

Build it “from the outset” (or, Who are you calling an anarchist?)

Michael A. Lebowitz

My cup runneth over. In 2014, *Science & Society* published two critiques of my work which raised fundamental questions that call for an extended discussion and to which I am delighted to respond.

In “Socialism: the Contradictions of Leftist Critique”, Mel Rothenberg reviewed and criticized my *Contradictions of “Real Socialism”: the Conductor and the Conducted* as “an inadequate characterization of the Soviet social economy” (Rothenberg, 2014). Subsequently, David Laibman devoted a significant part of his July editorial (“Quotology, Stages, and the Posthumous Anarchization of Marx”) to attack my chapter on Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in a Turkish collection on Marxist Classics (Laibman, 2014; Lebowitz, 2013b).

Marxism vs Anarchism?

Let me begin with David’s contribution, the more far-reaching rejection. His editorial evokes “a veritable ocean of infantilisms”, “worship of spontaneity”, “naïve faith in the power of exhortation” and warns that, in contrast to the science of Marxism, “anarchism and romantic idealism have resurfaced”. And, among the forms of this spectre haunting Marxism is the reinterpretation of Marx’s texts (hence “quotology” and “posthumous anarchization of Marx” in his title). His “case in point”? My essay on Marx’s Gotha Critique.

“The heart of the matter”, David proposes, is firstly my argument that the “defects” of communism/socialism (as it emerges from capitalist society) are “simply ‘bad’ things that can be rejected at will. All we have to do is ‘change the relations of production’--- and, incidentally, right away: ‘from the outset’.” To support further his view of my infantilism, David refers to the title of my earlier book, *Build it Now: Socialism for the 21st Century*, and argues that “since ‘now’ is, presumably, whenever the reader happens to be reading the book, this clearly translates to ‘Build it whenever you feel like doing so’” (Lebowitz, 2006). A strange comment--- since David seems to have forgotten that this title draws (as I noted in the Preface) upon the long-standing inspiring slogan of the South African Communist Party: “Socialism is the Future. Build it Now.”¹

The second part of “the heart of the matter”, according to David, is my argument that “the ‘standard interpretation’ [of Marx’s Gotha Critique] emphasizes the productive forces, to the complete neglect of production relations.” Well, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that in the chapter in question (as well as in several books--- including a talk in Cuba published several years ago in *Science & Society*), I make this point and argue that the standard interpretation (which both David and Mel accept) is wrong in distinguishing

¹ Unfortunately, the SACP appears to have embraced David’s translation and is building socialism whenever it feels like doing so --- which is not now.

between two separate stages of socialism and communism (each with its own specific principle of distribution) and ignores the nature of the relations of production (Lebowitz, 2007). For David, however, this is heresy. As he notes in his editorial, “the general point is this: *stages are real*”. Indeed, the “failure to acknowledge... the presence of developmental stages (a necessary feature of the dialectic of structure and process)” is part of that “veritable ocean of infantilisms”.

In a deeper sense, however, “the heart of the matter” is to be found elsewhere--- in my rejection of the Histmat formula of the relation between productive forces and relations of production. In that formula, as articulated years ago by Oskar Lange in his *Political Economy*, there are two essential “laws”: (a) the “Law of progressive development of productive forces’ and (b) the “First basic law of sociology”, which is defined as “*the law of necessary conformity between production relations and the character of the productive forces*”. In this conception, (what Lange called) a “dialectical process” emerges in which the development of the productive forces generates a “contradiction” with the existing relations of production, a contradiction which is removed by the adjustment of productive relations which restores conformity (Lange, 1963: 32-3, 23, 40). This is the same essential formula presented by G.A. Cohen in his famous “defence” of Marx’s theory of history which introduces the two laws as “the Development Thesis” and “the Primacy [of the productive forces] Thesis proper”, respectively (Cohen, 1978:134). Similarly, in David’s more nuanced general presentation, the two laws appear as “the development principle” and “the correspondence principle” (Laibman, 2007: 6-14).²

From this systemization of a single long paragraph (in the “Preface” of 1859 to Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*), any suggestion of building new productive relations in the new society “from the outset” cannot avoid but be seen as “naïve faith in the power of exhortation” in contrast to the appropriate focus upon development of the productive forces. However, if we stress instead what Marx wrote at length in Volume I of *Capital* about capitalist relations of production (and the nature of the productive forces developed within them), the result leads us to focus upon the specificity of the relations of production--- both in the new society as it initially emerges from capitalism (as projected in Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*) and in the “real socialism” of the 20th Century.

