

The Relevance of Marxism Today: An Interview With Michael A. Lebowitz

by Zhuo Mingliang

Do you think Marxism is still relevant today? If so, which parts?

I think that Marxism is completely relevant for understanding capitalism now. It's an error to think that capitalism has changed and that therefore we have to change Marxism. Marx grasped the nature of capitalism; and, although capitalism has changed in some of its forms, its essence remains the same.

Capitalism is a system based upon the exploitation and deformation of wage laborers for the purpose of profits for those who own the means of production. *That* has not changed.

What are the main theoretical problems that Marxism needs to solve at present?

I think it is important to recognize that Marxism has been significantly deformed in the 20th century. What has been forgotten is that Marx was a dialectical thinker and that he attempted to consider the whole -- the whole consisting of interacting parts, of parts that mutually influence each other and form each other and constitute an organic system. What has been lost is that profound understanding that looks upon productive forces not as neutral but as marked by the character of society from which they emerge. In other words, there's been a tendency to forget about the character of the relations of production. Instead, what has often been presented as Marxism is a positivism and determinism in which the development of productive forces is viewed as the cause (and tool) of all change. This conception emerged in the context of the Soviet attempt to develop as rapidly as possible because of the threat of imperialism, which is understandable, but it is a distortion of Marxism. I talk about this deformation of Marxism

in my latest book, ***Contradictions of "Real Socialism": The Conductor and the Conducted.***

Closely related to the de-emphasis of relations of production is the disappearance of the focus on how human beings are produced within the process of production. Imagine! After all that Marx had to say about how people are crippled and deformed within the process of capitalist production! There is a tendency to forget about the effects of capitalist production upon people and to talk only about exploitation. But that's not what Marx did. Marx explained that the source of capital was exploitation, but the fury and the passion of Marx came from his recognition of how capitalism destroys people. If you forget that, it is easy to come to the conclusion that the only thing that matters is the development of productive forces and not how that occurs; thus you can justify gulags and capitalism and not think about the nature of people produced under these conditions. I think we need to return to Marx.

What is the theme of your book *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*? What do you think are major features of real human development?

I have tried in my book, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, to return to Marx's emphasis on the centrality of human development. For Marx, the goal was the creation of a society which permitted the development of "rich human beings." And when he spoke of rich, he was not talking about people who can consume and consume but, rather, people who are able to develop their capacities, their potential. That was the rich individuality which is many-sided in its capacities and needs. And Marx spoke very clearly about this requiring the combination of thinking and doing -- i.e., an ending to the separation of mental and manual activity, an end to a situation in which people work under the direction of others for the goals of those others. Human development understood this way is entirely incompatible with capitalist relations of production.

Why do you think socialism is the only way to promote human development rather than capitalism?

Marx believed (and I agree entirely with him) that human development requires the cooperative society based upon the common ownership of the means of production. I believe we can be more specific about that, and I do that in *The Socialist Alternative*. Real human development requires relations of production in which people can develop through their own activity -- i.e., socialist production organized by workers. But this implies the necessity of the common ownership of the means of production -- social ownership. And social ownership is not ownership by a distant state nor is it ownership by individual groups of workers; rather, it is ownership by society which involves production directly and consciously for the needs of society. So, the community must be active as a social institution which identifies the needs that must be fulfilled, and insofar as we exist in the community we produce for others out of solidarity. So we have a "socialist triangle": social ownership of the means of production, social production organized by workers, for the purpose of the satisfaction of social needs (which implies a solidaristic society). This is the society for which Marxists and all socialists should struggle. It won't happen overnight. However, we have to struggle on all three fronts simultaneously and not put off some sides of this triangle until a distant future. Because that future will never come unless we struggle to end the perversity that is capitalism in all its sides. We need to understand that when we put off some sides of the triangle, we are allowing the logic of capital to flourish in their place.

Who are the most significant Marxist thinkers of the last decades in your opinion? What is the significance of their contributions to the development of Marxism?

