

## Mészáros and the Critique of the Capital System

Foreword to *The Necessity of Social Control*

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István Mészáros is one of the greatest philosophers that the historical materialist tradition has yet produced. His work stands practically alone today in the depth of its analysis of Marx's theory of alienation, the structural crisis of capital, the demise of Soviet-style post-revolutionary societies, and the necessary conditions of the transition to socialism. His dialectical inquiry into social structure and forms of consciousness—a systematic critique of the prevailing forms of thought—is unequaled in our time. No less a historical figure than Hugo Chávez referred to him as the “pathfinder” of twenty-first century socialism.<sup>1</sup>

The present book grew out of a conversation that Mészáros and I had in July 2013 in London, in which I expressed the need for an easily accessible work that would provide a way into his thinking for the uninitiated. He took this challenge seriously, resulting in *The Necessity of Social Control*. The role of this foreword is to help to put his system of thought as a whole, and this book in particular, in their historical contexts, while illuminating some of the distinctive concepts governing his analysis.

Marx, Lukács, and Mészáros

Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844—discovered in the late 1920s but only becoming widely known decades later—was unquestionably the most discussed and influential philosophical work to appear in the twentieth century. For the first time the full philosophical roots of Marx's system became evident—in ways that challenged the whole history of philosophy up to that time, along with the roots of the prevailing social order.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the discovery of Marx's early writings raised entirely new intellectual challenges for social theory. Among these were comprehending the much deeper relation between the Hegelian and Marxian philosophical traditions that these works made evident.

It was Georg Lukács—whose monumental *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) had provided the most influential interpretation of the dialectical relation between the Hegelian and Marxian systems, but whose outlook was to be transformed by his subsequent encounter with Marx's early manuscripts—who responded most radically to this challenge, delving deeply into Hegel's philosophy, out of which Marx's theory of alienation had emerged. The result was *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics* (1966).<sup>3</sup> Here Lukács focused on how critical analysis of the logical categories of classical political economy had led to the genesis of Hegel's system, separating him from his predecessors, such as Kant, Fichte, and

Schelling. Hegel recognized from the beginning that the dominant philosophical concepts of the Enlightenment were in the main reified expressions (that is, abstracted from their material basis and given an artificial, ideal life of their own) of the underlying production and exchange relations of bourgeois society. It was this recognition that lay behind the extraordinary importance that Hegel gave to the concept of alienation in his philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Hegel's idealist philosophy thus took on a more comprehensive form than that of any of his predecessors within German idealism. What Kant had previously characterized as insurmountable antinomies were seen in Hegel's philosophy as manifestations of a contradictory historical process, in which the various mediations between the material and ideal, subjective and objective, particular and universal were revealed and superseded—but only at the level of thought. Here the inalienable truths of Enlightenment philosophy were given their ultimate justification: as the unfolding of reason (the absolute spirit) in history.

Marx's theory of alienation represented his rebellion against the Hegelian system.<sup>5</sup> In Marx's materialist dialectic, it was theoretically mediated material practice (praxis) associated with a given mode of production or social formation that lay at the root of social change. He thus explored the progressive alienation of labor and production in materialist terms, seeing this as the basis of the logic of capital, emanating from capital's expropriation of the means/conditions of production. Marx, like Hegel, saw modern philosophical categories as reified expressions of the alienated economic relations of capitalist class society.<sup>6</sup> However, in contradistinction to Hegel, he sought to transcend this alienated world, not by providing an idealist reconciliation of subject/object within the realm of thought, but through revolutionary praxis.

As Lukács's assistant and younger colleague (until he departed for the West after the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary), Mészáros was to continue the exploration of what Lukács had called the "relations between dialectics and economics" in Hegel and Marx. This was most evident in his *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (1970)—a work unsurpassed on its subject, for which he was to receive the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize. It was here in the process of elucidating Marx's entire philosophical system that Mészáros first envisioned the regime of capital as what he was subsequently to call a "social metabolic system." This was prefigured in Marx's hitherto neglected treatment of capital as an alienated form of the labor process, defined dialectically as the social metabolism between human beings and nature.<sup>7</sup>