The two “deductions”

Before exploring this deeper question, though, let us return to David’s comments. Those who have no access to my essay in question (since at this time it has only been published in Turkish) will not recognize that the quote, “from the outset”, which so agitated David is not my invention but comes directly from Marx’s *Gotha Critique*. Similarly, they will not know that my discussion is centred on Marx’s argument in the *Grundrisse* that the development of a new society “to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks” (Marx, 1973: 278). Specifically, I emphasize that the new socialist society

² While David's general presentation stresses much more the interactions, there is a definite family resemblance to Lange's (as, for example, in the distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic modes of production).

must subordinate the defects it inherits “as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges”.

For example, the new society must subordinate the inherited defect to which Marx explicitly pointed: the private ownership of “the personal condition of production, of labour power” and its associated right of a worker to an equivalent in exchange for her labor. Rather than *building* upon such economic, moral and intellectual defects, I argue that the associated producers must introduce into society new organs, institutions which embody their own logic, the logic of the working class (described in my “real socialism” book) which is characterized by social ownership of the means of production, by the democratic protagonism in workplace and community which fosters human development and by production for social needs.³

Of course, that process cannot happen overnight and, indeed, may be quite lengthy. However, Marx understood that we must *begin* to remove the defects inherited from the old society “from the outset”. That is the point of his discussion of two “deductions” that have to be made before the total social product is distributed to individual producers for consumer goods. Consider the first deduction--- “*the general costs of administration not belonging to production*”, which is to say the costs associated with state administration. Marx indicated clearly that “this part will, from the outset, be very considerably restricted in comparison with present-day society, and it diminishes in proportion as the new society develops” (Marx, 1962). *But why?* Very simply, you cannot understand Marx’s reference to those reduced costs of administration *from the outset* (and their successive reduction as the society advances) without recognizing the relation to his perspective after the Paris Commune (a few years earlier) where he talked about the development of “self-working and self-governing communes” and about “state functions reduced to a few functions for general national purposes.”

Unfortunately, rather than theoretically engaging the implications of this deduction and its link to Marx’s position following the Paris Commune, David’s response to the quotes from Marx about “self-working and self-governing communes” and the reduction of “State functions” was to describe my references as “quotology” and to suggest that “Lebowitz’ self-working and self-governing communes” sounds like “an accommodation to an aspect of long-standing anarchist conceptions”.⁴ Not an especially reasoned response, and it reaches its nadir when David instructs us that Marx’s discussion of reduced state functions really refers “to the historically specific French State”.⁵

³ Of course, the struggle between the logic of capital and the logic of the working class (a struggle on three fronts) does not begin with the arrival of “the cooperative society based upon the common ownership of the means of production”. This “contested reproduction” also occurs within capitalism and is an essential part of the struggle for socialism. See the discussion of contested reproduction and the logic of the working class in “real socialism” in Lebowitz (2012) and within capitalism in Lebowitz (2010 and 2014).

⁴ David’s point about “quotology” is somewhat humorous given that his discussion is filled with his own quotations. “Quotology” appears to be quotes from Marx that one doesn’t like.

⁵ Thus, Marx’s view of a state with its “all-directing bureaucracy” which squeezes “the living civil society like a boa constrictor” presumably is limited to 19th Century France; and, understanding the Commune as “the reabsorption of the state power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves” refers merely to Paris rather than to the “political form of the social emancipation” (the specific form which Engels described on its 20th anniversary as “the Dictatorship of the Proletariat”). See the discussion of “the workers’ state” in Lebowitz (2003).

