

"The profound understanding in this new book of why twentieth-century attempts at constructing socialism failed must be an essential element in the socialist renewal emerging amid the first great capitalist crisis of the twenty-first century."

—Leo Panitch, editor, *Socialist Register*

THE
CONTRADICTIONS
OF
"REAL SOCIALISM"

THE CONDUCTOR AND THE CONDUCTED

MICHAEL A. LEBOWITZ



Praise for *The Contradictions of 'Real Socialism'*

“The owl of Minerva only flies at dusk”—it was Hegel’s old maxim that seemed confirmed when in 1991 the *Socialist Register* published Michael Lebowitz’s article on the nature of “real socialism” amid its very demise. This new book takes off from there, but its wings are buoyed by Lebowitz’s work since then, from *Beyond Capital* to *The Socialist Alternative*. The profound understanding in this new book of why twentieth-century attempts at constructing socialism failed must be an essential element in the socialist renewal emerging amid the first great capitalist crisis of the twenty-first century. It thus appears that the old wise owl also flies at dawn.

—LEO PANITCH, editor, *Socialist Register*

If we want socialism for the twenty-first century, we need to understand why the “real” socialisms of the last century so often ended in capitalism. In this book, Lebowitz shows, theoretically and historically, that the socialism practiced in the Soviet Union and Central Europe was doomed because vanguard relations of production weakened the working class, ensuring that it would have no primary role in the battle ultimately won by the logic of capital (represented by managers) over the logic of the vanguard (represented by the party). We must, he concludes, reject vanguard Marxism and embrace a Marxist vision of socialism in which, from the beginning, the full development of human capacities is actively promoted. There is a lot to learn here.

—MARTIN HART-LANDSBERG, professor of economics,
Lewis and Clark College

One doesn’t have to agree with all the theses presented in Michael Lebowitz’s latest book in order to acknowledge that this is a major contribution to the international debate on socialism of the twenty-first century. Drawing lessons from the dramatic failure of so-called “real socialism,” he argues, with powerful and persuasive logic, that a new society, based on values of solidarity and community, cannot be created by a state standing over and above civil society: only through autonomous organizations—at the neighborhood, community, and national levels—can people transform both circumstances and themselves.

—MICHAEL LÖWY, co-author, *Che Guevara: His Revolutionary Legacy*
(with Olivier Besancenot)

What would Marx have thought had he lived to see the Soviet Union? Nobody has interpreted Marx to greater advantage to answer this question than renowned Marxist scholar Michael Lebowitz, who explains in *The Contradictions of 'Real Socialism'* why Marx would not have been pleased!

—ROBIN HAHNEL, professor of economics, Portland State University

We need this well-written book to understand that socialism did not die with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

—FRANÇOIS HOUTART, Executive Secretary of
the World Forum for Alternatives

Where fresh insights are rare, indeed, Michael Lebowitz provides a bundle of them. Although no one will (or perhaps should) agree with everything here, the book provides rich material for badly-needed discussion.

—PAUL BUHLE, author, *Marxism in the United States*

A riveting exploration of what can be learned from the first attempts to create socialist systems, specifically the period from 1950 through the 1980s. Lebowitz convincingly demonstrates that the distortions of the model developed in the Soviet Union and copied in eastern European countries (“real socialism”) were caused by setting in motion two contradictory forces—ending up with the worst aspects of both capital and leadership and control by a “vanguard.” He examines the development of “real socialism” as a complex system, with the various parts explained and scrutinized in their interactions and interrelations as part of the system. Required reading for those interested in avoiding diversions and pitfalls in a post capitalist alternative—on the path to creating a system under social, instead of private, control in which the goal is meeting everyone’s basic needs and encouraging and allowing the full human development of all.

—FRED MAGDOFF, professor emeritus of plant and soil science,
University of Vermont

The Contradictions *of* “Real Socialism”

The Conductor and the Conducted

by MICHAEL A. LEBOWITZ



MONTHLY REVIEW PRESS

New York

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lebowitz, Michael A.

