

Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class, by Michael Lebowitz. 2nd edition. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

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This paper critically reviews Michael Lebowitz's book Beyond Capital. The book explores the side of the workers in capitalism, which, argues Lebowitz, was not developed in Marx's Capital—a thesis, however, which is found to be an exaggeration. Lebowitz explicates his understanding of Marx's method and uses it to question and remove critical assumptions in Capital in order to develop the political economy of the working class. In this review essay, I explain why I find Lebowitz's understanding of Marx's method congenial to but also departing critically from overdeterminist Marxism; this difference is crucial in leading Lebowitz to consider Marx's analysis as one-sided. In the process of taking into account the side of wage labor, Lebowitz vividly reveals workers as subjects. His efforts to theorize the "abstract proletarian" as a concrete human being are very welcome. I find, however, his explanations for the containment of workers' struggles within contemporary capitalism rather limited.

Key Words: Marx's Method, Political Economy, Working Class, Struggles

Written eleven years after the original edition, the second edition of this important and insightful book reflects the development of Michael Lebowitz's thinking on the working class as a subject. One of the great and thought-provoking merits of the book is its stress on the centrality of Marx's method. *Beyond Capital* offers, according to the author, an 'orthodox Marxist' (in the sense that Gramsci used this notion) attempt to resolve certain problems of Marxism—that is, an attempt to build on Marx's method to demonstrate that Marxism contains "all the fundamental elements to construct a total and integral conception of the world" (26). The focus of the book is the exploration of the side of the worker, a side inadequately developed in Marx's *Capital*.

In the first chapter, Lebowitz discusses the basic concepts of Marx's theory of capitalism. To understand capitalist society we must focus upon its unique relation of production: the relationship between capitalists and wage laborers. Capital's impulse, its 'ought', is to secure surplus value; this also is an impulse to grow and to constantly drive beyond any barriers it comes up against. Its movement is that of Growth-Barrier-Growth and seems to suggest an endless, infinite process. However, the limit to capital that Marx and Engels offered, argues Lebowitz, is the working class: workers end capital's story (14-5).

In chapter 2, Lebowitz presents arguments asserting that two 'anomalies' confront Marxism as its refutation: the durability of capitalism and the passivity of its working class. He discusses different critiques offered by Andre Gorz, Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis, Chantal Mouffe, J. Cohen, Claus Offe, K. Castoriadis, and E. P. Thompson. Although Lebowitz thinks that these criticisms are powerful and coherent, he does not accept their basic conclusions that Marx provided a closed system of economic logic or that Marxism is irrelevant to the concerns of feminists, environmentalists,

national minorities, or even rank-and-file workers. In succeeding chapters, he substantiates his position but in a way that concedes too much to these criticisms, in my opinion.

In chapter 3, Lebowitz argues that Marx never abandoned his plan for *Capital* to be one of six books, including a book on wage labor, but he never finished the project. To illustrate his argument about the missing book on wage labor, he begins with a discussion of the necessities of workers. Marx treated the set of necessities entering into the value of labor-power as given and he has been criticized for this argument. However, Lebowitz correctly points out that what has often been regarded as Marx's argument was in fact no more than a methodologically sound working *assumption*. Marx stressed the rising level of 'necessity' as capitalism develops, argues Lebowitz. In the course of capitalist development, the producers change, too, in that they develop new powers, qualities, and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs, new language (31). In addition, the need for expanding markets to realize surplus value fuels the constant efforts by capital to discover new use-values and to create new needs (35). For Marx, this process of going beyond the existing standard of needs is part of the historic role of capital (38). Lebowitz argues that for Marx, in *Capital*, it was inherent in the very nature of capitalism that there is a level of *social* needs that is not satisfied. These unfulfilled needs are *a measure of worker's deprivation and poverty* (41), and they instigate workers' struggles against capitalists for a higher wage. There is, however, no discussion in *Capital* about the struggle for higher wages—and *cannot* be because *Capital* assumes the standard of necessity given, argues Lebowitz (44). However, this point seems to me to be an exaggeration since Marx often refers to conflict over wages.