David's interrogation of Marx's second deduction is no deeper. "*Secondly*," Marx pointed out, there is "*that which is intended for the common satisfaction of needs, such as schools, health services, etc*". In contrast to the first deduction, though, "from the outset this part grows considerably in comparison with present-day society, and it grows in proportion as the new society develops." Thus, the new society proceeds immediately ("from the outset") to expand its provision of use-values for common satisfaction of needs; further, this deduction from what individuals may claim as an equivalent of their labor *grows*. However, "what the producer is deprived of in his capacity as a private individual benefits him directly or indirectly in his capacity as a member of society." In short, as the new society develops, our claim upon the output of society increasingly is *as a member of society*.

This new relation of distribution emerges in place of distribution in accordance with contribution, the conception of "right" (equivalent exchange with its "right of inequality") inherited from the old society. Of course, this new relation of distribution cannot rest in mid-air. (No distribution relation does.) The new conception of right accordingly requires the development of new "organs" that challenge "the antithesis between mental and manual labour" and foster "the all-round development of the individual", thereby ensuring that "all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly" as the new society develops (Marx, 1962: 24). Further, increasingly "a communal production, communality is presupposed as the basis of production" and that "presupposed communal character would determine the distribution of products" (Marx, 1973: 171-3).⁶ In short, subordination of the old relation of distribution requires the development of a new relation of production, a new economic structure. David, however, is silent on the implications of this second deduction.

Soc-law

Silence about the relations of production is characteristic of the "standard interpretation" of Marx's Gotha Critique. In the Histmat formula, subordination of the old relation of distribution focuses upon the development of the productive forces in socialism. Rather than talk explicitly about the character of the relations of production, that standard interpretation follows Lenin's insistence in *State and Revolution* that "an enormous development of productive forces" in the socialist stage is the prerequisite for the new relation of distribution. Until the labour of people has become "so productive that they will voluntarily work *according to their ability*," the "socialist principle" of equivalent exchange must be safeguarded by the state and, indeed, requires "the *strictest* control by society *and by the state* of the measure of labour and the measure of consumption" (Lenin, 1965: 112-16).

Apparent here is the law of Histmat specific to socialism (Soc-law): *the law of necessary correspondence between the level of productive forces and the relation of distribution*. Those who cite this law, too, can draw upon Marx's statement in the *Critique* that "Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby" because they misinterpret "economic structure" to mean the level of productive forces rather than the relations of production

⁶ For a discussion of such "organs" and the development of planning from below, see *The Socialist Alternative* and my essay on "The State and the Future of Socialism" in the *Socialist Register 2013*.

(Marx, 1962: 24).⁷ The relations of production themselves? Conjured away. They are the missing term, the vanishing moment; and, accordingly, we are left with two inferences from Soc-law: (a) if distribution relations go beyond what the productive forces justify, there will be disaster and (b) reliance upon the existing distribution relations is essential for the development of the productive forces.

Those inferences are made by both Mel and David. Thus, to explain the existence of shortages in the Soviet Union, Mel points to “the egalitarian ideology” and stresses that in a society “at an intermediate stage of development”, the result of egalitarianism is “shortages no matter how efficient the system of distribution is”. Unless we understand the social and political reality at hand, he indicates, the result is “utopian expectations and demands” (Rothenberg, 2014). Similarly, underlying David’s position is his explicit statement in the special *Science & Society* issue on “Designing Socialism” that “the experience of 20th-century socialism is filled with examples of excessive equalization of incomes, in the given technical and cultural conditions” (Laibman, 2012: 211). As with Gorbachev’s complaint about “serious infractions of the socialist principle of distribution according to work” with the result that “the psychology of levelling has taken root,” the policy implications of Soc-law are clear: increase productive forces, increase inequality to correspond to what the level of productive forces permits (Lebowitz, 2012: 138).⁸