The contradictions of real socialism : the conductor and the conducted /
by Michael A. Lebowitz.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58367-256-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58367-257-0

(cloth : alk. paper) 1. Communism. 2. Socialism. I. Title.

HX73.L4163 2012

335—dc23

2012019992

Monthly Review Press
146 West 29th Street, Suite 6W
New York, New York 10001

www.monthlyreview.org

5 4 3 2 1

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For friends in Cuba, Venezuela,
and everywhere people are struggling to build a new world.

Hasta la victoria siempre!

Preface

This is not a book for those who already know everything important there is to know about “Real Socialism.” For those fortunate souls who have inherited or adopted the eternal verities of particular political sects on the left, empirical footnotes that strengthen their claim to leadership are the principal tasks of scholarship. As a result, the central question about this book for them is likely to be, “Is he with us or against us?” In short, is this book good for the chosen?

I presume, however, readers who begin with questions rather than answers. What was this phenomenon known as “Real Socialism,” or “Actually Existing Socialism,” a concept created in the twentieth century by the leaders of countries in order to distinguish their real experience from merely theoretical socialist ideas? What were its characteristics? How was this system reproduced? And why did it ultimately yield to capitalism without resistance from the working classes who were presumably its beneficiaries?

I didn’t plan to write this book. My original idea was to include a few chapters on “Real Socialism” in my book *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, published by Monthly Review Press in 2010. The point I wanted to make is that the socialist alternative is an alternative not only to capitalism but also to “Real Socialism.” However, after drafting a few chapters based in particular on the experience of the Soviet Union

and Eastern Europe, I realized that this section of the book was "taking over" and demanded a book of its own. So, as I indicated in the Preface to *The Socialist Alternative*, I decided to shift this material plus a discussion of the Yugoslav experience with market self-management to a separate project, which I called "studies in the development of socialism."

In my attempt to apply Marx's methodology to the study of Real Socialism (hereafter noted without quotation marks), however, I found myself constantly surprised because the subject under investigation continually revealed new sides that had to be explored, sides that I hadn't considered in my years of teaching the subject. As a result, the book grew in size and took much longer to complete than anticipated. And, its scope was reduced. First to go was the discussion of the Yugoslav experience, now put off to a future project. But in addition, the discussion of Real Socialism as such was itself truncated.

Originally, my plan was to analyze Real Socialism as a system that consolidated in the period after 1950 and then to follow that with a section on its historical development. My model in this respect was Marx's treatment of capitalism in *Capital*, which revealed the nature of capitalism as a going system (its "being") and then used that analysis as a guideline for examining the original emergence of the system (its "becoming"). So, Part I would explore the nature of a system dominated by what I have called "vanguard relations of production," whereas Part II would consider the original emergence (or original accumulation) of those relations.

Accordingly, the chapters drafted for Part II took up topics like the emergence of the vanguard party in the USSR, NEP (the New Economic Policy), social relations within the countryside, and the theory of "primitive socialist accumulation." Only the discussion of the 1930s remained to be done. But these questions, too, have been set aside for another work, for now.

This is not at all a book without premises. As the Introduction reveals, I start from an understanding that at the core of socialism is a focus upon human development, upon, indeed, the development of human capacities, a process inseparable from human activity. But that specter is not the subject matter of this book. We understand Real Socialism best, I suggest, not by proceeding from theory and the simple application of

concepts from the study of capitalism but by beginning, as Marx did, from the real, concrete phenomena of these societies and by trying to grasp the underlying structure that generates them.

Our examination of Real Socialism begins by investigating an omnipresent characteristic in the system—shortages. To understand the factors underlying the “shortage economy,” we consider first the concept of a particular social contract that offered some definite benefits for the working class, and then we explore the character of vanguard relations of production. But there was more to Real Socialism than one set of relations. We see an inherent struggle between the logic of the vanguard and the logic of capital; in addition, we see a particular set of beliefs on the part of the working class (the moral economy of the working class in Real Socialism), which provides glimpses of an alternative logic, the logic of the working class. Can the latter be built upon in Real Socialism? That is the question for which we provide some suggestions but no definitive answer.