I consider chapter 4 one of the most important in the book. Lebowitz considers the method that Marx utilized in *Capital*, which is to be followed by the author in exploring and completing its missing elements. He finds in Marx's method an emphasis on the 'whole'. For Marx, under the influence of Hegel, a society is a particular complex of interconnected elements, "the universal, all-sided, *vital* connection of everything with everything," in the words of Lenin. This marks a break from the Cartesian perspective and from "methodological individualism" (53). In society as a totality, change and development do not represent a simple relationship of cause and effect, independent and dependent variables. There is "reciprocal action of these various sides on one another"; and, as a result, there is movement and change within the whole. Lebowitz clearly demonstrates a deep understanding of Marx's dialectics. This understanding is, to a certain extent, congenial to overdeterminist Marxism which perceives society as consisting of natural, economic, political, and cultural processes that interact with each other and are mutually constituted. Human beings are also understood as complexly constituted (overdetermined) by the influences of various aspects of social reality and so as continually becoming and differing. The class process—the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor—comes into the determination of every aspect of social reality and is, in turn, influenced by each one of them. Social contradictions are brought about by the complex interaction and constitution of social processes and propel social changes open to various possibilities. Marx's *Capital* could thus be read from an over-

determinist standpoint as an economic and social analysis with class as its focal concept, instead of as a one-sided analysis, as Lebowitz asserts.

Another aspect of Marx's method is *how* precisely he develops an understanding of society as a whole (the epistemological question), says Lebowitz. Rather than starting from an abstract model of society, we must embark upon the careful study of real society. One should begin with the simplest determinations and concepts and proceed to deduce logically a conception of the whole "as a rich totality of many determinations and relations" (55). By rising from the abstract to the concrete-in-thought, Marx was careful to ensure that no elements were extrinsic, independent, indifferent, or exogenous to the system, argues Lebowitz convincingly. In the end, we arrive not at a chaotic conception of the whole, but at a rich totality of many determinations and relations (58).

To illustrate Marx's method in *Capital*, Lebowitz discusses Marx's treatment of the forms of value and those of the circuit of capital. He argues that the deficiencies that Marx identifies are not the result of thought acting upon itself. Rather, the measure of their inadequacy is the real—the concrete processes and relations that they fail to express conceptually. Testing by facts or by practice then validates theory (56–7). Lebowitz's reading of Marx on this point seems to echo empiricist arguments. To the extent that this is true, however, it should be noted that observations, facts, and the 'real out there' can be approached by the human mind only through theoretical frameworks, not in their absence. It is only within particular conceptual frameworks that we can conduct empirical investigations to evaluate practices and substantiate or discredit theoretical arguments.

Using Marx's method, Lebowitz argues that the totality presented in *Capital* remains incomplete. The reproduction of capital is revealed to require something outside capital and this is the reproduction of the working class—a process that does not fall entirely within the circuit of capital. The process of production of the worker is a *labor process* and is a "purposeful activity," one that has "the worker's own need for development" as its preconceived goal. However, the presuppositions of this labor process (i.e., the use-values) cannot be produced within this process: capital is a mediator for wage labor here. Moreover, the separation of the living labor capacity of the worker from his or her self is realized in the sphere of production of capital under the direction and control of capital. Workers thus experience deprivation and subordination and, as a result, resist capital. There is accordingly a two-sided struggle and two 'oughts': "capital's need for valorization" and "the worker's own need for development" (74).

Lebowitz then concludes that *Capital* is one-sided and inadequate precisely because the worker is not present in it as the subject who acts for herself against capital. An adequate totality, *capitalism* as a whole, requires the consideration of wage labor for itself, not only capital for itself. In such a totality, the process of production of capital and that of wage labor are opposites; they *exclude* each other. However, the reproduction of each presupposes the other. They are unity (75).

However, despite the rich dialectics, Lebowitz seems to assert here a dualistic scheme (see also fig. 5.1) insofar as he claims that each of these two processes excludes the other instead of being mutually determined by the influences of each other and, thus, contradictory and coevolved. For example, the worker can be for

capital and for himself simultaneously in the workplace, albeit in contradictory ways, insofar as he develops his capabilities within capitalist production.

In the fifth chapter, Lebowitz embarks upon further distinguishing the political economy of capital from that of wage labor which is only latent in *Capital*. Underlying Marx's political economy of capital was his conception of the relation between the analysis of 'capital in general', which captures the inner logic of capital, and the phenomena of 'many capitals in competition' ('the blind rule of the supply and demand laws'), which are surface phenomena, mere manifestations of the inner logic of capital, argues Lebowitz. The inner logic of capital is at work when 'capital in general' acts as an actor: capital drives up the workday, drives down real wages, increases productivity and always in order to increase surplus value (82).

