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# *Change the System, Not Its Barriers*

*Michael A. Lebowitz*

“System-change, not climate-change!” More and more, this demand has emerged in response to the overwhelming signs of environmental destruction around us. It reflects a growing understanding of the incompatibility of capitalism and life. However, many do *not* understand this. Many people concerned about what is happening to the planet think that what is necessary are regulations which can check the destructiveness of current patterns. Measures which try to limit carbon emissions by offering big carrots and small sticks, which propose taxes to encourage rational economic actors to choose less harmful options, which offer subsidies for forms of power generation deemed less harmful to the environment – all these efforts to patch up the problems which have emerged remain the first choice of those who look upon themselves as realists in the real world.

That idea that we can regulate abuses within capitalism is not unique to environmental issues. We see the same pattern when it comes to the current financial crisis of capitalism. New regulations, new limits, new forms of oversight are seen as a solution to abuse and excess. They are proposed as ways to encourage good behaviour on the part of the actors who have created the situation. Bad capitalists rather than capitalism itself are identified as the evil. And the problem of the newly homeless, the unemployed? Everywhere the same approach: protect those who are being evicted, protect the victims of the system, repair the excesses and all will go (more or less) well.

The common element is the failure to understand the system, the failure to grasp the very nature of capital and capitalism. It is the failure to recognise that the logic of capital is the logic of cancer – the tendency to expand without limits.

## **Capital’s tendency to go beyond all barriers**

Like every other social process of production, capitalism is a system of reproduction (Marx 1977: 711). It develops as an organic

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system by taking the historic premises it inherits and by “subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality.” And, once capital stands upon its own foundations, “every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition; this is the case with every organic system” (Marx 1973: 278).

Thus, the result of capitalist production is the reproduction of its premises: capitalists, capitalist ownership of the means of production, and workers separated from the means of production and compelled to sell their labour-power in order to reproduce themselves. As long as that process is not interrupted, capital can replace the means of production consumed and can continue to exploit workers, thereby producing the surplus value which underlies the reproduction of the capitalist. However, capitalism is much more than a system of reproduction of its initial conditions. Rather than a steady-state system, capitalism by its nature requires *expanded* reproduction.

Inherent in the logic of capital, Marx argued, is its “ceaseless striving” to go beyond its quantitative barrier: “The goal-determining activity of capital can only be that of growing wealthier, i.e. of magnification, of increasing itself” (Marx 1973: 270). Accordingly, in its drive for profits, capital presses to increase the exploitation of producers – by increasing both the degree of exploitation and the numbers exploited. Capital constantly attempts to expand by extending the length and intensity of the workday, driving down the wages it pays, and increasing productivity relative to real wages. And, it can succeed in increasing the surplus value generated in production because it has the power to decide how and where to expand and is constantly engaged in finding ways to divide and separate workers in order to weaken them.

The surplus value generated through the exploitation of workers in production and latent in commodities, however, is only made real by the exchange of those impregnated commodities for money. Therefore, if capital is to grow, so also must the consumption capacity: “a precondition of production based on capital is therefore the production of a *constantly widening sphere of circulation*” (Marx 1973: 407). Accordingly, in its “ceaseless striving” to expand the “consuming circle within circulation,” capital turns to the “production of *new* needs and discovery and creation of new use values,” to the “discovery, creation and satisfaction of new needs arising from society itself” – that expansion of the needs of workers upon which “the contemporary power of capital rests” (Marx 1973: 408–9, 287; Lebowitz 2003: 32–39).

Further, capital confronts quantitative limits in the existing sphere of circulation by driving to widen that sphere. "The tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome" (Marx 1973: 408). And, as capital strives "to tear down every spatial barrier" to exchange, and to "conquer the whole earth for its market," it also strives "to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another" (Marx 1973: 539). In short, "capital," Marx accordingly declared, "is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a barrier for it" (Marx 1973: 334).