Implicit in the above is that if socialism can only find the right distribution of incomes, the right pattern of incentives, the right way to motivate people, then it can go beyond obstacles to the development of productive forces. Social ownership of the means of production, Lange wrote, “makes it possible to set economic stimuli so that people react to them in conformity with the will of organized society” (Lange, 1963: 81). And this has been David’s scientific project for some time-- the search for the combination of incentives (as well as for the most efficient package of economic mechanisms) that will permit the most rapid advance of production. Certainly, the motivation of producers is important for the development of productive forces but the elephant in the room is the nature of the relations of production. If the producers only relate as private owners of labour-power within structures where they follow directives from above, then (for those above and their economic advisers) increasing the possibility for inequality may appear to be the best option to stimulate the producers.⁹

But, why all this focus upon distribution? After all, Marx was very explicit in the *Critique* that “it was in general a mistake to make a fuss about so-called *distribution* and put the principal stress on it.” On the contrary, we need to focus upon the mode of production. The error of vulgar socialists, Marx pointed out, has been to take over “from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution” (Marx, 1962: 25). Specific relations of distribution, as Marx explained

⁷ As one of many examples of this use of this sentence, see Francisco Soberon [then President of the Central Bank of Cuba] in December 2005 (Soberon, 2005).

⁸ Cf. Lebowitz, 2012: 138. This same general perspective underlies the “reforms” introduced in China’s “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, Vietnam’s “market socialism with a socialist orientation” and Cuba’s current “updating” of the socialist model.

⁹ “A maturing socialist society, then, must work to achieve the *degree of income inequality* that is consistent, at a given time, with its levels of technical, socio-political and ideological development” (Laibman, 2012: 211).

over and over again in Chapter 51 of Volume 3 of *Capital*, are not independent but arise from specific relations of production (Marx, 1981).

So, why are the relations of production, the grounding for relations of distribution, missing from Soc-law? I suggest that implicit in Soc-law is the premise that socialism is a “non-antagonistic” mode of production. As Lange put it, “social ownership of the means of production eliminates the antagonistic character of production relations” (Lange, 1963: 81). Characteristic of the non-antagonistic mode of production (in which category Lange placed the primitive community and the socialist mode of production) is that “all members share in the ownership of the means of production” (Lange, 1963: 20). Similarly, David assumes a lack of class antagonism in socialism, noting that a non-antagonistic mode of production does not contain “antagonistic social classes” and describing the socialist transformation as one in which “a non-class-antagonistic mode of production replaces, simultaneously, capitalism and the entire historical epoch of antagonistic MPs [modes of production]” (Laibman, 2007: 11, 146).

Presumably, we do not need to investigate relations of production and class differences with respect to the means of production (in theoretical or “real” socialism) insofar as socialism by definition is non-antagonistic. For Lange, social ownership of the means of production “removes the obstacle formed by privileged, vested class interests which oppose any attempts to make economic laws operate ... in conformity with the will of the whole of society” (Lange, 1963: 82). As well, David points out that in the non-antagonistic mode of production, there are no classes which have a vested interest in holding back the development of productive forces; accordingly, any such tendency is “*progressively* overcome by the need for institutional evolution to fulfill the potential of developing PFs [productive forces]” (Laibman, 2007: 12). Once there is common (juridical) ownership of the means of production, in short, we just have to figure out the way to realize all the potential of that ownership pattern.

Marx’s focus upon the relations of production

What, though, if we restore the relations of production to their proper place? Recall Marx’s discussion of production under capitalist relations. Due to space limitations, we briefly identify here a few specific points developed at length in *The Socialist Alternative* (Lebowitz, 2010):

A. Every human activity has *two* products. Every human activity has as its result *joint products* -- both the change in circumstances and the change in self, both the change in the object of labour and the change in the labourer herself. So, a central question we must always ask is what kinds of people are produced in the workplace? And the answer is that it *depends*. It depends upon the nature of relations within the process of production.

