

## ***Review of Build it Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century***

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*Build it Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century*

by Michael A. Lebowitz

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Michael A. Lebowitz's book *Build It Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century* is one of the most valuable contributions to scholarship on the prospect of 21st century socialism. It may even provide a "handbook" for those who are striving for a better society where "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx, 1848, as cited in Lebowitz, p. 12).

Lebowitz's analysis of the problems associated with capitalist relations of production and its ideology leads to conclusions about how to change the resulting inequalities. To bring change, workers should know why they want the changes they do and also they should have knowledge of existing solidarity among other people as fellow producers. For Lebowitz, the process to change this capitalist world is continuous revolutionary struggle through participatory democracy with the right for the working class to make its own mistakes and learn from the dialectic of history (p. 72). The cherished site of this change is present day Venezuela.

As Lebowitz was no doubt aware, this task is daunting with several ideological and structural obstacles. Foremost among these is the mentality of TINA, which stands for *There is No Alternative*. Among the more structural challenges are Bretton Woods Institutions, the struggle against property rights, commodification, and the invasion of money and prices in all aspects of our life. In Lebowitz's view, only if people consciously practice such resistance and continually build solidarity across the world can we change this capitalist world to a socialist one.

Given that Lebowitz believes Venezuela is an appropriate site for 21st first century socialism, he analyzes how the country is moving toward this goal. It is an oil-rich country where infrastructure is at the level of centuries past and oil rents have made some people rich while 80% of the people remain poor. In Lebowitz's terms, capitalism in Venezuela is parasitic, demonstrating the virtual disappearance of

manufacturing and agriculture, while possessing a pervasive culture of clientalism, corruption, and a “sham democracy.”

Hugo Chávez was elected as the president of Venezuela in 1998. By 2000, the country had a new name and new constitution: The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and The Bolivarian Constitution. The constitution was based upon equality of rights and duties, solidarity, common effort, mutual understanding, and reciprocal respect. Article 62 of the Bolivarian constitution declares that participation by the people is “the necessary way of achieving the involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective” (p. 72). This is a constitution that demands a democratic, participatory, and protagonistic society.

Within the new system are key elements of capitalism, such as the right to hold private property, recognition of the role of private enterprise in generating growth and employment, and autonomy for the Central Bank of Venezuela. However, it is different from the regulatory framework of neo-liberalism penetrating much of the Western World. Rather than “worshipping the market,” it has rejected the privatization of oil and other state industries. Rather than government retraction, the state is actively involved. To Lebowitz’s surprise, there was little role for the self-managing co-operatives in the “social economy” of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The system encourages private investment, creating a domestic environment for foreign investment, yet it does not follow neo-liberalism, which leaves markets virtually untouched. In this strategy for endogenous development, the active state works as the supply side: it acts not as entrepreneur, but as facilitator, correcting market failures and encouraging the development of technology, growth, and accumulation.

The focus on endogenous development began on a relatively modest scale, not copying any previous path, but by inventing a new one. Chavez repeatedly pronounced, “You can not end poverty without giving power to the poor” (p. 101). Yet obstacles remain; the most important among them are the general belief that there is/was no place for co-management in strategic industries and worker self interest (as opposed to solidarity or a collective). Lebowitz argues that in order to overcome these problems, Venezuela must reinvent socialism. The way to do so is to develop new systems that are built on cooperation, not competition. This reinvention is not state socialism like in the Soviet Union. Instead, it is a system which puts humans first, and not machines, or the state. In theory, this is a production system where the collective producer is both the object and subject of power. Lebowitz demonstrates that this occurs not by a sudden change to society through state capitalism and bureaucracy, but rather through a step by step, gradual process with the people and through their understanding and choice.

In his view, democratic decisions taken both in the workplace and by the community; production based on satisfying needs; common ownership; a democratic, participatory, and protagonistic government; and, solidarity based upon recognition of our common humanity characterize “the true human society” (p. 67). For that to be achieved, we need to learn from the lessons of the 20th century. As Rosa Luxemburg said, the working class “demands the right to make its own mistakes and learn in the dialectic of history” (p. 72). The Bolivarian constitution of Venezuela is one of the documents of this learning process. Lebowitz suggests that

the experience of Yugoslav self-management offers a good example of learning from our own mistakes.

*Build It Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century* is unique in many ways. First, Lebowitz calls our attention to early Marxian thought from an early draft of the *Communist Manifesto*. To paraphrase, the goal is to organize a society where every member can develop and use their capabilities and powers in complete freedom without infringing on the basic conditions of society. Lebowitz reminds us that contrary to the much talked about economic equality, the ultimate goal of the communists was something different. This goal—social relations of freely associated producers, free development of each and free development of all—may not be an unattainable alternative. If we look to Lebowitz, then the way toward this goal is continuous revolutionary practices through participatory democracy, providing that we learn from our mistakes: it is the Marxism of Che Guevara.