Although the focus is to move from concrete phenomena to an understanding of those phenomena, we begin the book with two abstract sections. Firstly, the Introduction presents my premises about capitalism and the concept of socialism for the twenty-first century. In this respect, it provides a bridge between the discussion in *The Socialist Alternative* and this book. Secondly, “The Overture” introduces the question of the conductor and the conducted (the subtitle of this book). It specifically poses a question about the need for a “directing authority” and the issue of power. Indeed, the Overture introduces the leitmotif of the book: the possibility of socialism in a society divided into conductor and conducted.

Once again, I need to point out that this book owes much to the encouragement, commitment, and comradeship of my partner Marta Harnecker (whose work ethic makes my reputed workaholism appear like the behavior of a sloth). I have benefited much, too, from David Mandel, who has read several parts of this book and has offered useful critical comments. Finally, especially encouraging (and daunting) have been messages from a number of people who have told me how much they are looking forward to this book. I hope that I have raised the right questions for them.

—MICHAEL A. LEBOWITZ, MARCH 25, 2012

Bishop, I can fly,
The tailor said to the Bishop.
Just watch how it works.
And he climbed with things
That looked like wings
To the broad, broad roof of the church.
The Bishop passed by.
It's all a lie,
Man is no bird,
No one will ever fly,
The Bishop said of the tailor.

The tailor is done for,
The people said to the Bishop.
It was the talk of the fair.
His wings were smashed
And he was dashed
On the hard, hard stones of the square.
Toll the bells in the steeple,
It was all a lie,
Man is no bird,
No one will ever fly,
The Bishop said to the people.

—BERTOLT BRECHT ¹

INTRODUCTION

New Wings for Socialism

In 1990, I began an essay (bearing the subtitle “A Cautionary Tale”) with Brecht’s poem about the tailor who put on “things that looked like wings,” climbed to the roof of a church, tried to fly, and crashed.² In 1990, what many called the socialist world crashed.³ And, everywhere there were experts who saw this as proof: socialism had failed. *No one will ever fly.*

What I attempted to do in that essay was to challenge the theoretical arguments against socialism, theoretical arguments in particular against the Marxist case for socialism. And I proposed that there had been a distortion of Marxism both in theory and in practice—a distortion that forgot about human beings, a determinist message focusing upon productive forces that was silent about “the nature of human beings produced within an economic system.” The determinist argument that stresses the primacy of productive forces, I argued, could never understand why Marx sacrificed his “health, happiness and family” to write *Capital*. Nor could it make sense of why Marx never stopped stressing that workers can make themselves fit to create a new society only through the process of struggle.

What was my essential point? It was to emphasize the importance of developing a new common sense—one that sees the logic of producing

together to satisfy human needs. The failure to do this and to stress instead the development of productive forces, I proposed, leads inevitably to a dead end—the dead end that we could see in front of us. The point was simple: as Che Guevara stressed, to build socialism it is essential, along with building new material foundations, to build new human beings.

But how? I focused upon a number of elements. Self-management in the process of production, I argued, was an essential element: "Insofar as people produce themselves in the course of all their activities, the very process of engaging in democratic forms of production is an essential part of producing people for whom the need for cooperation is second nature." But self-management in particular productive units is not sufficient. You need, I argued, to replace a focus on selfishness and self-orientation with a focus on community and solidarity, a conscious emphasis upon human needs; that is, the necessity to engage in collective solutions to satisfy human needs must be "recognised as a responsibility of all individuals." And, producing people with these characteristics could never be achieved by a state standing over and above civil society. "Rather, only through their own activities through autonomous organisations—at the neighbourhood, community and national levels—can people transform both circumstances and themselves." What, in short, was necessary was "the conscious development of a socialist civil society."

Thus I stressed the centrality of human beings and the development of the institutions that permit them to transform themselves. This had not occurred in the Soviet model. "With its lack of democratic and cooperative production, its absence of a socialist civil society and its actually existing bureaucratic rule," Real Socialism had not produced the new human beings who could build a better world. And that, I proposed, was the lesson we had to learn from this experience. Rather than concluding from the crash that socialism had failed and that no one would ever fly, the lesson for socialists was different. My concluding line was: "No one should ever again try to fly with those things that only *look* like wings."