According to Mészáros's interpretation of Marx's theory of alienation and its relation to his overall critique of political economy, capital as a system perfects and universalizes what in previous class systems were mere partial tendencies. It seizes upon and alienates humanity's distinctive role as the "self-mediating being of

nature," turning this essential human relation into a means of class oppression by removing workers from control of the means of production, thus severing their direct connection to nature and their own labor.<sup>8</sup> On this basis, the logic of capital is extended to the reproduction of the social relations in their entirety and to the relation to the environment, creating a self-generating, self-reinforcing social order, unlike any that had preceded it. And as its history has shown, this social order exhibits remarkable social cohesion. But the capital system achieves this cohesion only by means of "antagonistic second-order mediations" (such as the nuclear family, alienated labor/production, civil society, and the state) generating various vicious circles.<sup>9</sup> The result is the growth of social chasms and crises that the logic of the system carries to the nth degree, bringing to the fore at last its own absolute limitations.

It was this overall viewpoint, already present in nascent form in Marx's Theory of Alienation, that led Mészáros to his theory of "the global structural crisis of capital"—referred to in the preface to the third (1971) edition of his book.<sup>10</sup> In his January 1971 Deutscher Prize Memorial Lecture, "The Necessity of Social Control," published as a separate volume that same year, Mészáros emerged as one of the first major social theorists to put the relation of "Capitalism and Ecological Destruction" at the very forefront of the burgeoning contradictions of the system—ahead of the Club of Rome's famous 1972 study on The Limits to Growth.<sup>11</sup> Going against the general tenor of the time, he declared that the proposition of "the universal adoption of the American pattern of 'high mass-consumption' within the space of one single century," as then advanced by the economist Walt Rostow, author of The Stages of Economic Growth (1960), was not only impossible—given the reality of imperialism—but was all the more absurd since this outlook "could not be bothered with making the elementary, but of course, necessary, calculations which would have shown...that in the event of the universalization of that pattern...the ecological resources of our planet would have been exhausted well before the end of that century several times over."<sup>12</sup>

Nor could science and technology, Mészáros insisted, dispose of capitalism's ecological contradictions, since the fundamental environmental problem stemmed from the logic of capital itself, geared to infinite quantitative economic expansion, and thus in antagonistic relation to any truly sustainable pattern of development. This critical standpoint was already evident in nascent form in Marx's Theory of Alienation, where Mészáros had written of "the intensity of pollution that menaces the very existence of mankind" due to the "alienated form of productive capacity" constitutive of the capital system. The capitalist organization of the natural sciences inherently led to the "intensified 'alienation of nature'—e.g. pollution."<sup>13</sup>

Central to Mészáros's entire critique was an understanding of the waste, artificial scarcity, irrationality, and destruction characterizing monopoly-capital's increasingly globalized production. As he declared in his 1971 Deutscher lecture:

Another basic contradiction of the capitalist system of control is that it cannot separate "advance" from destruction, nor "progress" from waste—however catastrophic the results. The more it unlocks the powers of productivity, the more it must unleash the powers of destruction; and the more it extends the volume of production, the more it must bury everything under mountains of suffocating waste. The concept of economy is radically incompatible with the "economy" of capital production which, of necessity, adds insult to injury by first using up with rapacious wastefulness the limited resources of our planet, and then further aggravates the outcome by polluting and poisoning the human environment with its mass-produced waste and effluence.<sup>14</sup>

Equally important was "the intensification of the rate of exploitation" associated with the "world system of monopoly capitalism" and the growing inability to find new ways of displacing this contradiction through imperialist expansion. Increasingly, the fault lines of capitalism were worldwide. A core manifestation of this was "the growing equalization of the differential rates of exploitation as the global trend of development of world capital."<sup>15</sup> Here he frequently referred to a "downward equalization" from the standpoint of the wages of the workers, and thus a race to the bottom in the world as a whole.<sup>16</sup> This view articulated by Mészáros in the early 1970s is similar to that recently advanced by Ernesto Screpanti in *Global Imperialism and the Great Crisis*, in which Screpanti argues that over the long run there is a worldwide tendency toward "a convergence of labor costs," resulting "in an international leveling to the bottom, that is, in a maximization of global exploitation."<sup>17</sup> The result, however, is to intensify capitalism's overall economic contradictions, which can no longer be abated by means of imperialism and war.<sup>18</sup>