B. Production under capitalist relations is a process of exploitation of workers, one which is the source of capital. But it must not be forgotten that it is also a process of the “crippling of body and mind” of the worker, a process characterized by the “separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour” and where “every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity” is lost. Few things are clearer than Marx’s rejection of the capitalist division of labour: “those revolutionary ferments

whose goal is the abolition of the old division of labour stand in diametrical contradiction with the capitalist form of production” (Marx, 1977: 619).

C. Within capitalist relations (which, is to say, within those class relations) “all means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become means of domination and exploitation of workers” (Marx, 1977: 799). Further, Marx stressed that capitalist production “only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of wealth--- the soil and the worker” (Marx, 1977: 638). Productive forces, in short, do not drop from the sky. As in the case of capitalism, they are never neutral but always reflect the particular relations of production within which they emerge.

D. The development of particular productive forces tends to reinforce and strengthen particular class relations. Reproduction of capitalist relations was tenuous as long as “the subordination of labour to capital was only formal, i.e. the mode of production itself had as yet no specifically capitalist character” (Marx, 1977: 900; Lebowitz, 2010: 95). Capital, however, altered the mode of production it inherited and changed it into one that corresponded to its needs and requirements, thereby reinforcing the dependence of workers upon it. “The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance” (Marx, 1977: 899,935).. By removing inherited defects (from its perspective), capital was successful in “subordinating all elements of society to itself” and producing its own premises, thereby ensuring that it could develop upon its own foundations.

E. Under particular conditions, before the development of the “specifically capitalist mode of production”, workers were able to extract themselves from wage-labour and to work for themselves as independent commodity producers. Thus, a tendency for the non-reproduction of wage-labour (and therefore the non-reproduction of capitalist relations of production). In the colonies, for example, Marx spoke explicitly about “two diametrically opposed economic systems” but “contested reproduction” was present until such time as capital developed upon its own foundations (Marx, 1977: 931; Lebowitz, 2010: 96-99). Accordingly, the possibility of a reversion to pre-capitalist relations in that interim led capital to develop a specifically capitalist mode of *regulation*--- “state compulsion to confine the struggle between capital and labour within limits convenient to capital”(Marx, 1977: 899, 904-5).

By focusing upon the relations of production (Soc-law’s vanishing moment) in that new society which Marx described in the *Critique* as “in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges”, it is possible to consider the theoretical implications of not *beginning* to subordinate the defects inherited from capitalism “from the outset”. However, since these are issues I explored in sections of *The Socialist Alternative* (considering, in particular, what is to be subordinated, the socialist mode of

regulation and contested reproduction), it is far more relevant here to consider concrete experience--- “real socialism”, the subject of my last book (Lebowitz, 2010: 110-23).¹⁰

Considering “real socialism”

What were the relations of production in “real socialism”? Following Marx’s method of beginning from observation of the concrete to develop simple concepts from which to develop logically on a step-by-step basis an understanding of that society and its laws of motion, I drew upon the experience not only of the USSR but also that of Eastern and Central Europe (with references as well to China and Cuba). And, on this empirical basis, I developed the argument that at the core of “real socialism” was a relation between a vanguard oriented to building socialism from above and a working class which, under the existing social contract, had property rights in particular means of production and the expectation of security, relative egalitarianism, stable prices and rising living standards in return for the acceptance of vanguard rule in the workplace and society.¹¹

Within these relations, the character of productive forces introduced tended to take the form of extensive development in part because worker defense of their job rights limited changes in organization of existing productive operations.¹² Further, in the absence of worker decision-making and the breaking down of the division between thinking and doing, workers did not develop their capacities, and the vanguard became increasingly dependent upon enterprise managers to achieve their goals. In this context, I argued that bonus-maximizing managers increasingly emerged as an incipient capitalist class, and the interaction between the logic of the vanguard and the logic of capital produced growing dysfunction in “real socialism”. In the end, “free the managers” became the mantra (led by the ideological spokespersons of capital, the economists), taking the form of freeing the managers from both central planning regulations and from the protection provided to workers under the social contract. Capitalism, as we know, triumphed.