IN THE ABSENCE OF AN ALTERNATIVE

A lot has occurred since 1990 when that essay was written. However, one thing that has not changed is that, now as then, the absence of a vision of a socialist alternative ensures that there is no alternative to capitalism. If you don't know where you want to go, no road will take you there. The result is that you end up going nowhere—or, more precisely, your struggles are either defeated or absorbed within capitalism.

For many critics of capitalism, though, the system is on the verge of collapse. It is fragile—requiring for some only a cacophony of loud “*No*’s or a resounding chorus of “silent farts” for it to crumble.⁴ For others, since capitalism is about to enter its final economic crisis (or, indeed, has been in it for decades), it is time to document the dying days of this doomed system.⁵ But for Marx, it was *not* so simple—capitalism was not fragile. Despite his hatred of a system that exploited and destroyed both human beings and nature, he understood that capitalism is strong and that it tends to create the conditions for its reproduction as a system.

Capitalism is a system centered upon a relationship between capitalists, owners of the means of production who are driven by the desire for profits (surplus value), and workers who are separated from means of production and who have no alternative to maintain themselves but to sell their capacity to perform labor (labor-power). But how, Marx asked, does such a system reproduce itself? How are its premises produced and reproduced?

From the side of capital, this is easy to understand. Through its purchase of labor-power, capital obtains both the right to direct workers in the labor process as well as property rights to what the worker produces. It uses these rights to exploit workers (that is, to compel the performance of surplus labor) and thus to produce commodities that contain surplus value. What capital wants, though, is not those impregnated commodities but to make real that surplus value in the form of money by selling those commodities.

With the successful sale of those commodities (and, thus, the realization of the surplus value), capital is able to renew the means of production consumed in the process of production, hire wage-laborers

again, maintain its own desired consumption and accumulate capital for the purpose of expansion. However, capital's ability to continue to operate as capital requires the reproduction of workers as wage-laborers (that is, as workers who reappear in the labor market to sell their labor-power in order to survive). But what ensures this? While capital constantly tries to drive wages down, workers push in the opposite direction. So what ensures that workers will not gain sufficient wages to extract themselves from the need to sell their ability to work in order to survive?⁶

One way capital keeps wages down is by dividing and separating workers so they compete against each other rather than combine against capital. Not only can capital do this by using workers against each other (as Marx described the way capital took advantage of the hostility between English and Irish workers) but also it constantly reproduces a reserve army of the unemployed by substituting machinery for workers. The competition among workers and the division into employed and unemployed both tend to keep wages down. "The great beauty of capitalist production," Marx commented, is that by producing "a relative surplus population of wage-labourers," wages are "confined within limits satisfactory to capitalist exploitation, and lastly, the social dependence of the worker on the capitalist, which is indispensable, is secured."⁷

Yet Marx offered an additional reason for the reproduction of wage-labor (and thus the reproduction of capitalist relations of production). Workers are not only exploited within capitalist relations—they are also *deformed*. If we forget this second side of capitalist oppression, we can never understand why workers fail to rise up when capital enters into one of its many crises. We need, in short, to understand the nature of the workers produced within capitalism.

While capital develops productive forces to achieve its preconceived goal (the growth of profits and capital), Marx pointed out that "all means for the development of production" under capitalism "distort the worker into a fragment of a man," degrade him and "alienate him from the intellectual potentialities of the labour process."⁸ *Capital* explains 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 labor characteristic of the capitalist

process of manufacturing. But did the development of machinery permit workers to develop their capabilities? The possibility was present but in capitalism this *completed* the “separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour.”⁹ In short, thinking and doing become separate and hostile, and “every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity” is lost.