No less crucial to Mészáros's argument was the necessity of a system of divided states that dominated over and enforced the conditions of capitalist reproduction, and the impossibility therefore of anything like a system of global governance even as the conditions of accumulation were increasingly globalized. The closest to such governance was the rule of the United States as the current hegemonic power, reinforced by the more frequent recourse to wars and military interventions. An organized capitalism, however, remained beyond reach, due to the competition between states, the rivalry of global monopolies, the ever-increasing levels of exploitation (and inequality) worldwide, and the alienation of all of life by means of capital's second order mediations. As Mészáros stated in *The Work of Sartre* (1979, 2012), the seeming stability of "advanced capitalism," able to remake human needs to fit its own commodity objectives—and thus seemingly eliminate its internal

contradictions—was a phantasm, since in reality the “mode of social metabolic reproduction finds itself in its [productively] descending phase of historical development, and therefore...only capitalistically advanced but in no other sense at all.” It was “capable of sustaining itself only in an ever more destructive and therefore ultimately also self-destructive way” leading to new, more absolute revolutionary imperatives.<sup>19</sup> The question then became simply what was the “Archimedean point” by which a socialist transcendence of “labour’s self-alienation” (under the aegis of capital) could be effected, and a new era of conscious planning by the associated producers could be introduced, in line with the necessity of social control.<sup>20</sup>

### Beyond Capital (1995)

Mészáros was to devote his main efforts in the quarter century after the completion of Marx’s Theory of Alienation to writing his magisterial *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (1995).<sup>21</sup> Around a thousand pages long in small print, this great work (parts of which are incorporated into the present book) is so complex as to defy easy summary. Nevertheless, the enormous departure in outlook that it represented and some of its key conceptual categories can be mapped here, in ways that will help the reader to navigate the present book and Mészáros’s work as a whole.

The predominant tendency on the left in the era of neoliberal globalization dominated by monopoly-finance capital has been one of acceding reluctantly to capital’s rule—accepting the proposition that there is no alternative to capitalism. In this respect, Mészáros’s *Beyond Capital* stood out, as Daniel Singer was to write in 1996, in that it presented “the opposite message: What must be abolished is not only classical capitalist society but the reign of capital as such. Indeed, the Soviet example proves it is not enough to ‘expropriate the expropriators’ if you do not uproot the domination of labor on which the rule of capital rests. An alternative exists, or more precisely, can be forged, provided it is radical and fundamental.”<sup>22</sup>

At the center of Mészáros’s analysis of the structural crisis of capital and the possibility of socialist transition are three radical theoretical innovations drawn from Marx’s intellectual legacy: (1) the conception of the “capital system,” (2) the notion of “social metabolic control” and reproduction, and (3) the idea of “second order mediations.”

In the first of these conceptual innovations Mészáros follows Marx in engaging in a critique of capital, rather than capitalism (a term that Marx hardly ever used). The crucial problem is then the logic of capital, and not primarily the institutional order of market capitalism. The rule of capital for Mészáros means the dominance of the

capital-labor relation, or the systematic accumulation of surplus labor, and can only be understood in these terms. The capital system in general is thus a system based fundamentally on the alienation of labor, rooted in the systematic expropriation of human powers and the estrangement of human needs.<sup>23</sup>

Viewing the capital system as the embodiment of the logic of capital emerging out of the capital-labor dialectic has three major implications for the theory of the transition to socialism (often lost if the focus is on capitalism as an institutional order):

(a) A revolution that overcomes some of the main institutional forms of capitalism, including the private ownership of the means of production and the nexus of state and market, is nonetheless incomplete, insofar as it does not supersede the capital relation itself. It thus continues to operate according to the fundamental logic of the capital system, even if property has been socialized and the state is given sole command of the society as in the Soviet Union.

(b) The struggle against the logic of capital can be fought and important battles (but not the war) won within the formal institutional domains of a capitalist society itself, making the actualization of revolutionary socialist politics—a genuine movement toward socialism—strategically viable within capitalist boundaries (without a “storming of the Winter Palace”) but only insofar as this means a wholesale struggle against all aspects of the capital relation and the progressive substitution of an alternative organic mode of social control within the pores of the existing society.

(c) In all cases of revolutionary struggle the goal must be to supersede the second order mediations and reified ideological structures that constitute the system’s alienated existence. The revolutionary object is never simply to displace one of these or seize merely a part of the system—the commanding heights of the state, for example—but to transcend the alienated capital-labor metabolism altogether, creating a society of substantive equality.

