

## "Build it Now": An Interview with Michael A. Lebowitz

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### Radical Notes

Michael Lebowitz's *Build it Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century* is not just another book about the specificities of the Bolivarian Revolution. Like the Communist Manifesto, its purpose is to identify the participants in the ongoing class struggle - the fundamental struggle between the needs of capital and the needs of human beings - underlying contemporary capitalism and its crisis, exposing the contours of their practices. It refreshes the classical Marxist notion of a continuous and uninterrupted revolution of radical needs as practice of the working class, as its struggle for self-emancipation.

We all know that the mechanical dualisation of "objective conditions" and "subjective intervention" (taken as reactive and external) has always come handy in justifying the social democratic deferral of revolutionary tasks. *Build it Now* disarms the ideology of such deferral, by stressing "the need for activity, the need to struggle for [socialism] now". But, then it also attacks the voluntarist tendencies of speculating recipes for the society of the future, as "socialism doesn't drop from the sky". Lebowitz finds both these ideological tendencies as reflections of a period of disappointment and defeat.

The beauty of *Build it Now* lies in presenting this dialectical critique as articulated within the contemporary practice of the working class - in the demolition and building of institutions and their discourses that impede and facilitate this practice. Definitely, Latin America, especially Venezuela, is the centre where this revolutionary class practice is present in its clearest form. However, the Venezuelan context simply shows, There is an alternative. And it can be struggled for in every country. We can try to build that socialism now... So, today, let us say, "Two, Three, Many Bolivarian Revolutions!"

*Build it Now* has several implications for left practice throughout the globe, and the following discussion with Prof Lebowitz is an attempt to bring out a few such lessons relevant for our struggle.

Radical Notes (RN): You have been writing lately about the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. Are there essential aspects of the Bolivarian model of a "democratic, participatory and protagonistic" society that would ensure a progress towards socialism for the 21st Century? Further, there are left intellectuals and leaders who assert that the Bolivarian revolution has been successful mainly due to the Venezuelan oil revenue, and since others do not have that advantage, its experiences cannot be emulated elsewhere. How far do you think this allegation/explanation is valid?

Lebowitz: At the core of the process that we can see in Venezuela are two essential elements: (a) the focus upon the full development of human potential as the goal and (b) the explicit recognition that the necessary condition for this human development is participation as subjects - i.e., revolutionary practice, the simultaneous changing of circumstances and human activity and self-change. This combination of vision and necessary practice is present in the Bolivarian Constitution with its emphasis upon overall human development and upon local planning and self-management and other forms of economic activity 'guided by the values of mutual cooperation and solidarity.' That combination is being realized at this very point, too - the creation of the new communal councils, where people in their neighbourhoods are beginning to direct activity toward the satisfaction of communal needs, and the new emphasis upon the development of workers councils demonstrate the definite deepening of this process.

However, nothing ensures progress towards socialism but struggle. Insofar, then that the path the Bolivarian Revolution is taking is one of mobilising and developing the capacities of masses, the potential to win that battle is increased. Certainly, having oil revenue makes it possible to attempt to deal with Venezuela's enormous social debt quickly. But, I suggest that intellectuals and leaders who focus upon this unique characteristic are just looking for excuses to do nothing (or, more accurately, to follow the capitalist path). As I argued in *Build it Now*, 'most of what stands out about the Bolivarian Revolution has little specifically to do with Venezuela. The struggle for human development, radical needs, the centrality of protagonistic democracy (within the workplace and the community), the understanding that people are transformed as they struggle for justice and dignity, that democracy is practice, that socialism and protagonistic democracy are one - these are the characteristics of a new humanist socialism, a socialism for the twenty-first century everywhere' (118).

RN: A central theme in *Build it Now* is to reclaim a socialist vision based on human needs, or as Marx would say, "the worker's own need for development". In your work, we find this conception to be based on a critique of socialist practice that prioritised the task of removing the fetters in the development of means of production or technology. Thus, perhaps, it rejects the whole logic of "catching up" with capitalism that dominated the developmental discourse in the erstwhile 'socialist' countries. In your socialist vision the notion of development loses its neutrality and is redefined in terms of class struggle - as a struggle between the needs of capital vs. the needs of human beings (or collective worker!).