Unfortunately, Mel appears to have read the book through a prism of old conceptions. Describing my argument as suffering “from the narrowness of the syndicalist model” (which is to say, the anarchist tradition), he argues that it focuses upon three primary social classes and manages to distort my presentation of each (111, 114). For example, he proposes that I treat the workers “as in capitalism” as those “whose labor is the source of surplus value” and that I picture them “in mass similar to the industrial proletariat in advanced capitalism” (111). In no way, though, do I speak of “surplus value” in “real socialism” (as first one would have to have value in the society!); further, I stress that, with property rights in particular means of production, workers within vanguard relations (which were not at all limited to factories!) had not only the right to a

¹⁰ It is worth noting that David previously reviewed *The Socialist Alternative*, making many similar points to those in the editorial (as well as pointing out there was “not a word about: planning, management, prices”) and implying that my “programmatic rejection of the entire 20th-century (read Soviet) experience of the actual working-class movement in power” tapped “into the existing ideology of ignorance and rejection--- and ignore[d] the class source of that ideology” (Laibman, 2011: 434).

¹¹ To my surprise, this designation is yet to be criticized as apologetics.

¹² Additional reasons for this trajectory increasingly included fear of disruption of annual bonuses for enterprise managers as the result of new techniques and machinery and the ministerial dependence upon the managers to meet annual targets.

job (such that there was no functioning reserve army of labor) but the right to a *particular* job. How could we compare the situation of workers within this relation to those within capitalism? I certainly didn't. Indeed, behind the attack on the unique situation of workers within "real socialism" was the attempt to *make* them similar to workers in capitalism.

Then there are those he keeps calling "the planners" (as if they are a particular group of technical functionaries). But, as I made clear beginning with Chapter 3 which introduced the concept of vanguard relations of production, the planners are the *vanguard*--- indeed, the vanguard party. And, what distinguishes that vanguard (before it is penetrated and deformed) is the commitment to building socialism--- but only from *above*. My central point, then, about vanguard relations is that they constitute a particular, unique relation between the vanguard and the working class, one signalled by the book's subtitle--- "The Conductor and the Conducted". And, the lesson offered in the book is that, within this vanguard relation, workers do not develop their capacities and a socialist consciousness because the vanguard believes that it and only it can lead the workers to socialism. The lesson, in short, is *don't try this at home!* How could Mel fail to grasp that my argument transcends the particular history of the Soviet Union?

Finally, the third class--- the managers. About these, Mel states that "it is asserted, but the point is not really developed, that the managers are the real carriers of capitalist values and aspirations and the driving force behind the restoration of capitalism" (111). This is the strangest comment of all--- given that he does not once mention that I describe the managers throughout the book as "bonus-maximizers" and argue that, through their behaviour, the logic of capital emerged and increasingly challenged the logic of the vanguard (which did not include bonus-maximizing managers). Considering that process of contested reproduction, several of my chapters describe the struggle which took the form of plan vs. market, and they show that the advance of the market at the expense of the plan marked the growing strength of capital.¹³ Since Mel did not mention managerial bonuses (which, as I indicated, could be quite substantial for Soviet managers), it is not surprising that he did not grasp my particular argument about the development of capitalism from within "real socialism".

Were there internal dynamics in "real socialism"? In the absence of considering the relations of production and the process of contested reproduction, this is a closed book for Mel. In its place, he stresses the importance of going beyond relations of production to talk about demographic problems and the need to consider the parts of the population that are "neither industrial workers, managers nor planners" (113).¹⁴ Mel does acknowledge tendencies (like shortages, taut planning, the emphasis upon capital goods and the failure to elaborate an intensive development strategy) but attributes these not to the relations of production but to the hostile external environment which left "no

¹³ See in particular, "Contested Reproduction in Real Socialism" and 'The Conductor and The Battle of Ideas in the Soviet Union' in Lebowitz (2012). My argument about the link between markets and property rights, influenced by Charles Bettelheim, would be anathema for anyone who views markets abstractly.