The last of these implications requires that the state, as the top-down mechanism for the enforcement of the capital relation, and the command center of the system, “wither away” to be replaced progressively by communal structures. A new horizontal division of labor needs to be accompanied by the self-organized coordination of labor in society as a whole, and by the collective determination of needs. This necessitates that the socialist system be rooted in its own organic microcosms. In the Soviet Union, in contrast, the state remained in charge, standing in for the collective capitalist. The Bolshevik Revolution was thus only partial and ultimately self-contradictory. In Mészáros’s terms the October 1917 revolution overthrew capitalism without going on to dislodge the capital system. Labor remained proletarianized. In the end Soviet-style post-revolutionary society did not

so much “collapse” as simply recede back into a classical capitalist institutional pattern for which it retained a close affinity.<sup>24</sup>

The second key conceptual innovation introduced is closely related to the first, and involves envisioning the capital system as a form of “social metabolic control” or reproduction.<sup>25</sup> Here Mészáros draws both on Marx (who had written of the “social metabolism” of capital rooted in an alienated productive relation to nature), and on the later Lukács who employed the metabolism concept in his analysis of the dialectics of nature.<sup>26</sup> The same critical approach is evident in recent work by Marxist ecologists, who, following Marx, have emphasized the metabolic rift inherent in the capitalist mode of production.<sup>27</sup>

For Mészáros the capital system is a metabolic, or organic, order capable of its own reproduction, but only as long as the “command structure” of the state is intact. “Without the emergence of the modern state,” he writes, “capital’s spontaneous mode of metabolic control cannot turn itself into a system with clearly identifiable...socioeconomic microcosms. The particular socioeconomic reproductive units of capital taken separately are not only not capable of spontaneous coordination and totalization but diametrically opposed to it if allowed to follow their disruptive course.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, while capital’s mode of social metabolic reproduction is based on alienated labor, a hierarchal class system, competition, and an unlimited accumulation imperative, it nevertheless requires for its internal cohesion the existence of a superstructural state apparatus. Altogether the capital system can be seen as a form of “self-reinforcing reciprocity” in which its various second order mediations, including the state, hold it together despite its alienating, destructive, and anarchic nature.<sup>29</sup>

This leads to Mészáros’s third key conceptual innovation, that of “second order mediations.”<sup>30</sup> The “primary mediation” at the basis of all social existence is the productive relation “between human beings and the vital conditions of their reproduction, nature.”<sup>31</sup> In alienating this fundamental relation capital simultaneously introduces various antagonistic second order mediations (i.e., mediations of the primary mediation), such as: the estranged nuclear family; alienated labor/production; the fetishism of commodities; money (the cash nexus); repressive state formations; and the world market. All of these second order mediations “reciprocally sustain one another.” Hence, “it is impossible to counter the alienating and paralyzing force of any one” of these capitalist second-order mediations “taken in isolation.” Any attempt to overcome any one of them partially and separate from the others will inevitably fail. “Accordingly, what must be confronted and overcome by the adversaries of the established, incorrigibly discriminatory, order of social metabolic reproduction is not only capital’s positively self-sustaining force of surplus-labour extraction but also the devastating negative

power—the apparently forbidding inertia—of its circular linkages.” This is why Mészáros argues that “the real target of radical socialist transformation must be the capital system as such, with all of its second order mediations.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, just as the revolution against the capital system requires the overcoming of all of its alienated second order mediations constituting the basis of its social metabolic reproduction, so must an alternative system of social metabolic reproduction seek to establish its own—in this case unalienated—forms of reciprocal exchange (based on the communal exchange of use values).

These considerations contributed to Mészáros’s theory of transition. Drawing metaphorically on a story of house renovations carried out by Goethe’s father (in his attempt to circumvent a local law that said that only one story of a house could overhang the ground floor), Mészáros explains that revolutionary change is “conceivable only as a form of transitional restructuring...of material mediations”:

As in the case of Goethe’s father (even if for very different reasons), it is not possible to pull down the existing building and erect a wholly new edifice in its place on totally new foundations. Life must go on in the shored-up house during the entire course of rebuilding, “taking away one storey after another from the bottom upwards, slipping in the new structure, so that in the end none of the old house should be left.” Indeed, the task is even more difficult than that. For the decaying timber frame of the building must be also replaced in the course of extricating humankind from the perilous structural framework of the capital system.<sup>33</sup>

Socialist transition, Mészáros thus argues, requires the creation of an alternative system of communal production, social consumption, and collective control: a whole new structure that must be built floor by floor from the ground up while living in the house itself, and replacing the rotten capitalist building materials.