This language is not incidental to Marx's argument. In Hegelian terms, if capital has a Limit, this means that it is *finite*, that "its perishing is not merely contingent, so that it could be without perishing." In contrast, if a system has *no* limit, then it is infinite. The use of the concept of Barrier accordingly reveals that there *is* no limit: "by the very fact that something has been determined as barrier, it has already been surpassed" (Lebowitz 2009: Ch. 7). Thus, when Marx spoke of capital's drive to take all limits (or boundaries) and to transform them into mere barriers, he was describing its endless drive to expand, its ceaseless striving to be infinite.

So, is it possible, then, to *regulate* capital? Certainly on specific questions, it is possible to create barriers, regulations which target specific outcomes. Capital always comes up against barriers, and its history is one of driving beyond barriers and transforming and developing itself in the process. Indeed, Growth-Barrier-Growth is the law of motion of capital. But what *cannot* be regulated is capital's tendency to grow without limits. After all, it is the very essence of capitalism to expand. *So, does capital have no limit?* Will this system, which looks upon human beings and nature as mere means to its growth and tends to destroy both these "original sources of all wealth," continue infinitely until it has destroyed everything (Marx 1977: 638)? In short, is the only limit to capital the total destruction of human beings and nature?

Certainly, the classical political economists worried that there was a limit to the growth of capital – "a day of judgement" signalled by the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Ironically, this has become a matter of faith since for many opponents of capitalism. However, in "Marx's Falling Rate of Profit: A Dialectical View" (reprinted in Lebowitz 2009), I stressed that there was no built-in limit to capital in the mathematics of the so-called "falling rate of profit." In fact, as further developed in "The General and Specific in Marx's Theory of Crisis" (and

expanded in Lebowitz 2009), it is clear that Marx repeatedly stressed that the classic FROP argument presented in Volume III of *Capital* depends upon the assumption of lagging productivity growth in Department I – i.e., where “the productive power of labour does not rise *equally* and *simultaneously* in all the branches of production which contribute to produce the commodity” (Lebowitz 2009: 133–43; Marx 1994: 33–4). If the rate of profit falls, though, because of uneven productivity growth, it is merely a barrier that capital can drive beyond.

So, if FROP does not point to the finiteness of capital, does it mean that there is no limit this side of the mutual destruction of the contending parties? In “Marx’s Falling Rate of Profit,” I argued that for Marx it was “conscious human beings who recognize that capital is its own barrier, who are the Limit to capital.” The Limit that Marx identified was “the proletariat, created, united, and expanded by capital in the course of its development. What capital produces, “above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (quoted, Lebowitz 2009: 127–8).

### The products of capital

Yet, that assertion of inevitability seems a bit problematic. Who are those real subjects that will put an end to capital? After all, it is not the Abstract Proletariat who acts in the real world. Rather, it is always people who have produced themselves through their own activities – through that simultaneous “changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change” which is the essence of Marx’s view of “the self-creation of man as a process” (Lebowitz 2003: 178–81). Every act of production, every labour process, indeed every human activity has as its result a “joint product” – both the change in the object of labour and the change in the labourer herself.

So, what about human activity under capitalist relations of production? What is the joint product that develops alongside the commodities containing surplus value that emerge from this particular labour process? What is the nature of the people produced within capitalism?

In *Capital*, Marx described the mutilation, the impoverishment, the “crippling of body and mind” of the worker “bound hand and foot for life to a single specialized operation” that occurs in the division of labour characteristic of the capitalist process of manufacturing. Did the development of machinery rescue workers under capitalism? Certainly, the potential to permit workers to develop their capabilities

was there; however, you can detect the horror with which Marx explained how machinery provided a technical basis for the capitalist “inversion” – how it *completed* the “separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour” (Marx 1977: 482–4, 548, 607–8, 614).

In this situation, head and hand become separate and hostile, “every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity” is lost. “All means for the development of production undergo a dialectical inversion,” Marx indicated; “they distort the worker into a fragment of a man,” they degrade him and “alienate from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process” (Marx 1977: 548, 643, 799). In short, in addition to producing commodities and capital itself, capitalism produces a fragmented, crippled human being, whose enjoyment consists in possessing and consuming things.

