'

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Unfortunately, something of a public relations problem arises out of this situation. How does one sell something that doesn't exist, and that can only be described in vague, open-ended language? Faced with a similar predicament, it seems as if many socialist academics and researchers have gone in one of either two directions. The first is a rabid historicism, immersing oneself in every twist and turn of the Russian Revolution and those that followed. The second suits those with an analytical bent, using the Marxist toolkit to break apart the movements of capitalism today. Though both approaches have produced fascinating and necessary texts, they still end up thumping home the two points on which almost everyone on the left already agrees: Stalinism failed, and capitalism sucks. The question remains: What is to be done?

This is where a *book like *The Socialist Alternative* comes in. Without slipping into the clutches of either doctrinism on the one hand, or the empty banalities of revolutionary vernacular on the other, author Michael Lebowitz outlines a new vision of socialist transition and development as a means to reinvigorate the debates about possibilities for a socialist future.

It certainly helps that Lebowitz' own history allows him to draw on a broad array of hard left activism and "real" socialist policy development, however fragmentary that might be. As well as a long-standing economics professor, Lebowitz was an activist with the iconic 1960s group Students for a Democratic Society, a policy wonk for the New Democratic Party in Canada (a lesson, he says, "into the limits of social democracy") and in recent years has been advising the Ministry of the Social Economy in Venezuela and directing the Centro Internacional Miranda in Caracas. Many of his ideas openly reflect the lessons and experiences he's accrued from the Bolivarian revolution.

Lebowitz opens *The Socialist Alternative* with a set of big, broad questions: "What is a good society?" he asks. "What do we want — for ourselves, for our families, for those we love?" His answer, along the same lines as Marx, Engels, Saint-Simeon and Louis Blanc, is that a good society permits "the full development of human potential". In the pages that follow the author fleshes out this vision, as well as discussing methods for a socialist transition.

Part one expands on Lebowitz' ideas about what a society that fosters real human development would look like. Needless to say, it is not capitalist, but it is also not social democracy, or a refurb of the Soviet Union's "real socialism". Instead, and in line with a cluster of other theorists — particularly those in the feminist tradition who persevered through the 1980s apocalypse of Marxist-feminist thought in the humanities — Lebowitz moves past any towering Althusserianism for a return to the living, breathing subjects — the "rich human beings" — who will create and be created by the good society.

These subjects are to materialise at the systemic level through a truly "organic" way of producing and reproducing human life (Lebowitz acknowledges and respects the organic nature of capitalism). An organic society with a socialist basis is said to be constituted by a "socialist triangle", the three points of which are: social ownership of the means of production; social production organised by workers; and the satisfaction organised to meet communal needs. Without all three points in place, Lebowitz argues, not everything can

harmoniously intersect — he brings forward the Yugoslav experiment with worker self-management as an example of social production organised by workers, but not organised to meet communal needs.

In part two, the knottier question of strategy comes into play — the “being and becoming” of socialist development. Lebowitz palms away the prophetic Leninist approach — that is, socialism as an “early” stage during which the state appropriates the means of production, followed by a “higher” communist phase —and proposes instead the notion of socialism developing out of capitalism through substituting the self-orientated characteristics of the owners of labour power with the principle that people are not only workers, but are members of society.

This introduces a new socialist principle: “that which is intended for the common satisfaction of needs”. The break with productivist ideology here — the insistence that people be seen “not only as workers” — is a welcome break from worker-ism, and it is again apparent how developments within feminist theories of (re)production could be folded into the mix here. Lebowitz’ more concrete proposals about connecting workers’ councils and communities through neighbourhood councils are also interesting, as is his notion of “socialist conditionality”.

The Socialist Alternative is worth reading for anyone seeking innovative projections about socialist alternatives that are free of uneasy dogmatism while supported by rigorous theory and insight stemming from real-life experience. This book will also inject a shot of optimism into even the most worn-down activist by engaging with socialism as a real possibility that is here, now and in the future, not just material for tiny reading groups and tomes on Russian history. In stripping away, for a moment, the militaristic veneer of revolutionary activism, Lebowitz reminds readers once again what socialism is about and what people are fighting for: a better, happier, healthier society for all, in which everyone is free to reach their creative potential. □

[source: <http://workerseducation.net/>]

*THE SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE : REAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

by Michael Lebowitz, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2010.