A particular type of person is produced within capitalism. Producing within capitalist relations is a process of a “complete emptying-out,” “total alienation,” the “sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end.”¹⁰ 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. In addition to producing commodities and capital itself, capitalism produces a fragmented, crippled human being, whose enjoyment consists in possessing and consuming things. More and more things. Capital constantly generates new needs for workers and it is upon this that “the contemporary power of capital rests”; every new need for capitalist commodities is a new link in the golden chain that links workers to capital.¹¹

Is it likely, then, that people produced within capitalism can spontaneously grasp the nature of this destructive system? On the contrary, the inherent tendency of capital is to produce people who think that there is no alternative. Marx was clear that 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.¹²

Breaks down all resistance! And Marx proceeded to add that capital’s generation of a reserve army of the unemployed “puts the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker” and that the capitalist can rely upon the worker’s “dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by

them."¹³ Obviously, for Marx, capital's walls will never crumble with a loud scream.

Of course, workers *do* struggle against capital for specific goals—they struggle for better wages, workdays of lower length and intensity and for benefits that will allow them to satisfy more of their needs within this wage-labor relation. However, no matter how much they may struggle on particular questions such as questions of "fairness" (for example, "fair" wages, "fair" day's work), as long as workers look upon the requirements of capitalism "as self-evident natural laws," those struggles occur within the bounds of the capitalist relation. In the end, their subordination to the logic of capital means that faced with capitalism's crises, they sooner or later act to ensure the conditions for the reproduction of capital.

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 common sense, Marx's purpose was to explain the nature of capital to workers and to help them to understand the necessity to go beyond capitalism.¹⁴ 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 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.

Here is why the story of the fall of Real Socialism is so important. It serves as a "cautionary tale"—socialism, we are told, cannot succeed. It was all a lie. No one will ever fly. There is no alternative. For so many, the story of Real Socialism killed the idea of a socialist alternative.

As Marx understood, ideas become a material force when they grasp the minds of masses. For many years, as the result of characteristics of Real Socialism (as well as its ultimate fall), people unhappy with capitalism have been convinced there is no alternative, that the logic of capital is common sense and that, accordingly, the best hope is capitalism with a human face. The result has been to strengthen capitalism.

For this reason, to understand Real Socialism and why it crashed is not an exercise in the study of history (like the study of feudalism). Rather, we know now—more clearly than in 1990—that there *must* be an alternative. There must be an alternative to a system that by its very

nature involves a spiral of growing alienated production, growing needs and growing consumption—a pattern the earth cannot sustain. The specter we face is that of barbarism—not only because of the limits of the earth (reflected in the evidence of global warming and the growing shortages that reflect rising demands for the earth’s resources) but also because of the growing competition for those resources—a competition not likely to be left to the market.

A NEW VISION:
SOCIALISM FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

There is, though, a new vision of socialism that has emerged in the twenty-first century as an alternative to barbarism. At its core is the alternative that Marx evoked in *Capital*: in contrast to a society in which the worker exists to satisfy the need of capital for its growth, Marx pointed to “the inverse situation, in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development.” Human development, in short, is at the center of this vision of the alternative to capitalism.¹⁵

From his early discussion of a “rich human being” to his later comments about the “development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption,” the “development of all human powers as such the end in itself” and “the all-around development of the individual,” Marx focused upon our need for the full development of our capacities; this is the essence of his conception of socialism—a society that removes all obstacles to the full development of human beings.¹⁶

But Marx always understood that human development requires practice. It does not come as a gift from above. His concept of “revolutionary practice,” that concept of “the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change,” is the red thread that runs throughout his work.¹⁷ In every process of human activity, there is more than one product of labor. Starting from his articulation of the concept of “revolutionary practice,” Marx consistently stressed that, through their activity, people simultaneously change as they change circumstances.

We develop ourselves, in short, through our own practice and are the products of all our activities—the products of our struggles (or the lack of same), the products of all the relations in which we produce and interact. In every human activity, in short, there is a *joint product*—both the change in the object of labor and the change in the laborer herself.¹⁸

Marx's unity of human development and practice constitutes the *key link* we need to grasp if we are to talk about socialism. What kind of productive relations can provide the conditions for the full development of human capacities? Only those in which there is conscious cooperation among associated producers; only those in which the goal of production is that of the workers themselves. Worker management that ends the division between thinking and doing is essential—but clearly this requires more than worker management in individual workplaces. They must be the goals of workers in society, too—workers in their communities.