Lebowitz: For me, everything loses its neutrality. In my book, *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*, I argued that because Marx did not proceed to write the volume on Wage-Labour, Marxists have tended to forget about the side of workers, about workers as subjects struggling for their needs. They have mistaken Marx's look at the side of capital for a study of capitalism as a whole. Once you focus upon this second side, the side in opposition to

capital, it becomes clear that in order for capital to succeed in achieving its goals, it must defeat workers. Capital must divide and separate workers in order to defeat them. Everything capital does, in fact, is permeated by its need to divide and separate workers. (I develop this point further in the Deutscher Prize Lecture, 'The Politics of Assumption, the Assumption of Politics', later published in *Historical Materialism*, 14(2):29-47, 2006) How then could we ever think of technology or the means of production - and, indeed, any investment decision by capital - as neutral? The means of production and technology that capital introduces in the context of class struggle necessarily embody capital's needs. So yes, in this respect, the notion of development loses its neutrality.

In contrast to the productive forces introduced by capital, the productive forces introduced by a society oriented toward satisfying the needs of workers, satisfying in particular 'the worker's own need for development,' are those which permit the full development of all the capacities and potential of human beings. No one could say that the kind of technology that capital introduces permits this. So in this respect, my emphasis definitely is upon the character of productive relations and how particular productive relations shape the nature of productive forces. The issue, then, is not one of catching up with capitalism. Rather, it is one of creating a new path.

RN: In your work, you have also redefined the concept of endogenous development, where you seem to move away from its general conceptualisation as import-substitution efforts, welfarism and investment in "human capital"; you seem to stress more on whether or not the exploited and oppressed classes are subjects or protagonists of such development. You define endogenous development as "the real development of human potential which occurs as the result of human activity", as "the transformation of people through their own activity, the building of human capacities". Can you elaborate on this theme?

Lebowitz: When you start from the idea that our real goal is the development of all human potential, the development of rich human beings (the spectre that haunts Marx's *Capital* and indeed is the premise for that work), you recognize the inadequacy of a definition of development which focuses upon specific sectors of the economy or, even upon investments by a state in inputs for what some people call human capital. Rather, when you start from the focus upon human development and you understand (as Marx did) that real human development is the product of human activity, then you recognize that real endogenous development is the development of human productive forces.

Of course, characteristic of the Venezuelan focus upon endogenous development is also the desire to produce things that have been imported previously. Both agriculture and domestic industry in Venezuela have been stunted by the ability to import these products cheaply because of oil revenues; the result has been a warped economy - one in which, despite having rich agricultural land, Venezuela imports 70% of its food. Now, some would say this is just a case of comparative advantage - that this specialization and exchange is economic efficiency. This is a prime example of the idiocy of neoclassical economics - a theory whose concept of efficiency does not take into account the effect upon human beings because it is an economics of capital and not of human beings. That masses of people are unemployed or in the reserve army that we politely call the informal sector, that they have little access to education or health facilities - these seem to be matters of minor concern; those who rationalize these effects of the market are simply the hired prize-fighters of neoliberalism. Venezuela's particular concept of endogenous development, then, is the attempt to do two things simultaneously - transform circumstances and transform the capacities of the human subjects. It is what I called 'radical endogenous development', radical because it goes to the root which is human beings.

Through the encouragement of cooperatives and new state sectors organized on the basis of worker protagonism, Venezuela is attempting to build not only material productive forces but new human productive forces; it is attempting to unleash the potential of the masses. But, let me stress that this is not my concept of endogenous development. It is the Bolivarian concept. I have learned from this. And, we all should.

RN: Do you think the three tenures of President Chavez can be divided into phases of socialist construction? If yes, what are they?

Lebowitz: There is definitely a revolutionary process occurring in Venezuela, a very uneven one which is propelled by struggle. It is a process of struggle in which every advance can be reversed. I think that is the most important thing to understand.

Even if specific, discrete phases of socialist construction in Venezuela could be identified, I'm not certain about the utility of doing so. I really think we need to break away from schematic, stagist thinking. I am constantly amazed by the extent to which people think they can judge the Venezuelan process with the help of schema based upon the singular experience of the Soviet Union. The last thing we need to do now is create a new schema based upon the Venezuelan process. As I argued in 'Socialism Doesn't Drop from the Sky' (published in *Build it Now*), we all start the process of socialist construction from different places and, given our own particular histories and circumstances, 'we would be pedantic fools if we insisted that there is only one way to start the social revolution.' I went on to say, though, that 'one step in every particular path is critical - control and transformation of the state.'

RN: John Holloway asserts that in the last century the revolutionaries' stress on state power was essentially based on a false understanding of state as a mere instrument rather than as embedded "in the web of capitalist social relations". In

your critique of Holloway's notion of "changing the world without taking power", you seem to reaffirm the "orthodox" Marxist stress on the role of state power in the revolutionary process. But you have ruthlessly criticized statism, populism and totalitarianism too. So can you tell us briefly about the role of state power in the process of socialist construction, which, as we understand, is essentially a process of humanity's "self-change"? How can "the sovereign people" transform themselves into "the object and the subject of power"? What can we learn from the Bolivarian experience in this regard?