Indeed, consumerism is another way that capitalism deforms people. Within capitalist relations of production, people are subjected to “the powerful will of a being outside them, who subjects their activity to his purpose.” The creative power of the worker’s labour here “establishes itself as the power of capital, as an *alien power* confronting him” (Marx 1977: 450; 1973: 453, 307). Thus, fixed capital, machinery, technology, all “the general productive forces of the social brain,” appear as attributes of capital and as independent of workers (Marx 1973: 694; 1977: 1053–4, 1058). Workers produce products which are the property of capital, which are turned against them and dominate them as capital. The world of wealth, Marx commented, faces the worker “as an alien world dominating him” (Marx 1977: 1062).

And, that alien world dominates the worker more and more *precisely* because (as noted above) capital constantly creates new needs to consume as the result of its requirement to realise the surplus value contained in commodities (Lebowitz 2003: 37–9). For workers, producing within this relationship is a process of a “complete emptying-out,” “total alienation,” the “sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end” (Marx 1973: 488). How else but with money, the true need that capitalism creates, can we fill the vacuum? We fill the vacuum of our lives with *things* – we are driven to consume.

What we observe here is *the vicious circle of capitalism*. Beginning with (a) people who are separated from the means of production and with needs that they must fulfill, we see that these people (b) must go into the labour market to sell their labour power – competing with other people in the same situation. They (c) enter into capitalist production, that process which yields as its result impoverished

workers with both the need and the means to consume. Having (d) consumed the products they are able to purchase, however, those workers are once again without the means to maintain themselves and must present themselves again to capital; they must once again produce for capital's goals. Within the wage-labour relation, workers remain dependent upon capital.

But there is another reason for the reproduction of capitalism. Precisely because the nature of capital as the product of exploitation is hidden, there is the tendency not to recognise that the productive power of capital is in essence the productive power of combined past and present social labour (Lebowitz 2010b: 35–40). As a result, we attribute all progress to capital. And, the more the system develops, the more that production relies upon fixed capital, the “organs of the human brain, created by the human hand,” that social heritage that takes the form of instruments of labour – the more that capital (and the capitalist) appear to be necessary to workers. Capital continues to rule over production and society because workers think capital is *necessary*. Indeed, capital tends to produce the working class it *needs*, workers who treat capitalism as common sense:

The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition and habit looks upon the requirement of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws. The organization of the capitalist process of production, once it is fully developed, breaks down all resistance (Marx 1977: 899).

Thus, “in the completed bourgeois system, every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form” (Marx 1973: 278).

Of course, workers *do* struggle against capital for specific goals – they struggle for better wages, workdays of lower length and intensity, and benefits that will allow them to satisfy more of their needs within this wage-labour relation. However, as long as workers do not understand that capital is the result of exploitation, they will always be dependent upon it – no matter how much they may struggle on particular questions, such as questions of “fairness” (e.g., “fair” wages, “fair” day’s work). And, that is why Marx wrote *Capital*. Precisely because of capital’s inherent tendency to develop a working class that looks upon capital’s requirements as “self-evident natural laws,” Marx’s purpose was to explain the nature of capital to workers and to help them to understand the necessity to go beyond capitalism (Lebowitz 2003: 177).

Understanding that capitalism is a perverse society that deforms people, and that capital itself is the result of exploitation, however, is

not enough. If people think that there is no alternative, then they will struggle to do their best within capitalism but will not waste their time and energy trying to achieve the impossible. If workers accept the logic of capital as essential, then even a working class in motion will not be the Limit to capital. Rather, the successes of their struggles will be mere barriers that workers have erected, because capital will find ways to get around them.

Ideas become a material force when they grip the minds of masses. And the idea that capitalism may be unjust but that there is no alternative – an idea that was strengthened by the experience of attempts to build socialism in the last century – supports the reproduction of capital; it ensures that when capitalism is in crisis, the dominant tendency among workers will be to *give in* rather than to *move in* (Lebowitz 2006: 39; Lebowitz 2010b: 136). For this very reason, to change the system requires the development of a new common sense – a vision of an alternative.

