Michael Lebowitz Tries to Tackle "Real Socialism"—And Misses

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Michael A. Lebowitz. *The Contradictions of "Real Socialism": The Conductor and the Conducted.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012. 222 pp., $15.95

Initially, I was very enthused at the chance to read and review Michael A. Lebowitz's *Contradictions of "Real Socialism,"* expecting to find an incisive analysis of how and why the countries of "real socialism"—those heir to the Bolshevik legacy, no matter how distorted, developed after the October Revolution of 1917—failed as they did, ending their reigns of "socialism" with either the restoration of capitalism itself, as in the former USSR and Eastern Europe; or the triumph of capitalist institutions and investments within the building of what survived as "socialism," as in China and Vietnam.[1] Unfortunately, I was to be disappointed: despite salient elements within Lebowitz's analysis, in which he tries to analyze this "real socialism" as a socio-economic system with fundamental characteristics and contradictions the way Marx had analyzed capitalism as a system in *Capital*, he's departed crucially from the historicity of Marx by creating an economic model of "real socialism" that is ahistorical and schematic. Thus, *Contradictions of "Real Socialism"* lacks the richness of both historical context and specific referents found not only in *Capital*, which can be seen as developing a general schematic of capitalism, but certainly in the historical writings of Marx, in which this schematic is provocatively enhanced, expounded and qualified through rich and detailed expositions of the actual working-out of events.

Lebowitz does too much and too little at the same time—as he himself explains in his "Preface," numerous elements and investigations he wished to include in this volume would have to wait for later books; so that, in *Contradictions,* he's left us instead an ahistorical bare-bones model of "real socialism" that confines itself only to relations between workers, managers and economic planners as they were within the aggregate factory workplaces—omitting the macroeconomics of this "real socialism" nationwide, and leaving out all consideration of the way political decisions made by the leaders of "vanguard Marxist," i.e., Marxist-Leninist, parties impacted the economic actors. He also confines his consideration to the palpable repression that existed in "real socialist" societies to the way workers' initiatives were frustrated on the factory floor, and how workers were channeled into specific modes of working—leaving out entirely the subjugation of the arts, culture and literature to Marxist-Leninist Party norms; all discussion of political repression; and the role of gender and nationality in framing economic and political decisions, decision-making, and access to political and economic power. He leaves us, then, with only a detailed economic model of one part of the system of "real socialism," the microeconomic workings of individual enterprises, and the social relationships between planners, managers and workers as they develop in the course of enterprise performance. All else has been abstracted out of consideration by this partial model which Lebowitz considers the essential, systemic whole.

Lebowitz justifies this ahistorical schematism on p. 10, where he writes:

> "To select and blame a *different* element from the combination that made up Real Socialism—for example, underdeveloped capitalism, the lack of world revolution, short men with moustaches? That can be an entertaining parlor game but in the absence of a careful consideration of precisely how various elements within Real Socialism were interconnected and interacted to make up that whole, can we really understand its fate?

> Which were inherent, indeed necessary, aspects and which were contingent, merely historical elements? [Emphasis in original.]"

While Lebowitz has a point here, he ignores the way in which these "contingent, merely historical elements" shaped and defined the "inherent, indeed necessary, aspects" that came to be "real socialism" as we understand it. Especially as, for the sake of his analysis developed in *Contradictions*, he takes as his referent for "real socialism" the system in existence in the USSR and Eastern Europe from 1950 through its collapse in 1989-1991, a system that by 1950 already had its "inherent, even necessary, aspects" firmly in place as they had been put there by a "short man with moustache" and, before that, by two men with goatees, whose "contingent, merely historical" political leadership of "real socialism" in the USSR established that system, dictated what it would be and would not, and proclaimed it as *the* model of socialism in practice to Marxists worldwide. Many of the "inherent" elements which Lebowitz scathingly criticizes—the inequality, the power of managers, the tussles between managers and planners, the bonuses for achieving or exceeding production goals—were those that had won out after "contingent" battles over policy in the top echelons of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. While Lebowitz has a point when, in his model, he notes, emphasizes and develops the similarities, the parallels, between the "real socialism" of the USSR and the "real socialism" of the various countries of Eastern Europe (without specifically referencing them by name), he fails to note that there were also differences and departures; jus as, historically, there were similarities and parallels in the capitalism of England, France and Germany, there were differences and departures as well—not insignificant in how different social systems both within "real socialism" and capitalism specifically developed.