Such conceptions were to influence Hugo Chávez in his implementation of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. Mészáros had singled out Chávez in *Beyond Capital*, while the latter was still in prison and before he ran for president, as the most revolutionary new leader in Latin America, already deeply committed to substantive equality.<sup>34</sup> It was on the basis of Mészáros’s theory of socialist transition in *Beyond Capital* that Chávez (with the intervention of Michael Lebowitz) was to develop his powerful conception of “the elementary triangle of socialism,” encompassing social ownership of production, worker control of production, and consumption based on communal needs.<sup>35</sup> The idea was to create an entire, self-reinforcing social metabolic order dedicated to human needs and substantive equality. The creation of the famous communal councils in Venezuela and the system of mutually beneficial exchange of use values instituted by the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) were both partly inspired by

Mészáros's *Beyond Capital*, which was seen as the basis of a socialism for the twentieth-first century.

### The Structural Crisis of Capital

Mészáros's *Beyond Capital* originated, as we have seen, as a response to the structural crisis of capital of our age. Few, if any, thinkers have contributed as much to the understanding of the accelerating global contradictions of capital, and the unprecedented dangers that lie ahead in the new millennium. The permanency attributed to the present capital system, Mészáros declares, is entirely false, while the system's "unalterable temporality" is increasingly evident.<sup>36</sup> Change on a vast scale is inevitable, presenting itself as a choice of Socialism or Barbarism.<sup>37</sup> However, Mészáros sometimes qualifies this by adding "barbarism if we are lucky"—pointing to the possibility, if the train wreck represented by capital is not stopped, of the effective annihilation of the species, not just civilization.<sup>38</sup>

The structural crisis of capital arises from the fact that "no global system can be other than explosive and ultimately self-destructive if it is antagonistically structured all the way to its inner core."<sup>39</sup> The severe impasse in capital's mode of social metabolic control "sets in when the established order of socioeconomic reproduction collides with the obstacles made by its own dualistic articulation, so that the threefold contradiction between production and control, production and consumption, and production and circulation cannot be any more reconciled, let alone used as powerful engines in the vital expansion and accumulation process."<sup>40</sup> Hence, the system begins to run into its own absolute limits, evident in proliferating crises, once its further quantitative expansion is impeded.

Today the capital system is no longer confined to a small corner of the globe, but has achieved a "global ascendancy," taking over the entire world (and increasingly the planet itself), while confronting a "closing circle." Under these circumstances—those of "the descending phase of development" of the system—the destructive tendency, always present in capital's expansion, comes to predominate, overwhelming its remaining creative aspects. The former process of displacing its contradictions to other parts of the world (the historic role played by imperialism) is no longer possible to the same extent. The necessary command structure of the state increasingly breaks down in the context of a global system of accumulation, which it can no longer control due to the impossibility of forging a coherent global capitalist state.<sup>41</sup>

These contradictions are most powerfully expressed in Mészáros's treatment of "the activation of capital's absolute limits."<sup>42</sup> Here in an analysis of the outer limits of the system, conditioned by its own internal organization, he demonstrates how the

globalized production and accumulation characteristic of the age of monopoly-finance capital undermine the traditional nation-state system, and the possibility for the orderly maintenance of hegemonic power on the part of the United States, which must increasingly resort to its full coercive power—only to confront in the end widening geopolitical threats to its rule.

The planetary ecological crisis meanwhile represents “the destruction of the conditions of social metabolic reproduction” as the system irredeemably fouls its own nest.<sup>43</sup> Here too the future of humanity is placed in question, as a result of the capital system’s increasingly destructive second order mediations. “Neither the degradation of nature nor the pain of social devastation,” Mészáros writes, “carries any meaning at all for its system of social metabolic control when set against the absolute imperative of self-reproduction on an ever-extended scale. This is why in the course of historical development capital not simply happened to fatefully overreach itself on every plane—even in its relationship to the basic conditions of social metabolic reproduction—but was bound to do so” and in planetary terms.<sup>44</sup>

