

Day celebrations put it: *Cuba vive y trabaja*. That Cubans continue to live and work despite all the odds is testament to the resilience of the Cuban people and their enduring commitment to their socialist revolution in the face of formidable challenges.

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## MICHAEL LEBOWITZ'S FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS ON BUILDING SOCIALISM

Michael Lebowitz's (2022) article, "The Struggle Between the Future and the Past: Where Is Cuba Going?" was published on July 3 — less than a year before he died. At almost 19,000 words, it is nearly three times the length of a standard academic article. It is more in the nature of a monograph. The space is well used. No single article that Michael wrote could cover the multitude of

issues concerning the building of socialism that he discussed at great length and depth in his entire *oeuvre*. However, this article directly addresses, from the title on, the central axis of his thinking on moving beyond capitalism, the conflict between the past and the future, and his positions on several of the most important and debated issues. The first five sections of the article address this question in a general frame, while the last five consider it in the frame of the development of the Cuban Revolution.

This review essay has two sections. The first will spotlight four issues briefly but richly discussed in the article, all central to the debates among advocates of socialism around the world today, and in particular in Cuba, on how to “get there from here.” Then, as part of that same necessary discussion among socialists that this article so well presents, the second section will present brief arguments, based on Marx and Engels’ ideas about socialism and its goals, why today’s socialist movement needs to drop three dictums from “standard 20th century Marxism” that are present in Michael’s article.

### *Three Essential Issues in Creating a Socialist Future*

1. To know what to fight for to build socialism, the socialist movement needs to know its goals, the general nature of what that socialism will be.

As Michael has repeated throughout his life, “If you do not know where you want to go, no road will take you there.” He presents the structural goal of socialism as “the association of free and equal producers that Marx called a communal system.” As per Lebowitz (2010), and as he stressed throughout his life’s work, the goal of socialism underlying that structural goal is to support and promote human development.

2. Protagonism and revolutionary practice.

The desired communal liberating socialist future is not an esoteric concept to be given to humanity by an enlightened, well-intentioned elite that has achieved state power. Referring in particular to the work of Harnecker (2015, 161) on this point, Michael insists that these goals can only be achieved through the protagonistic collective activity of society itself. “[Marta] asks if governments understand that ‘human development cannot be achieved with a paternalistic state’ but only ‘through practice and creating spaces in which popular protagonism is possible’.” In his discussion in the second half of the article on the Cuban government’s 60-year effort to build socialism, Michael notes its repeatedly publicly declared recognition that this error of paternalism had characterized its pre-1990 efforts to build socialism. Today, the government specifically indicates this as one of the reasons for some (far from all) of the changes involved in the new road to socialism that the island has been working on developing since then.

3. Revolutionary practice and self-transformation of the revolutionary agents.

As Michael notes that Marx pointed out, the ongoing reproduction of capitalism requires a “working class which by education, tradition, and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self-evident natural laws.” The goal of having a sustainable socialist mode of production will likewise require members of a socialist society to have an analogous view of the requirements of its reproduction. A socialist society cannot be built and maintained by humans who consider the behavior appropriate and necessary for survival in a capitalist society as normal or acceptable. Operating within a materialist (as opposed to idealist) framework for understanding human societies and their transformations, and in line with Hegel’s and Marx’s understanding that humanity has created itself through its social activity, Michael argued here and throughout his life that “through their struggles, workers transform both conditions and themselves.” “In short, there are two products of human activity — the change in circumstances and the change in human beings. Unfortunately, that second product, the human product, is often forgotten even by Marxists.”

4. Contested reproduction between the future and the past as the new society emerges.

As new ways of doing things appropriate to the desired future social system develop bit by bit, they are in constant conflict with the old ways of doing things that they are replacing. The old order fights any manifestation of a new system that threatens its essence as one class living off the labor of another through its system based on the private ownership of the means of production. As Michael points out as an example, the old system fights to maintain its “systematic and hierarchic division of labor” against all manifestations of the emergence of egalitarian relations among the associated free producers of the new system. The old system fights to maintain the distribution of the social product according to the recipients’ purchasing power against all manifestations of the emergence of distribution according to human need. And so on, against all manifestations of the emergence of socialism.