In Lebowitz's understanding of Marx's political economy of capital, elements of essentialism and determinism (such as the inner logic of capital versus surface phenomena, etc.) are clearly present. There is, however, a different and better way, in my opinion, to read Marx from the one that Lebowitz proposes here, a way that is based on a different understanding of Marx's method. In *Capital*, Marx moves from simple to more complex determinations of capital, from a notion of capital in terms of surplus-value extraction to a more concrete-in-thought concept of capital in which not only the extraction but also the distribution of surplus value and the reproduction of capital are taken into consideration. With respect to intracapitalist struggles, they play an important role in Marx's accounting for real changes in capitalism and also play an important role in his definition of particular concepts. For Marx, intracapitalist struggles involve not only the marketplace but also the production, distribution, and accumulation of surplus value. Moreover, superprofits in the same industry, the formation of the price of production, rents, the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, and so forth, are concepts developed by Marx by explicitly taking into consideration intracapitalist struggles. For example, Marx argues that, by applying a new technique, the individual capitalist is able to increase productivity and to reduce costs of production while selling at the same (market) value, given the normal conditions in a particular industry. This individual capitalist is able to appropriate through *exchange* more surplus value than he had produced (superprofit) at the expense of capitalists using *production methods* less efficient than normal. Technical change is thus propelled by the superprofit it creates for the innovating capitalists and by the need for survival of the less efficient capitalists.

Lebowitz also discusses different forms of struggles that need to be fought from the standpoint of labor. He emphasizes, in particular, the necessity to end workers' own disunion as sellers of labor-power; otherwise, this weaker side in a buyer's market will gradually get accustomed to a lower and lower standard of life. And I would argue that this is actually the case in the current era of neoliberalism. In the sixth chapter Lebowitz elaborates more on the critical role of class struggle between capital and wage labor and their respective power in the determination of wages.

The political economy of wage labor, argues Lebowitz, starts from the recognition that social productivity results from the cooperation of the collective worker. It focuses on removing capital as a mediator between workers as *a whole*. The wage labor has to move from pure economic interests to acting as a class that politically

asserts the needs of the workers as human beings and use the state, *within capitalism*, in the interest of workers (99–100).

In chapter 7, Lebowitz argues that one-sided Marxism uncritically rests upon the one-sidedness of Marx's *Capital* in that it does not explore the side of wage labor. In particular, there are a number of basic one-sided concepts in *Capital*; these include the reproduction of wage labor, wealth, and productive labor, says Lebowitz. For example, the value of labor-power is linked to the reproduction of wage labor but only in the sense that the latter is necessary for the reproduction of capital. From this functionalist perspective, capital's appetite for surplus labor does not bring about the "degradation and final depopulation of the human race." What is forgotten, says Lebowitz, is that, from the side of workers, the value of labor-power is both the means of satisfying their own needs for development and the barrier to satisfying them.

However, one has the feeling here that Lebowitz's understanding of Marx is not adequately dialectical in its method. Although it is fair to say that certain issues are undertheorised in Marx's and Engels's work, both had undeniably great respect for the organization and struggles of the working class and had devoted to them a great deal of their lifetime. In addition, Marx never loses sight of the dialectic between, for example, productive and unproductive labor in *Capital* and his other works. And what drives capital forward, and hopefully to its end, is a complex historical process, for Marx as I understand him, not to be reduced to the technical development of productive forces. There is, nevertheless, no doubt that the abstract proletarian, as a mere negation of capital, has to become a concrete social being of many determinations, and Lebowitz's efforts to complete Marx's project are very welcome.

In chapter 8, Lebowitz proceeds to theorizing workers as "concretions of multiple determinations," by making explicit the distinction of the worker as wage laborer and as *non*-wage laborer. The specific nature of the workers produced depends upon both the nature of the inputs (the use-values consumed) and the labor process by which those inputs are transformed into a final project. Domestic labor is part of this reproduction process. There can be many possible relations under which the use-values for the production of wage laborers are obtained. One particular relation under which such labor may be performed is through the ownership of a *slave*, through a process of exploitation within the household.