In addressing the activation of capital’s absolute limits, Mészáros—in line with the famous proposition of Fourier that the emancipation of women is the measure of human emancipation in general—argues that the irrepressible demands for gender equality have stripped the veils away and exposed the utter inability of the capital system to provide substantive equality. A society of full emancipation, run on the principle of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” (Bolívar’s equality is “the law of laws”) is absolutely inconceivable under the rule of capital.<sup>45</sup> The best that such a system can provide is an empty formal equality, which it substantively undermines at every point, and more visibly so as the crisis intensifies. The diversity of “identities” is used to divide labor within itself and thereby becomes a vital tool for the preservation of the alienated system. The absence of substantive equality is in fact “the common denominator and vitiating core of all social relations under the present system.”<sup>46</sup>

Finally, in accord with Marx’s absolute general law of capital accumulation, Mészáros points to the chronic unemployment (accompanied by the systematic and growing underutilization of capital) that is affecting the entire capital system: both core and periphery, making precariousness the leading characteristic of labor in our time. In this way he highlights the inevitability of today’s Great Crisis.<sup>47</sup>

A key element of Mészáros’s analysis of the global structural crisis is his thesis that we have entered “the potentially deadliest phase of imperialism.”<sup>48</sup> The vain efforts of the United States to maintain global supremacy and to establish itself as a surrogate global government (with the help of its European and Japanese allies, which are subordinated to its rule) are now threatening the entire world. “The onset

of capital's structural crisis in the 1970s has produced important changes in the posture of imperialism."<sup>49</sup> This is what made it necessary to adopt an increasingly belligerent stance—one of perpetual war ideologically justified by a totalistically defined and yet indistinguishable, and therefore unconquerable, "terroristic" enemy, crossing all national and international boundaries and limits: at once everywhere and nowhere. It is the inherent dangers of this situation, associated with the rise of "surveillance capitalism" and ultimately uncontrollable war—inevitably engendering major conflicts between nation-states themselves—that most directly raises the inescapable question of Socialism or Barbarism in our time.<sup>50</sup> Similar dangers, he reminds us, are connected to the continual calls for "humanitarian interventions," aimed at shoring up the imperial system.<sup>51</sup>

The financialization process emanating from the economic stagnation of the core accumulation process under monopoly-finance capital adds to the growing structural crisis of the system, which is rapidly degenerating from within, while presented with insurmountable obstacles from without. The system is incapable of expansion based simply on productive investment, but must rely now on various props, such as the sales effort, militarism, and most recently financialization, in order to achieve a putative economic growth that is more and more wasteful and illusory, rooted in debt-leveraged speculation. The result is the rise of a financially fragile, debt-ridden system, one characterized by the highest levels of inequality that the world has ever seen.<sup>52</sup>

### The Historical Moment and the Actualization of Radical Politics

Central to Mészáros's revolutionary critique is the need today for the maximal radicalism in social/class movements. This calls for a popular "alternative to parliamentarianism"—or to the current established order of electoral representation through which the mass of the people are periodically called upon to ratify their own subordination in the name of a false "democracy."<sup>53</sup> Here he emphasizes that capital itself "is the extra-parliamentary force par excellence" and hence can only be radically confronted by a "politics capable of matching capital's extra-parliamentary powers and modes of action."<sup>54</sup> This means the building of an extra-parliamentary movement able to confront capital's control of production and civil society as well as the state. Basing his analysis here on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (and Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*), Mészáros's harbors no illusions with regards to the common left notion of a war of civil society (as presently constituted) on the state. "The adoption of such a position," he writes, "can only result in being trapped by a very naïve conception of the nature of 'civil society' itself and by a totally uncritical attitude toward a great multiplicity of NGOs which, belying their self-characterization as 'Non-Governmental Organisations,' happen to be well capable of happily coexisting with the dominant retrograde state institutions on which they

depend for their financial existence”—drawing as well on the financial support of capital.<sup>55</sup>

Rather than accepting “the line of least resistance” and attempting to conform to the limits set by the system, it is vital, Mészáros therefore insists, to take advantage of the historical moment resulting from the crisis-induced breach in the established order in order to promote a determined “socialist offensive.” Such an offensive should seek to prolong the moment of radical politics by transforming the terrain of political action: “turning fleeting time into enduring space” and fusing “the power of political decision-making with the social base from which it has been alienated for so long.”<sup>56</sup> Here Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution and the current “movement toward socialism” in much of Latin America provide evidence of the speed with which a radical offensive can shift the whole terrain of struggle.