*Three Dictums from “Standard 20th Century Marxism” that  
Need to Be Rethought*

Within the frame established above, of seeing this article as a rich and brief presentation of many of the most important issues involved in the struggle to move beyond the past to the future, and the struggle to do so in Cuba in particular, the second part of this review essay looks at three additional positions argued by this article. As Michael himself did so many times concerning several issues, I will argue here that these “standard dictums of

20th century Marxism” need to be rethought, and a useful part of that rethinking process is to “go back to Marx and Engels.”<sup>3</sup> These are three issues frequently debated today among advocates of socialism and communism, particularly among those in and outside Cuba who support its 60-year struggle to build a socialist society.

1. “. . . the necessity to build socialist consciousness through socialist practice rather than through self-interest . . .”

Like “standard 20th century Marxism,” Michael argued throughout his life that there is an inherent contradiction between the self-interest of the individual and social consciousness, and hence that achieving the desired future socialism requires overcoming self-interest. In this quote, Michael counterposes self-interest to the correct and fundamental idea that the socialist consciousness necessary for socialism can only be built by socialist practices. Marx and Engels agreed that if one accepts the frame of capitalism, then this contradiction between necessary social consciousness and *perceived* self-interest indeed can exist within it. They argued, however, that not being restricted to the frame of capitalism, socialism will not have to suppress *real* self-interest exactly because social consciousness and *real* self-interest are *not inherently* incompatible. Socialism does not require universal altruism to function. Instead, they stressed that a fundamental aspect of the nature of a socialist society would be *precisely* that its institutions and social practices would be such that, unlike in capitalism, it was *in one’s self-interest* to act for the collective well-being. Beyond this misunderstanding being simply an incorrect theoretical understanding of the nature of the individual’s relation to society in socialism, this is a politically essential point for winning the working class to the project of constructing socialism. Most workers will never be won over to desire a society where they are required to *sacrifice* their genuine self-interests for the good of society (which, again, socialism does not require of them).

One needs to be very careful when using abbreviated expressions to convey ideas. For example, if one omits the word “perceived” from Marx and Engel’s position in the last paragraph, it would then state that individual self-interest and social consciousness are incompatible under capitalism. This assertion might be correct, or it might be false, depending on exactly what one means by “self-interest” and what one means by “under capitalism.”

If one takes “under capitalism” to mean that under capitalism, the workers do not consider the possibility of changing the system, then as argued above, for the many workers who accept capitalism’s false ideology of “the

3 Not as a bible for revealed truth, but rather as a rich source for ideas to be considered (and then possibly accepted, rejected, or modified) for fighting against capitalism, “given that Marxism has been, since its conception in the mid-nineteenth century, the primary basis of the critique of capitalist society” (Foster, 2022, 1).

isolated individual,” the *perception of self-interest* will indeed be that self-interest is incompatible with social consciousness. In this case, they then become “free riders” on the class’s historical gains through struggle.

However, even if workers do not consider human alternatives to capitalism, their lived experience brings many of them to recognize elements of the compatibility of *real individual self-interest* (as opposed to *perceived self-interest*) and social consciousness for them within capitalism, giving rise to a trade union level of social consciousness. Furthermore, if instead of understanding “under capitalism” to mean that the workers are “restricted to accepting capitalism as the end of history,” one only means that “they live in a capitalist system,” then social consciousness and self-interest are not incompatible, despite all false perceptions. The very socialist project being presented to workers rests on the compatibility of authentic individual self-interest and social consciousness.

Also note that this position by Marx and Engels on the compatibility of real individual self-interest and social consciousness is closely related to their position that the species-being nature (collective nature) of humans makes human individuality a “social individuality,” as opposed to the “isolated individuality” of liberal political theory and neoclassical economics, which Marx ridiculed as “Robinson Crusoe” individuality. See, for example, Marx from 1844 and 1857 and Engels from 1845, cited and discussed further in “Marx and Engels’ Vision of a Better Society” (Campbell, 2010, 272 ff.).

2. “. . . Mészáros’s rejection of commodity exchange relations . . .”

“Standard 20th century Marxism” equated “overcoming commodity exchange relations” with “overcoming capitalism.” To the contrary, Marx developed at length in the first three chapters of *Capital* the concept of a commodity as something produced to be exchanged *in a hypothetical social setting devoid of capital*. A capitalist system *does* need commodities for its circuits of capital to carry out its necessary exploitation, but *that does not mean that commodity exchange implies capitalism*. Commodities also existed as part of the basic economic operation of feudalism, the Roman and Greek economies, and, in fact, in almost all complex societies from the time of Sumer in at least 2000 BCE. Marx further stressed that *capitalist exploitation*, the particular way some people live off the labor of others under capitalism, necessarily takes place *outside the process of commodity exchange*. It follows from these two points that there is no internal contradiction in creating things intended to be exchanged (“commodities”) in a socialist mode of production as one possible way to organize parts of the production and consumption processes.