I think that in considering the most significant Marxist thinkers of the last decades we have to look outside of Marxist economists. One very important Marxist philosopher is **István**

Mészáros. I think that he has been very important in stressing the centrality of an organic system in Marx and the dangers of forgetting that capitalism is an organic system. Another very important Marxist is a Marxist biologist: **Richard Levins.** The book that Levins did with **Richard Lewontin** called ***The Dialectical Biologist*** was a brilliant analysis of the dialectical worldview in contrast to the atomistic, Cartesian perspective that dominates so much Western thought. In addition to this theoretical insight, as the result of his holistic perspective, Levins has been very important in identifying the interactions and unintended consequences of individual decisions, particularly in relationship to the environment, and he has worked very closely with public health scientists in Cuba on these questions. Also at the forefront of the recognition of the link between Marxism and the understanding of the environment has been **John Bellamy Foster** who has written a **brilliant work on Marx and ecology** and continues to expand our knowledge about capitalism and the environment. All of these writers have greatly influenced me and helped me in my own work. Finally, I would add to this list **Marta Harnecker,** whose work on political parties and social movements, particularly in Latin America, has been very important in identifying what a political instrument should do and what it should definitely not continue to do.

In recent years, debate and discussion on Marxism have become renewed and reinvigorated. More and more people have begun to think Marxism can play a great role in solving the current crisis. What do you think of the vitality of Marxism in the current situation?

I think that there is absolutely no question that Marxism enables us to understand the nature of the capitalist crisis today. For non-Marxists, everything is an accident or the result of bad decisions. They are not able to distinguish between causes and effects and often see symptoms as the source of problems. In contrast, Marxism permits us to consider capitalism as a whole and to understand the underlying factors which

characterize not only its crises but also its periods of uninterrupted expansion.

However, I think it is an error to think that Marxism can solve the crisis. Marxism is a theory -- it is a way to understand.

Ultimately, the only way to end capitalist crises is to end capitalism. And that requires more than a theory; it requires a commitment and determination to put an end to this perverse economic system.

Do you see points of connection between Marxist theory and mass labor movements today? Are there movements using Marxism in general or Maoism in particular as their theoretical weapons? What are the major problems of left movements nowadays?

Unfortunately, at the present time Marxism has little importance in terms of influencing left movements, mass labor movements, or the developments associated with the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. In part, I think that reflects the extent to which Marxism was deformed in the 20th century. It ceased to speak to the needs of people as reflected in social movements and those things that people identified as most important to their lives. When human beings disappear from the centrality of Marxism, it cannot be considered surprising that Marxism does not appeal to the needs of people. So this was one problem.

But there was another, and that was the problem of Marxist organizations which believed that they had all the answers to all problems in their back pockets and that accordingly all social movements needed to listen to them. It was precisely this kind of perspective that Marx rejected when he said: **We do not say here is truth, now kneel here!** In short, Marxist organizations forgot how to listen.

Certainly people are suffering now. Certainly they are angry. And that anger grows as the result of neoliberalism, capitalist crisis, and now a crisis in food production (which is leading to

rising food prices). People are responding against what they consider to be unfair. But they are not currently drawing upon Marxism. Indeed, in many places, anarchists receive far more attention. And, we have to recognize that, in the absence of a coherent left analysis which can be communicated, there is the threat that fascism will fill the void; this prospect can be seen most clearly at the moment in Greece. We have an enormous responsibility: we have to build on the sense that people have about unfairness to explain the source of that unfairness -- just like Marx insisted upon the necessity to go beyond the slogans of the 19th century of **fair wages and a fair workday** (which he described correctly as a conservative slogan) to stress the necessity to end the wage relation, the revolutionary slogan.

But, to do that, we have to begin by listening and understanding. If we don't, fascism and religious fundamentalism will succeed.

What do you think of China's rise? Will China really rule the world as Martin Jacques has said in his book?

There is no question in my mind that there is a profound restructuring of capitalism in the world which is occurring and that China is emerging as the dominant capitalist power in the 21st century (with Shanghai as the dominant city) in place of the United States. There are many reasons for this. They include the ability of China to develop through its export orientation based upon its ability to draw upon very large numbers of people from the countryside to work in industry; and it includes the ability to use the state to foster the expansion of key sectors. However, I am not convinced that China is moving toward socialism.

Michael A. Lebowitz is Professor Emeritus of Economics of Simon Fraser University in Canada and author of ***The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*** (2010) and ***Contradictions of "Real Socialism": The Conductor and the Conducted*** (2012), both published by Monthly Review Press.

Zhuo Mingliang is a doctoral student at the Institute of Marxism of the Chinese Academy of Social Scientists. This interview was originally conducted in September 2012 and will be published in *Studies of Marxism*, edited by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in a different form.