Implicit in the emphasis upon this key link of human development and practice, accordingly, is our need to be able to develop through democratic, participatory and protagonistic activity in every aspect of our lives. Through revolutionary practice in our communities, our workplaces, and in all our social institutions, we produce ourselves as "rich human beings"—rich in capacities and needs—in contrast to the impoverished and crippled human beings that capitalism produces. This concept is one of democracy *in practice*, democracy *as practice*, *democracy as protagonism*. Democracy in this sense—protagonistic democracy in the workplace, protagonistic democracy in neighborhoods, communities, communes—is the democracy of people who are transforming themselves into revolutionary subjects.

We are describing here one element in the concept of socialism for the twenty-first century—a concept of socialism as a particular organic system of production, distribution and consumption. *Social production organized by workers* is essential for developing the capacities of producers and building new relations—relations of cooperation and solidarity. And if workers do not make decisions in their workplaces and communities and develop their capacities, we can be certain that *someone else will*. In short, protagonistic democracy in all our workplaces is an essential condition for the full development of the producers.

But there are other elements in this socialist combination. The society we want to build is one that recognizes that “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” How can we ensure, though, 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 individuals, or state bureaucrats? A second side of what President Chavez of Venezuela called on his *Alo Presidente* program in January 2007 the “elementary triangle of socialism” concerns the distribution of the means of production.¹⁹ *Social ownership of the means of production* is that second side. Of course, it is essential to understand that social ownership is not the same as state ownership. Social ownership implies a profound democracy—one in which people function as subjects, both as producers and as members of society, in determining the use of the results of our social labor.

Are common ownership of the means of production and cooperation in the process of production, however, sufficient for “ensuring overall human development”? What kind of people are produced when we relate to others through an exchange relation and try to get the best deal possible for ourselves? This brings us to the third side of the triangle: *satisfaction of communal needs and communal purposes*. Here, the focus is upon the importance of basing our productive activity upon the recognition of our common humanity and our needs as members of the human family. In short, the premise is the development of a solidaristic society—one in which we go beyond self-interest and where, through our activity, we both build solidarity among people and at the same time produce ourselves differently.

These three sides of the “socialist triangle” form members of a whole. They are parts of a “structure in which all the elements coexist simultaneously and support one another”—an organic system of production, distribution, and consumption. Associated producers working with socially owned products of past labor to produce for social needs reproduce their conditions of existence through their activity.²⁰ “In the completed bourgeois system,” Marx commented about capitalism, “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."²¹ It is also true of socialism as an organic system: every economic relation presupposes every other in its socialist economic form in the completed socialist system.

THINGS THAT ONLY LOOK LIKE WINGS

This book, however, is not about the theory of socialism as an organic system. Rather, it is about that attempt in the twentieth century to build an alternative to capitalism, an alternative that relied upon things that looked like wings and which crashed.

But, what were those things that looked like wings? For some people, the cautionary tale is all about state ownership of means of production. Accordingly, to escape the fate of Real Socialism, they argue that we must accept that private ownership of means of production is essential. For others, the tale revolves around the reliance in Real Socialism upon central planning. So, their answer is that markets are not specific to capitalism and that a viable alternative to capitalism must embrace the market.

If we are skeptical about such conclusions, though, what is our alternative explanation for the fate of Real Socialism? 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?

To understand the significance of individual elements, we need to try to understand Real Socialism as a system. Even elements that correspond to what may be found in capitalism or to the concept of socialism for the twenty-first century by themselves are not sufficient to identify the nature of the system. Parts, after all, gain their significance from the particular combinations in which they exist—that is, the whole of which they are part. Even *real* wings are only parts.

OVERTURE

The Conductor and the Conducted

Do we need leaders? Certainly, when we work together on a common project, we are more productive than when we are separate and isolated. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts taken individually. But do we need a director in order to work together on a common project?