### **A vision of socialism for the 21st century**

Marx had such a vision – the society of associated producers, “a society of free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth” (Marx 1973: 158). Socialism for him was a society which removes all obstacles to the full development of human beings; it was one in which “the worker’s own need for development” guides society (Marx 1977: 772). The possibility of that alternative society, indeed, was the perspective from which he criticized capitalism; it is the *premise* of his book, *Capital* (Lebowitz 2003: 203, 209).

Rather than this focus upon the full development of human potential, however, the dominant conception of 20th-century socialism stressed the development of productive forces, a development that someday (and somehow) would produce a society which negated the unsatisfied needs characteristic of capitalism – a society characterized by the abundance that would allow everyone to consume and consume in accordance with their needs. An important part of the socialist vision was lost – human beings at the centre.

Unfortunately, too, a significant part of the image conveyed by “socialism” and “communism” was that of a state standing over and above society, one that directs and oppresses working people – a bitter irony, given Marx’s contempt for the “all-directing bureaucracy” and the “state parasites, richly paid sycophants and sinecurists” of the



state of mid-19th-century France, a state that squeezed “the living civil society like a boa constrictor” (quoted, Lebowitz 2003: 193–5).

That is why Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s very public distinction between the experience of the 20th century and what we must build now was so important. “We have to re-invent socialism,” Chávez announced to assembled activists at the January 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. “It can’t be the kind of socialism that we saw in the Soviet Union,” he stressed, “but it will emerge as we develop new systems that are built on cooperation, not competition.” If we are ever going to end the poverty of the majority of the world, capitalism must be transcended, Chávez argued. “But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion as the Soviet Union. We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything” (Lebowitz 2006: 109; Sojo 2005).

The spectre of socialism for the 21st century thus made its public debut, and characteristic of the vision that it embodied was that neither expansion of the means of production nor direction by the state should define the new socialist society; rather, human beings must be at its centre. It is a conception of socialism that returns to Marx and to his focus upon the development of “rich human beings,” the development of “the rich individuality,” that real wealth which is the development of human capacity (Lebowitz 2003: 131–3; Lebowitz 2010b: 42–4).

But Venezuela? As I indicated in *Build It Now*, this “most unpredictable site” for “reinventing socialism” was an example of the surprises that history offers. Here, after all, was a country with a very small organised working class (especially in the private sector), a minuscule peasantry, a substantial informal sector, massive poverty, and a warped oil economy characterised by a parasitic capitalist class and a rentist culture of clientelism and corruption (Lebowitz 2006: 86–8). Definitely not the textbook case memorised by metropolitan radicals. True, there were rebellions against the ravages of neoliberal policy measures which created the environment leading to the election of Chávez in 1998. But, it took the coup and the bosses’ lockout in 1992–3 (both sponsored by US imperialism and both defeated by mobilisation from below) to turn Chávez away from his earlier belief in the possibility of a “Third Way.”

2003 was the year in which the Bolivarian Revolution really started – when the new social missions which bypassed the inefficient and sabotaged state began and when Chávez denounced capitalism (“the

logic of capital is a perverse logic”) and contrasted it to the “social economy,” which “bases its logic on the human being” and “generates mainly use-value” (Lebowitz 2006: 95–101). And, as this process advanced, so also did Chávez’s reading about socialism.