¹⁴ One wonders if it was my failure to focus upon matters such as "demographics and natural resources, civil society, the state, the dominant religious and family structure, etc" (114) that constitutes "the contradictions of leftist critique", the unexplained title of his review essay.

breathing room for experiment” and “in particular a denial of access to the most advanced markets and technology” (112).¹⁵

One looks in vain for any analysis of the nature of workers produced within “real socialism” or why the system regressed to capitalism (and why workers didn’t resist this). And, there is a reason for that. Like many others who write about “real socialism”, Mel implicitly rejects Marx’s method: the history of the Soviet Union is substituted for an analysis of “real socialism” as a system which has specific conditions for its reproduction (and non-reproduction). “The most serious problem with Lebowitz’s analysis,” Mel argues, “is the failure to provide any serious historical background or grounding”. This is a “fundamental mistake”, he proposes in several places, because I “cannot undertake serious consideration of the political and social forces at work”, i.e. the hostile environment in which “real socialism” emerged and which explains its tendencies (Rothenberg, 2014: 115, 113, 116).

Mel’s fundamental mistake, however, is to think that analyzing the historical emergence of a system (the conditions under which its productive relations originally emerge) is how to understand its nature once it has developed. That is precisely what Marx rejected explicitly in his *Grundrisse* discussion of the “becoming” and “being” of a system. It is why Marx’s exposition of “original accumulation” in *Capital* occurred only *after* he correctly analyzed the essential elements of the capitalist relation in order to be able to trace their emergence (Marx, 1973: 278, 459-61; Lebowitz, 2010: 89-91).¹⁶ Indeed, Marx argued that, by focusing upon the process of becoming rather than analyzing the developed system, bourgeois economists engaged in apologetics which confused the conditions of the becoming of capital (through, for example, individual savings) with its contemporary realization (through exploitation of workers.)

In the same way, by stressing the historical process of the becoming of “real socialism” (the examples of which, after all, emerged under different historical conditions) rather than carefully examining its reproduction as a system, it is easy to engage in apologetics. In place of an understanding of the dynamics of the system, we are offered *excuses* --- e.g., “the system would have worked well were it not for capitalist hostility and encirclement” or “if only the productive forces had first developed more”.¹⁷ The other side of that same methodological coin, though, is that it permits one to focus upon “original sin” by stressing the battles of the 1920s and 1930s. In place of a careful analysis of the relations of production of the system which emerged, there is “devil theory”. Both rejections of Marx’s methodology are a dead end.

Anarchism or Marxism?

¹⁵ With no indication of its implications, Mel contrasts failure in the Soviet experience to “the successful development of China”, which has “prospered through the flow of capital and investment from the west, and the opening of the western markets.”

¹⁶ For Mel, though, the discussion must be historical: “Marx begins with the logic of commodity production and then analyzes the historical preconditions, in particular the industrial revolution, for the commodification of capital and labor power” (113-4). From this understanding of Marx’s methodology (which would change the logical ordering of Marx’s chapters), he presumably also would argue that we can only understand capitalism by beginning *Capital* with “original accumulation”.

¹⁷ And, what lessons do we learn from these?

Indeed, what I have called “one-sided Marxism” is a dead end (Lebowitz, 2003). While David and Mel specifically address different questions (and different works of mine), neither focuses upon the key link of human development and practice--- the way in which the development of human capacities is the product of what people do. Neither focuses upon “the worker’s own need for development” and how relations of production which do not unleash the creative energy of working people reproduce them as objects rather than subjects and hold back the development of human productive forces. As I argued in my book on “Real socialism”, “Vanguard Marxism” is one-sided: it “does not consider how workers are deformed by their lack of power to make decisions and to develop their capacities through their activity” and “does not explore the behaviour of workers subsumed under vanguard relations of production” (Lebowitz, 2012: 176).