Global action is possible through the creation of a New International, modeled on the diversity of perspectives that characterized the International Working Men’s Association under Marx, while rejecting the attempts in all subsequent Internationals—the Second, Third, Fourth, etc.—to reduce the movement to a mechanical “doctrinal unity.”<sup>57</sup> Revolutionary political struggles require a determined, global assault on the capitalist state, and its withering away, in the sense of the rapid transfer of political power to the social base of society, rooting it in communal structures.

In the initial stage of a revolution the struggle is necessarily aimed at the hostile state of the capital system and at capital’s extra-parliamentary power, and thus takes a predominantly negative form. But even then the movement must proceed toward its positive goal—for which collective, socialist education is necessary—of going beyond the state and its top-down structures of control, and effecting a general social transformation, aimed at the creation of alternative structures of control rooted in new, socialist socioeconomic microcosms.<sup>58</sup>

Mészáros’s work has its most directly philosophical expression in his major, two-volume study of Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness, the most systematic critique we have of modern liberal thought, interrogating all of its methods and forms from a critical-dialectical perspective.<sup>59</sup> He shows by this means the continuity of bourgeois thought, the external parameters of which are determined by the dominant order to which it seeks to conform and to justify. At the same time, he introduces us to the “radical openness of history” and the dialectical process of critical reason which will allow us to find our way out of the capitalist maze. “The question of historically sustainable transition to a radically different form of social metabolic control,” he explains, “is not an abstract theoretical postulate” but a dynamic necessity: one which rejects all alienated second order mediations and

seeks to reestablish an organic human community through the associated producers rationally organizing their metabolic relation to nature. The “epochal change” required to bring this about is the only viable alternative for humanity in the face of the present runaway train to disaster.<sup>60</sup>

“The most precious lesson” Mészáros offers, Daniel Singer declared,

is the confrontation between two fundamentally opposed “metabolisms.” The rule of capital is presented as an integrated system, including all sorts of features built over time. The socialist project must be equally comprehensive. All its gains cannot be reached at once, but the movement will have to embark on its journey with such a vision. And the attack on the hierarchical division of labor as well as the withering away of the state will have to start from the very beginning, if a new historic attempt is not to be thwarted like its predecessors. What remains to be found is the passage from theory to praxis, the solution to the old socialist dilemma: How do you mobilize people within the framework of the existing society, while providing answers that take you beyond its confines?<sup>61</sup>

#### Notes

- 1.↪Chávez first called Mészáros the “Pathfinder” (Señalador de caminos)—referring to his role in illuminating the transition to socialism—in an inscription that he wrote in a copy of Simón Rodríguez’s *Collected Works* which he gave to Mészáros at a dinner in the Miraflores Palace on September 10, 2001.
- 2.↪István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (New York: Merlin Press, 1970), 11.
- 3.↪Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971); *The Young Hegel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1975).
- 4.↪Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, xxvi–xxx, 538–39. Lukács emphasized that Hegel’s work had also sought to penetrate dialectically into the reifications of natural science, in addition to political economy. He saw the economic reifications, however, as more vital to the understanding of the Hegelian system, and ones that he could more easily address, given the knowledge of physical science that would be necessary to elucidate the former. See *ibid*, xxi–xxii.
- 5.↪Marx was never a Hegelian. As early as his doctoral thesis on ancient materialist philosophy the depth of his critique of the Hegelian system is already evident. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 51–53.
- 6.↪See Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1970), 385–86.
- 7.↪Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 99–119.
- 8.↪Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, 162–65.
- 9.↪István Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, vol. 2 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 397; see also chapter 3 below.