Particularly influential now was the work of István Mészáros – especially his *Beyond Capital* (1994). From Mészáros’s reading of the *Grundrisse*, Chávez in 2005 drew a critique of exchange relations and commodity exchange in contrast to a society oriented toward communal needs and communal purposes (Lebowitz 2006: 106–9). While this focus upon community vs. self-interest reinforced the influence of liberation theology upon Chávez, the part played by Mészáros was entirely contingent.<sup>1</sup>

From Mészáros, Chávez also subsequently drew the concept of socialism as an organic system – a specific combination in which all the elements coexist simultaneously and support one another. Considering the failure of “real socialism,” Mészáros had stressed the need for “the radical reconstitution of the dialectic of production-distribution-consumption, setting out from the genuine social control of the means of production.” Here, then, was the starting point for what in January 2007 Chávez called “the elementary triangle of socialism” – the combination of social property, social production and satisfaction of social needs (Lebowitz 2010b: 24–5).<sup>2</sup>

Consider the logic of this socialist combination, this developed conception of socialism for the 21st century that has surfaced in Venezuela. Unifying those three sides of the socialist triangle is the theme of human development:

**A. Social ownership of the means of production** is critical within this structure because it is the only way to ensure that our communal, social productivity is directed to the free development of all rather than used to satisfy the private goals of capitalists, groups of producers, or state bureaucrats. But, this concerns more than our current activity. Social ownership of our social heritage, the results of past social labour, is an assertion that all living human beings have the right to the full development of their potential – to real wealth, the

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1. Chávez had been introduced to Mészáros and his work by Jorge Giordani (his thesis advisor when in prison and subsequently the long-standing economics minister). Giordani, who promoted the translation of *Beyond Capital* into Spanish, had been a student at Sussex where he had developed a close friendship with Mészáros. Through this unlikely set of coincidences, *Beyond Capital* became the bible which Chávez studied and regularly exhorted all to read.

2. See the discussion of these elements in Lebowitz (2007a).

development of human capacity. It is the recognition that “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

**B. Social production organized by workers** builds new relations among producers – relations of cooperation and solidarity. It allows workers to end “the crippling of body and mind” and the loss of “every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity” that comes from the separation of head and hand. As long as workers are prevented from developing their capacities by combining thinking and doing in the workplace, they remain alienated and fragmented human beings whose enjoyment consists in possessing and consuming things. Organization of production in all spheres by workers, thus, is a condition for the full development of the producers, for the development of their capabilities – a condition for the production of rich human beings.

**C. Satisfaction of communal needs and purposes** as the goal of productive activity means that, instead of interacting as separate and indifferent individuals, we function as members of a community. Rather than looking upon our own capacity as our property and as a means of securing as much as possible in an exchange, we start from the recognition of our common humanity and, thus, of the importance of conditions in which everyone is able to develop his/her full potential. When our productive activity is oriented to the needs of others, it both builds solidarity among people and produces socialist human beings.

These three sides of the “socialist triangle” form members of a whole. Parts of a structure in which “all the elements coexist simultaneously and support one another,” they mutually interact. “This is the case with every organic whole.” There is here the “universal, all-sided, *vital*, connection of everything with everything” that Lenin found in Hegel, that whole composed of various elements which “stand to one another in a necessary connection arising out of the nature of the organism” (Lebowitz 2003: 52–4; Lebowitz 2010b: 85–6).

Consider that mutual dependence. Social ownership of the means of production is a necessary condition for worker management and production for the needs of the community. In the absence of social ownership, the character of production and production decisions will not stress the joint product of socialist production – the development of rich human beings. Further, in its focus upon the entitlement to the fruits of our social heritage, social ownership supports the development of solidarity based upon recognition of our common humanity and, thus, the development of communal institutions (such as communal councils and worker councils) in order to make communality real.

In its turn, worker and community management ensures that decisions are not conceived and executed through a “systematic and hierarchic division of labour” but, rather, are democratic, participatory, and protagonistic. For the means of production to remain social property, it is essential to prevent the emergence of a “trained caste” above workers, “absorbing the intelligence of the masses” and developing the capacity to rule production in place of workers. Through worker management, the producers transform themselves and develop qualitatively different needs; they express themselves through their collective productive activity rather than by possessing things and thus create the conditions for development of a solidarist society.