Yet Lebowitz's model is definitely not without merit. His model clearly defines and delineates the social roles played by three distinct strata within the economic system of "real socialism" whose interests were often antagonistic, but which the system required be brought into equilibrium: the planners, who set production goals with the aim of increasing quantity of output, and often arbitrarily; the plant managers, who had the most to gain materially through lowered goals, which could be met more easily and thus the managers rewarded with bonuses for meeting or exceeding production; and the workers themselves, the most powerless of the three strata, who, despite their formal "ownership" of the means of production, were the least able to change the production goals and the conditions of the workplace. Thus did the system resemble a Hobbesian "war of all against all," pitting planners against managers, and both against workers, who embodied under this system of "real socialism" a concrete manifestation of alienated labor that could only resist the ukases of planners and managers indirectly. For developing the details of the workings of his model, Lebowitz relies heavily on the works of Janos Kornai, a Hungarian economist under "real socialism" who first wanted to reform the system in place, but later emigrated to the United States and became a neoliberal. With extensive help from Kornai's writings, Lebowitz develops this truncated system in detail, and shows the various interactions and direct thwarting of other actors' efforts when they crossed the narrow material interests of one of the actors, but confines all this to only looking very deeply at one aspect, as noted above—the economic battle as played out on the factory floor.

While pointedly noting that all three of these strata were supposed to be in "harmony" by the mythology of official Marxism-Leninism, and thus appropriately all members of the same Marxist-Leninist party, this membership subsumed and hid not only the antagonisms within these three strata, but also obscured and hid the real loci of power, which essentially lay with the managers against both the planners (who were often only able to plan in a formalistic sense) and the workers themselves. But the weakness of this model, as noted above also, is its ignoring the role of the political leaders of the party, who more often than not decided the economic goals to be achieved, whether economically feasible or not, and told the economic specialists what they were to do and not to do. As Lebowitz notes acidly from the beginning, indeed makes the centerpiece of his analysis of

"real socialism" as a system, the result was a system plagued with chronic shortages and hoarding at all levels, for "real socialism" was, at bottom, economically very inefficient. Yet Lebowitz, a retired professor of economics, limits himself to a sociological analysis and never discusses the *economic* problems of inefficiency—of misallocation of resources, of periods of stagnation in the production of goods followed by frenzied speedup and overtime as the deadline for meeting production goals approached, the bureaucratic nature of the planning mechanism itself, and the sacrifice of quality in order to achieve quantity. Lebowitz's analysis could've definitely benefitted here from the study of two basic works on what went wrong with the "real socialist" system, Irwin Silber's *Socialism: What Went Wrong?* (Pluto Press, 1994) and David Schweickart's analysis of the Soviet planning system in *Against Capitalism* (Cambridge University press, 1993), where he pointedly notes (p. 87), following Alec Nove, that some 50,000 industrial enterprises produced 12 million identifiably different products, where the information required for planning such production would tax even an optimally efficient planning mechanism.

At fault in all this, Lebowitz argues, is the notion of "vanguard Marxism," which is, of course, classical Bolshevik-legacy Marxism-Leninism, although he doesn't say so; and the solution, for Lebowitz, is a socialism that embodies genuine workers' democracy and the participation in the decision-making process. Here he follows many an argument presented by the workers' councilist and anarchist critics of Bolshevism. Certainly this is to be preferred to the authoritarian, hierarchical brand of socialism that came to be called "real socialism" or "already-existing socialism." Yet, in his paean to workers' democracy one can't help but wonder if Lebowitz isn't romanticizing workers, and that somehow collective ownership of the means of production coupled with workers' participatory democracy isn't the automatic panacea Lebowitz assumes it to be. For him, in the last part of the book, where he discusses the virtues shown by workers both under capitalism and "real socialism," Lebowitz seems ready to see workers *qua* workers as embodiments of St. Francis of Assisi; yet even the best of human beings can be very flawed at times, can let down and be let down by the ordinary vicissitudes of life.

Isn't it better to follow Eugene Debs on this when he states, "Socialism will not make men good, but it will make them better"? While we can certainly applaud Lebowitz's conception of socialism as an efficacious means to make ordinary workers (which actually embodies far more than just factory hands) "rich human beings," as Lebowitz puts it several places, wouldn't it be far better for the cause of socialism not to aim for such empyrean goals, but settle for a slower pace embodied in settling for less than maximal social transformation, but achieving concrete, but more limited, results that make people's lives demonstrably, measurably better? Haven't we socialists done a disservice to socialism itself by expecting too much of it? With the result that "real socialism" is what came to be, what got accepted and rationalized as socialism; and we socialists are stuck with its unfortunate, too often unpalatable, legacy—which itself becomes an obstacle, for achieving a humane 21st Century socialism.

Note

1. In referencing certain counties as (or having been) "socialist," as well as in using the terms "Marxist-Leninist" and "Bolshevik legacy," I am using them in their colloquial senses, and not distinguishing between Stalinist and non-Stalinist conceptions of the terms.

*This review is dedicated to my academic advisor in economics at Indiana University-Bloomington, Scott Gordon, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Economics **and** History and Philosophy of*

Science, now 88: excellent and accomplished scholar, encouraging friend and supporter who pushes me to do my best consistently, and self-professed "man of the left."

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