- 10.↪Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 10.
- 11.↪István Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), chapter 1.
- 12.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 27.
- 13.↪Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 104, 111.
- 14.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 49–50.
- 15.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 45–47.
- 16.↪István Mészáros, "Barbarism on the Horizon: An Interview" (conducted by Elenora de Lucena), *MRZine*, December 31, 2013, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org>.
- 17.↪Ernesto Screpanti, *Global Imperialism and the Great Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), 75.
- 18.↪The question of the degree to which unit labor costs are converging internationally in a race to the bottom, and the related question of whether or not unequal exchange will continue to be a fundamental feature of imperialism under capitalism, constitute controversial issues within Marxism today. Various historical tendencies and counter-tendencies are at work with somewhat different trends operative in different regions of the global South—and depending on the size and power of individual countries. For another view see Samir Amin, *The Law of Worldwide Value* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010). What seems irrefutable, as Mészáros argues, is that the rate of exploitation is rising globally, even if this is occurring unevenly between countries.
- 19.↪István Mészáros, *The Work of Sartre: Search for Freedom and the Challenge of History* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 316. In chapter 11 of the present book Mészáros clarifies his use of the term "the descending phase" of the capital system by referring to the "productively descending phase" (227). This crucial distinction is meant to highlight the fact that the capital system, while appearing to continue to advance in its own terms, has nonetheless passed objectively from "creative destruction" (to use Schumpeter's famous phrase) to destructive production, reflecting the totalizing nature of its structural crisis in which it is caught and the increasing dominance of waste and destruction. I have therefore inserted the word "productively" in brackets in the quoted passage from *The Work of Sartre* to conform to Mészáros's usage in the present book.
- 20.↪Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 76–77.
- 21.↪István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995).
- 22.↪Daniel Singer, "After Alienation," *Nation*, June 10, 1996, <http://thenation.com>; István Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 183.
- 23.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, xxi; Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, 95.
- 24.↪István Mészáros, *Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2010), 16; *Beyond Capital*, 91–95, 633–35, 645–72.

- 25.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 40–58.
- 26.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 42–47; Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 283; Georg Lukács, *Conversations with Lukács* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 43; *History and Class Consciousness*, xvi.
- 27.↪Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014); Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 141–77; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).
- 28.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 63.
- 29.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 65.
- 30.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, chapter 3.
- 31.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 68, *Beyond Capital*, 137–39, 141; *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, vol. 1, 397; *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, 110; *The Necessity of Social Control*, 68.
- 32.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 69–70; *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, 394–97.
- 33.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 423, 493.
- 34.↪Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, 117–46.
- 35.↪Michael Lebowitz, "Proposing a Path to Socialism: Two Papers for Hugo Chávez," *Monthly Review* 65, no. 10 (March 2014): 1–19.
- 36.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 106.
- 37.↪István Mészáros, *Socialism or Barbarism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).
- 38.↪Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 149.
- 39.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 55.
- 40.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 62–63.
- 41.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 30–38; Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, vol. 2, 15; Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).
- 42.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, chapter 4. The section on "The Activation of Capital's Absolute Limits" in *The Necessity of Social Control* consists of the introduction to that section of *Beyond Capital*. For his more concrete analysis see Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 152–253.
- 43.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 170.
- 44.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 173.
- 45.↪Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian or Scientific* (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 39; Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 10; Simón Bolívar, "Message to the Congress of Bolivia, May 25, 1826," *Selected Works*, vol. 2 (New York: Colonial Press, 1951), 603.
- 46.↪Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 99.

- 47.↪Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 566–79. The concept of “precariousness” was central to Marx’s theory of the reserve army of labor. See John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, *The Endless Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012).
- 48.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, chapter 6.
- 49.↪Mészáros *The Necessity of Social Control*, 110.
- 50.↪Chapter 4; Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, 49–50. See also John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, “Surveillance Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* 66, no. 3 (July–August 2014): 1–31.
- 51.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 200.
- 52.↪In his economic analysis of monopoly, stagnation, and debt Mészáros relies on such important Marxian political-economic critiques as Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966) and Harry Magdoff and Paul M. Sweezy, *The Irreversible Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988).
- 53.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, see chapter 9.
- 54.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 185, 192.
- 55.↪Mészáros, *Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive*, 22; G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 122–207; Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
- 56.↪Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, 114–16; *Beyond Capital*, 580–86.
- 57.↪Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 216; *Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive*, 34. See the similar observations in Samir Amin, “Popular Movements toward Socialism,” *Monthly Review* 66, no. 2 (June 2014): 5–7.
- 58.↪Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 238.
- 59.↪The use of a historical materialist critique in this work to show the limitations of the main forms of bourgeois thought is similar to that of Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Merlin Press, 1980). Yet, while Lukács had confined his treatment to irrationalism, Mészáros provides a dialectical critique of the main forms of liberal thought as a whole. See also István Mészáros, *The Power of Ideology* (London: Zed Books, 2005).
- 60.↪Mészáros, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness*, vol. 1, 426, vol. 2, 15, 253–54.
- 61.↪Singer, “After Alienation.”

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