Finally, productive activity oriented toward communal needs and purposes has as its condition the development of communality. Without this focus upon the community, production tends to be self-oriented in its character and exists as a *means* rather than as an expression of one’s capabilities and self. Communality guards against worker-managers viewing their labour-power as property and as the basis of an *exchange* with society as well as against a tendency to treat social property as belonging to a particular group. By stressing the principle that the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all, the solidarist society insists upon the existence of democratic, participatory and protagonistic institutions which ensure for all members of society “their complete development, both individual and collective” (Lebowitz 2006: 89).

The socialist triangle is a system of reproduction. Its premises are results of the system; and its products are social ownership of the means of production, social production organized by workers, and a solidarist orientation to communal needs and purposes. “Every economic relation presupposes every other in its [socialist] economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition; this is the case with every organic system” (Marx 1973: 278).

### **Struggling to make the vision real**

The conception of such an alternative is essential if we are ever to offer more than mere barriers to the logic of capital. To end capitalism – i.e., to make capital finite – we must (like even the worst architect) build the goal in our minds before we can construct it in reality. “At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally” (Marx 1977: 284). To struggle against a situation in which workers “by education, tradition and habit” look upon capital’s

needs “as self-evident natural laws” (i.e., as common sense), we must struggle for an *alternative* common sense.

The Battle of Ideas, in short, is an essential part of the revolutionary labour process. In the ideological struggle against capital, we need to counterpose to capital’s “ought,” that drive of capital for self-expansion, the *workers’ “ought”* – “the inverse situation in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development” (Marx 1977: 772). In *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, starting from the concept of the socialist triangle, I have tried to sketch out some dimensions for such an ideological struggle by introducing the concept of a Charter for Human Development:

- A. Everyone has the right to share in the social heritage of human beings, has an equal right to the use and benefits of the products of the social brain and the social hand, in order to be able to develop her full potential.
- B. Everyone has the right to be able to develop her full potential and capacities through democracy, participation and protagonism in the workplace and society – a process in which these subjects of activity have the requisite health and education which permit them to make full use of this opportunity.
- C. Everyone has the right to live in a society in which human beings and nature can be nurtured – a society in which we can develop our full potential in communities based upon cooperation and solidarity. (Lebowitz 2010b: 131)

The vision of a new society oriented to human development, however, is only a vision. There are many obstacles to its realisation. Certainly, this is true in the case of Venezuela, where, despite its successes, building socialism still faces US imperialism and, among other things, pervasive clientelism, corruption and bureaucracy within the Bolivarian Revolution itself. Whether these prove to be barriers or limits will only be determined by struggle.<sup>3</sup>

How do we turn this preconceived goal into a real result? Success in the revolutionary labour process, as in every labour process, depends upon the determination to achieve that purpose consciously:

And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it. This subordination is no mere momentary act. Apart from the exertion of the working organs, a purposeful will is required for the entire duration of the work (Marx 1977: 284).

More, in short, than the Battle of Ideas is essential for this revolutionary process. Real struggles, based upon “the worker’s own need for

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3. See this repeated theme in (Lebowitz 2006: 112–6; Lebowitz 2007b; Lebowitz 2010a).

development,” are the way workers transform themselves – the way they rid themselves of “the muck of ages.” Through revolutionary practice, that simultaneous changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change, they produce themselves as other than the products of capital. By going beyond the barriers presented by capital, the “ought” of workers allows them to develop the capacities to “found society anew.” It is through that process of struggle that the conditions are created for going beyond capital: “the present “spontaneous action of the natural laws of capital and landed property” can only be superseded by “the spontaneous action of the laws of the social economy of free and associated labour” in a long process of development of new conditions” (Lebowitz 2003: 180–3 204–5).

As explored in *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, that struggle for human development goes far beyond a narrow focus upon struggles within the workplace. Rather, it involves a struggle against every barrier to the full development of human potential, to that free development of each which is the condition for the free development of all. Capital, we must understand, is the obstacle to human development. We can go beyond specific barriers it presents, but capital will always present new barriers, and only struggle itself will determine whether capital itself proves to be the Limit or only the Barrier. In place of that system which destroys the “original sources of all wealth,” we must build “the inverse situation, in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development.”

*Be realistic – change the system, not its barriers!*

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