Lebowitz extends his discussion to differences among workers based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, historical circumstances—on *all* human relations and functions—which come into the shaping of workers as *non*-wage laborers, as heterogeneous human beings. Considering its significance, however, this discussion seems to me too brief. In short, to speak of wage laborers is to describe people who are in no way identical in their relations, people who have differing goals and differing hierarchies of needs and who engage in differing struggles (151). To this, it should be added that *capital tends to produce the working class it needs*: workers who feel dependent upon capital and who are separated from each other, argues Lebowitz. The separation and dependence occur not only at the production site; capital *also* contributes to the education, tradition and habit that make the requirements of capital appear self-evident.

In chapter 9, Lebowitz deals with the questions of the continued existence of capitalism and how we could go beyond capital. He is critical of the thesis of “the primacy of productive forces.” He offers an alternative thesis: the primacy of needs. The needs of socially developed (definite) human beings are considered central in determining the course of historical change. In this alternative view, social change occurs when the existing structure of society no longer satisfies the particular needs of definite people formed within that society (163). However, rather than pointing beyond capital, the inability to satisfy their needs in itself may lead workers not beyond capital, but to class struggle within capitalism. The result will then be capitalism with a human face—a capitalism humanized by the struggles of workers (168). I would add to these important insights of Lebowitz that this is what we have actually experienced in the form of social democracy in many European countries. Lebowitz explains this result by the fact that *capital produces the workers it needs*. Workers can only succeed in going beyond capital “if united by combination and led by knowledge.” Theory offers that knowledge. It becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses (171).

I find these arguments of Lebowitz very wise and penetrating. However, I feel that they overemphasize theoretical aspects over revolutionary experience. Workers have been more aware of their social position than has been often recognized, and have struggled to transcend capital in many historical instances. In these struggles, they have been faced with fierce force, suppression, and often physical annihilation. This has been the case, for example, in Spain, Greece, and Italy. Compromise may be consequently rooted in part in the very need for survival. Withdrawal, indifference and/or compromise may be also the result of fatigue, exhaustion and/or disappointment among workers who have been consciously engaged in social struggles, and this seems to be currently the case for a considerable number of people on the Left. The explanation for such a turn has to be searched not only in the doings of capitalism, in the unequal power of the combatants, but also in the theories and practices of the Left, only a part of which was “actually existing socialism.” I could not agree more with Lebowitz if he would argue that leftist parties and movements are (contradictory) ‘products’ of capitalist society; however, this is among the greatest difficulties for revolutionary change and should be recognized as such.

In fact, Lebowitz in the next chapter points out that the workers could change their being as ‘contradictory products’ of capital through *revolutionary practice*. In class struggles, workers become acquainted with each other, come to a knowledge of their social position and interests, organize themselves and know their strength, and also alter themselves as subjects (182). However, this optimistic perspective has to be integrated with aspects of exhaustion, fear, and disappointment experienced within the course of class struggles.

Given that real workers have many determinations and exist simultaneously in many different social relations, class struggles are multidimensional, have many organizing centers, and cover various needs. Lebowitz is thus right to object to suggestions that there is an inherent opposition between “new social movements” and the struggles of workers as a class against capital. However, I do not believe that a strategy calling for alliances between workers and new social actors takes as its starting point the theoretical reduction of workers to one-dimensional products of

capital, as Lebowitz claims. At least for some of us, it is exactly because we recognize that working people are heterogeneous human beings who, as social actors, *may* not share our explanations and visions but still take a critical stance toward capitalism, that we propose alliances based on respected differences. In an alliance, each movement would retain its specific focus in theory and action for social change. The focus of the alliance itself, however, would be how to combine efforts to eradicate *all* the damaging elements to social existence commonly prioritized by the allied forces. In short, we consider alliances a way to make struggles for social change, fought by congenial but still heterogeneous social subjectivities, more politically effective.

Marx envisioned a clear alternative: a society of associated producers in which social wealth, rather than accruing to the purchasers of labor-power, is employed by freely associated individuals who produce in accordance with ‘communal purposes and communal needs’—that is, a society of the collective worker for itself, argues Lebowitz in the final chapter (201). Marx was, however, reluctant to write recipes for future cooks. Yet, after the experience of the last century with actually existing socialism, it is essential to resurrect the vision of a society of associated producers for today’s, not future, cooks, argues Lebowitz (210).

Beyond Capital is a clear-sighted, substantive book that should be read by all those with an interest in going today beyond capital. Michael Lebowitz, an important and dedicated thinker in the cause of socialism, reveals to us the ingredients that he considers to be essential to demonstrating that “A Better World Is Possible” and can be built now.

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