One-sided Marxism leaves unanswered many questions. To what extent were problems in the development of socialism due to the failure to foster the development of human capacities? Did emphasis upon the “socialist principle” of distribution according to contribution hold back the development of socialist productive forces? To what extent was reversion to capitalism due to that emphasis? Why in every place where focus has been on that “socialist principle”--- rather than the introduction of new organs which allow for the development of human capacities through practice--- has capitalism been restored? Do we learn nothing from history?

Because I have argued for building new productive relations through workers councils and communal councils from the outset and have criticized “real socialism” for the failure to do this, I have been charged in *Science & Society* with anarchism, romantic idealism and utopianism. Mel has suggested that my lack of “scientifically grounded knowledge” leads to “utopian expectations and demands” while David in turn sees me (among other things) as engaging in “the posthumous anarchization of Marx”.¹⁸ If it is anarchy to stress the centrality of human development and to question top-down structures in which the division between thinking and doing is crystallized, then it is no wonder that so many young opponents of capitalism these days view themselves as anarchists.

But this is not anarchy--- it is Marx, the Marx whose critique of capitalism is from the perspective of that “inverse situation, in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development” (Marx, 1977: 772), the Marx who calls upon us to invert the capitalist inversion and to begin from the outset to build relations of production in which the producers are able to develop their capabilities and where the joint product of productive activity can be the “all-round development of the individual”, the rich human beings to whom Marx looked. This is not anarchy--- it is Marx, the Marx we need to recover after so much one-sided distortion.

¹⁸ As it happens, the official anarchist organizations are not likely to accept David’s nomination of me for membership--- given my continuing emphasis upon the need for a revolutionary party and a revolutionary state (including the use of the old state) and my criticism of John Holloway’s dream of changing the world without taking power. See, e.g., Lebowitz (2005, 2010 and 2013).

References

- Cohen, G.A. 1978. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Laibman, David. 2007. *Deep History: A Study in Social Evolution and Human Potential*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Laibman, David. 2011. Review of *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, *Science & Society*, Vol. 75, No. 23, July.
- Laibman, David. 2012. *Science & Society*, Vol. 76, No. 2, April.
- Laibman, David. 2014. "Quotology, Stages, and the Posthumous Anarchization of Marx", *Science & Society*, Vol. 78, No.3, July.
- Lange, Oskar. 1963. *Political Economy, Vol. I, General Problems*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2003. *Beyond CAPITAL: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2005. "Holloway's Scream: Full of Sound and Fury", *Historical Materialism* 13/4.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2006. *Build it Now: Socialism for the 21st Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2007. "Building on Defects: Theses on the Misinterpretation of Marx's Gotha Critique", *Science & Society*. October.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2010. *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2012. *Contradictions of 'Real Socialism': the Conductor and the Conducted*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2013a. "The State and the Future of Socialism" in the *Socialist Register 2013*. Pontypool, Wales: The Merlin Press.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2013b. "Understanding the Critique of the Gotha Programme," *Marksist Klasikleri Okuma Kılavuzu*. Istanbul: Yordam Kitap.
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 2014. "Proposing a Path to Socialism: Two Papers for Hugo Chavez". *Monthly Review*, Vol. 65, No.10. March.
- Lenin, V.I. 1965. *State and Revolution*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1962. *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in Marx and Engels, Selected Works, Vol. 2. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse*. New York: Vintage.
- Marx, Karl. 1977. *Capital*, Vol. I. New York: Vintage.
- Marx, Karl. 1981. *Capital*, Vol. III. New York: Vintage.
- Rothenberg, Mel. 2014. "Socialism: the Contradictions of Leftist Critique", *Science & Society*, Vol. 78, No.1, January.
- Soberon, Francisco. 2005. "Socialism is not a chance option for Cubans"
[\[http://www.jrebeldc.cu/2005/octubre-diciembre/dic-23/cuba_intervencion_index.html\]](http://www.jrebeldc.cu/2005/octubre-diciembre/dic-23/cuba_intervencion_index.html)
 CubaNews translation by Ana Portela, edited by Walter Lippmann. [then President of the Central Bank of Cuba] in December 2005,