Lebowitz: What Holloway had to say is not as interesting as the reception for a book which begins by saying we don't know how to change the world without taking power and, almost 200 pages later, ends by saying the same thing. In both an extended on-line exchange with Holloway and my article about his book ('Holloway's Scream: Full of Sound and Fury', *Historical Materialism*, 13(4):217-231, 2005) I argued that his position and the reception of his book reflect a period of defeat and demoralization. I see it as an example of the 'morbid symptoms' that appear when the new cannot yet be born.

In the exchange itself, I proposed that to be consistent he either had to repudiate his argument that the state is the 'assassin of hope' or attack the Bolivarian Revolution because it was spreading 'the notion that society can be changed through the winning of state power.' I find so much strange in the argument he presents in his book. How does Holloway deal with the power of the capitalist state (police, courts, armies)? As I demonstrate, he abandons Marxism for pure idealism by dissolving the power of the capitalist state through the power of logic. Of course, if you start from Holloway's premise that capitalism is fragile and that we can huff and puff and blow it down by shouting our 'No's', then I suppose it is consistent to say that you don't need organization and you don't need the power of the state.

So, it is definitely correct to describe my position on the role of the state in socialist transformation as traditional Marxism. I argue in both *Beyond Capital* and *Build it Now* that using political supremacy to wrest by degrees all capital from the bourgeoisie remains as critical now as when Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*. Where my position may be less familiar, though, is in my insistence that for working people to be the subjects of power who can transform society, you need a state which provides the space for revolutionary practice, the development of the capacities of people through their activity. However, this is simply a return to Marx from the crude historical materialism that Marx rejected: the focus upon transformative practice is precisely why Marx embraced the Paris Commune model as the political form 'at last discovered' under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.

Again, once you start from the emphasis upon human development and the recognition of the centrality of revolutionary practice, then it is self-evident that you must reject a hierarchical state, populism and totalitarianism. As I said in *Beyond Capital*, 'the form and the content of the workers' state are inseparable. Only insofar as the state is converted "from an organ standing above society into one completely subordinate to it" can the working class "succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew".'

How do you create such a state? I think there is no magic formula. The process will differ everywhere. In Venezuela, the impulse for the development of the communal councils as the basis for a new state has come largely from Chavez and, given the horror of the existing state, people have responded with enthusiasm. But, I'm sure there will be many paths to this point. What is important is knowing where you want (indeed, need) to go; the particular paths to that point will depend upon where you start in any particular society.

RN: In a situation of an unevenness of capitalist development throughout the globe, we find that for a large section of established "third world" left forces, the issue still remains that of greater industrialization and overcoming underdevelopment, which for them essentially signifies an insufficiency of national capitalist development. They also justify their reformist politics and compromises with neoliberal forces by invoking a kind of TINA rationale - the twin dangers of aggressive globalisation and the ever-looming possibility of capital strike. Do you think your critique of social democracy can also be directed against this tendency within the "third world" left?

Lebowitz: Within the Third World left, some groups which call themselves communist or Marxist (as in China these days) have reduced this only to a particular conception of the party - its internal practices and discipline and the view that the party is the instructor of masses and social movements. They continue to talk about socialism but in practice, as in the case of Social Democratic parties, they see no alternative to capital; that is, they accept the logic of capital. Thus, we see them evoking various forms of the discredited stagist theory that insists that now (as always) is the time for capital to develop the productive forces - thereby demonstrating once again that history repeats itself as tragedy.

As I noted in *Build it Now*, the failure of social democracy in developed capitalist countries to break ideologically and politically with capital has meant that, despite all the ideals it expressed historically about building a better world, social democracy has enforced the logic of capital. The same is true of those elements of the left in the South which are relying upon capital to develop productive forces.

What can be done about that? I think there are real limits to spending one's time attacking social democracy in all its forms theoretically and polemically. Many good working people are committed to these parties and tendencies because of their past struggles and achievements and, thus, are defensive in the face of such attacks. Rather, criticism in practice by the development of organization from below both develops the capacities of people as subjects and exposes the

limitations of those who refuse to break with the logic of capital. To paraphrase Fidel, we do not exclude these parties; they exclude themselves.

(Build it Now: Socialism in the Twenty-First Century - Monthly Review/Amazon. In South Asia, contact: Daanish Books, A-901, Taj Apartments, Gazipur, Delhi-110 096, Tel: 011-5578 5559, 2223 0812, Cell: +91-98685 43637, E-Mail: daanishbooks@gmail.com)