3. “‘Updating’ the Cuban economic model while preserving the responsibility of the State appears to be a path in the direction of the “market socialism” (or whatever other euphemism one prefers) of China and Viet Nam.”

The debated possibility of a socialist system using markets as a tool for some of its economic production and consumption processes is fundamentally the same issue as the “commodity exchange relations” just discussed. For the reasons argued there, the near-hegemonic use of the term “market society” as a synonym for a “capitalist society” is theoretically wrong.<sup>4</sup> What I want to stress here, however, is the related broad confusion among advocates of socialism between “market socialism” and “socialism with markets,” including in many arguments by advocates of socialism against the use of markets in Cuba. The theoretical concept of market socialism among a small group of “socialist” theoreticians in the capitalist North has enterprises (usually owned or controlled by their workers) producing to maximize profits (generally with some state redistribution role in the background). Such theoretical constructs are left variants of social democratic capitalism, and I fully agree with Michael that such “market socialism” is not socialism.

What about China, Vietnam, and Cuba? First, these three economies are very different, so they need to be discussed separately. Here I have room only to discuss Cuba.

Capitalism requires some people to live off the labor of others. Self-employment in Cuba, with its necessary markets, can never constitute the base for capitalism, regardless of what percent of the economy it grows to be. The recently legalized micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) differ from this. These are capitalist enterprises, and if they grow to determine the fundamental nature of the Cuban economy, then that will be capitalism.

Some advocates of socialism appear to believe that if any capitalist relations are allowed within a system, most of whose production is not organized according to the logic of capital, they will, by some law of capital, automatically come to dominate the society. On the contrary, whether they do so or not is a political question that society’s collective consciousness will determine.

Finally, distinguishing the issue of *building socialism* from that of *restoring capitalism*, two different questions, very much debated today, need to be considered. The first is whether a socialist society could have some “subordinate part of it” operating according to the goals of capitalism, perhaps as proposed by Alec Nove at the end of the last century. One *sine qua non* of socialism — in the sense of Marx and Engels, Michael Lebowitz, and myself — is that it ends anyone living off the labor of others. It ends classes and exploitation.

4 In line with its false ideology as the endpoint of human social development (“the end of history”), capitalism has successfully inserted several labels involving concepts connected only to capitalism (in the case being discussed, that concept being “capitalism” itself) onto patterns of human interactions that have taken place, albeit differently, in many modes of production (in this case, “markets”), and even onto human characteristics — for example, the theoretically false and anti-humanistic concept of “human capital” for “human developed capabilities and skills.”

Knowing where we want to go, it is clear that such a “mixed economy” would not achieve socialism’s goals and hence not *be socialism*. Whether such a “subordinate part of the economy” could be used by a government and society to support and promote *the transition to socialism from capitalism* is a different question. As a concept, humanity accepts, in many cases, the necessity or usefulness of employing means to achieve an end, whose use as part of that desired end would be inconsistent with its goals. As one example from hundreds, it is broadly accepted that, under many circumstances, one needs to fight a war to achieve peace.<sup>5</sup>

So, while having a subordinate capitalist part of the economy is not logically inconsistent with the goal of building socialism, the social danger of doing so is obvious. Many of the agents engaged in the capitalist part of the economy will, in line with the inherent nature of capital, desire to expand their capitalist operations. That danger is greatly increased if the project to build socialism occurs in a relatively small country with large and powerful capitalist countries committed to preventing socialist projects anywhere. However, there is no inherent reason that such a desired expansion of capitalist relations to social domination could not be stopped by a government and society committed to building socialism through a political and ideological struggle, a socialist “battle of ideas.” However, while, as argued above, there is nothing inherent to the concept of socialism of Marx and Engels that precludes the possibility of using markets as tools for some economic transactions in a socialist economy, “subordinated capitalist enterprises” *are* incompatible with socialism’s goals, and so *incompatible with a socialist society*. Hence, a project to build socialism that chooses to employ MSMEs will, at some point in the future, still need to transform them into social property to complete the project, once the support they gave to the project of building socialism ceases. At that point, they will become barriers to further socialist construction.

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5 The concept is not invalidated by the falseness of most governments’ claims that this is why they are fighting.

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