A DIRECTING AUTHORITY

Within capitalist relations of production, a capitalist hires “individual, isolated” owners of labor-power, directs their cooperation and owns the products of their collective labor. As the owner of the result of their activity, he is the beneficiary of “the social productive power which arises from cooperation”; it is “a *free gift*” to that capitalist.¹ According to Marx, though, direction in the process of cooperation is not unique to capitalism: “All directly social or communal labour on a large-scale requires, to a greater or lesser degree, a directing authority.” He offered two reasons: (a) “in order to secure a harmonious cooperation of the activities of individuals” and (b) “to perform the general functions that have their origin in the motion of the total productive organism, as distinguished from the motion of its separate organs.”²

According to Marx, in short, there is a *general* necessity for the "function of direction which arises out of the nature of the communal labour process." That general requirement, though, must not be confused with the particular content and form that it takes on within capitalism. After all, the essence of capitalist direction embodies capital's drive to expand surplus value (thus the greatest possible exploitation of workers), the need to overcome the resistance of workers and the need to protect investments in the means of production. Accordingly, capitalist direction is inherently an *antagonistic* process, and it takes on "despotic" forms—a hierarchy of supervisors whose function is to police workers and command in the name of capital.³

But a despotic character of direction is not unique to capitalism. "In all modes of production that are based on opposition of the worker as direct producer and the proprietor of the means of production," supervision and control of the producers is essential. Marx pointed to, for example, the supervision of slaves in the Roman Empire and also to "despotic states," where "supervision and all-round intervention of the government" involves "the specific functions that arise from the opposition between the government and the mass of the people."⁴ In all such cases, direction is "twofold in content"—it is general and specific, both that aspect related to every socially combined labor process and also that specific aspect related to maintenance of the particular character of exploitation.⁵

Let us try, though, to separate these two aspects logically and to consider in itself the *general* side—that "work of supervision and management [that] necessarily arises where the direct production process takes the form of a socially combined process, and does not appear simply as the isolated labour of separate producers." According to Marx, this combined labor in itself is enough to require a "directing authority": "where many individuals cooperate," he noted, "the interconnection and unity of the process is necessarily represented in a governing will, and in functions that concern not the detailed work but rather the workplace and its activity as the whole, as with the conductor of an orchestra."⁶ In a process of cooperation, someone must have responsibility for the whole, for "the total productive organism."

For Marx, the orchestra conductor was a symbol of directing authority that is not based upon the division between producers and the owners of the means of production. The conductor does not lead the orchestra because he owns the means of production: “A musical conductor,” Marx writes, “need in no way be the owner of the instruments in his orchestra”; rather, his role as leader is the result of “the productive functions that all combined social labour assigns to particular individuals as their special work.”⁷ In short, the orchestra conductor is *necessary*. “A single violin player is his own conductor; an orchestra requires a separate one.”⁸

The “special work” assigned to the orchestra conductor is to see the members of this orchestra as a whole rather than as a collection of separate players and to ensure that they function harmoniously and successfully as a unit in performing the predetermined score. Thus the conductor articulates the separate powers of the individual musicians into a collective power, where the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. But to secure that “harmonious cooperation” and to function as the agent of the whole, the conductor must be able to exercise authority over the individual members.

Does the conductor, then, have power over the members of the orchestra? For Elias Canetti, the conductor is the *embodiment* of power:

His eyes hold the whole orchestra. Every player feels that the conductor sees him personally, and still more, hears him. The voices of the instruments are opinions and convictions on which he keeps a close watch. He is omniscient, for, while the players have only their own parts in front of them, he has the whole score in his head, or on his desk. At any given moment he knows precisely what each player should be doing. His attention is everywhere at once, and it is to this that he owes a large part of his authority. He is inside the mind of every player. He knows not only what each *should* be doing, but also what he *is* doing. He is the living embodiment of law, both positive and negative. His hands decree and prohibit. His ears search out profanation.⁹

Truly, this is power: “Quite small movements are all he needs to wake this or that instrument to life or to silence it at will. He has the power

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