The economic crisis beginning in 2007 punctured the dominance of neo-liberal ideology, without completely overturning it. To accomplish that, and force socialism back on the agenda, is the urgent political job of the left, as the establishment's relative disarray will not last for the long term. The tired old saw on democracy still functions for capitalism as a whole: however bad capitalism is, it is the best system possible. Breaking this piece of common sense is a priority. Happily, the crisis does seem to have given left-wing writers the confidence to start openly arguing for socialism once more.

Despite books by figures as different as Badiou (The Communist Hypothesis, Verso) and G. A. Cohen (Why Not Socialism?, Princeton University Press), much of this new wave of writing seems to be coming from the context of the American continents. The upsurge in the left across Latin America in the last ten years or so, as well as simultaneous bitter divisions within the USA, no doubt provide the impetus. Nonetheless, the three books considered in this review are all very different in intentions and approach, and so it might be considered somewhat unfair to consider them side by side. And yet, it is precisely their very varying perspectives that beg comparison.

Capitalism is a murderous system, and the injustice and hardship within a privileged centre such as the United States provide Alan Maass with the punchy opening for his Case for Socialism. He goes on to contrast, for example, the US government's spending on wars and its social spending, providing arguments that anyone should find compelling. Material of this kind enables the book to develop an accessible critique of American capitalism. This approach can be rousing to the activist, and is certainly a useful source, but its effectiveness depends upon a problematic assumption. The hidden premise is that the experience of economic hardship will encourage people to look towards the left as a matter of course. Sadly, the terrible fact about capitalism is that its damage lies not merely in the quantitative hardships it inflicts upon so many people worldwide, but the isolating, embittering effects of the daily experience of alienation in boom times as in recession. The de-humanising impact of capitalism upon people is essential to the system's survival.

Alienation is therefore a key element in Michael A. Lebowitz's pithy but profound explanation of capitalism as a system in The Socialist Alternative. Thus he explains why 'our power does not appear as our power because, in reality, it isn't our power anymore. Rather, we think of the means of production, of our social heritage, as capital' (p. 35). This mystification of society and economy is constantly reproduced by the exploitative structures of capitalism. It is what enables the ruling class to convince many people that 'cuts' are just a common sense necessity. From here, the analysis leads Lebowitz onto the problem of defining socialism and the difficulties of achieving it.

Lebowitz intends his analysis of alienation and its socialist opposite, 'the rich human being', to provide the basis for a kind of methodology for the building of socialism. The formula here is derived from Mészáros by way of Chavez's triangle of socialism: social ownership of the means of production, social production organised by workers, and social production for communal needs and purposes (p. 24). Lebowitz builds the case for socialism by moving from
the profound de-humanising effects of capitalist economic relations, to demonstrating why the 'socialisms' of
the twentieth century failed to overcome capitalism's alienating life-cycles. Thus learning from those
disasters, through a return to Marx's analysis of capitalism as an historically constituted system, is necessary in
developing a new socialist programme. This would be a whole system of production, distribution and
consumption in which real human needs rather than abstract profit become the driving force. The shape of
socialism thus emerges very persuasively from Marx's own analysis of capitalism.

While Maass presents a 'common sense' approach to the case against capitalism, Lebowitz illuminates why
standard common sense is so often a gift to capitalist ideology. The thoughts of the ruling class are ruling
thoughts in a very deep sense. Lebowitz's careful definition of a humanist socialist project makes brilliant use
of Marx's writings from the 1844 manuscripts, through to the Grundrisse and Capital, alongside a number of
other works. The wholeness of Marx's thought on the nature of capitalism, alienation and human liberation
from it, as a result, is made lucid and accessible. Lebowitz makes it clear why socialism does not simply
follow directly from the horrors of capitalism, but does not fully elaborate how capitalist alienation can be
overcome through self-conscious, organised class struggle.

Nonetheless, Lebowitz extracts an impressively coherent set of ideas from Marx about the nature and meaning
of socialism, giving the lie to an early contention in Eric Olin Wright's Envisioning Real Utopias. This
contention is drawn from the standard view of Marx that he left only a 'broad-stroke conception of the future',
lacking a 'theory of the trajectory' (pp. 27-9) into a future system. Several passages in Lebowitz would serve
as withering put downs of this point of view.

Wright adopts a number of dispiriting positions for someone setting out to 'envision' actual 'utopias'. One
would expect such a project to attempt to leap with some enthusiasm beyond the given 'reality' of the present,
but in fact Wright seems relentlessly to adopt the principles of socialism's opponents as his starting point. The
counter-productive effect of revolutionary perspectives is just one nostrum that re-appears with some
frequency. It begins to seem as if revolutionaries are more serious impediments to the achievement of 'real
utopias' than, say, the capitalist ruling class. This is all a long way from Lebowitz's grounding in the perception
that present 'common sense' behaviour encodes the dominance of capitalism. Academic reason, such as it is,
is often a reliable example of the thoughts of the ruling class being ruling thoughts.

This is the price of Wright's 'realism'. Considerable space is given over in the first section, 'Diagnosis and
Critique', to dealing with even the most tendentious right-wing defences of capitalism. The virtues of a
straightforward, factual attack on capitalism is evident when the distinguished left academic feels the need to
concede capitalism's great successes. Not only has capitalism 'generated dramatic technological and scientific
progress' leading to much improvement but that 'these improvements . . . have diffused quite broadly,
including, more recently, to significant parts of the developing world' (pp. 40-1). The immense social
destruction and exploitation, the suffering imposed on the bulk of the global population by neo-liberal
globalisation, seems to have passed by Wright altogether. It is hard not to feel at this point that Wright would
benefit from Maass' brisk run through the horrors of present-day capitalism.

Having conceded the ground to panglossian visions of neo-liberal globalisers, Wright then offers the 'counter-
factual' argument that the world could be better still under socialism. This seems to be a weak position to
argue for the necessity of a wholly new social system. Wright is not choosing weak foundations out of
caprice, but apparently out of theoretical conviction. He states that Marx was wrong in nearly all aspects of
his work; 'historical materialism' is untenable, the labour theory of value has been 'disproved', and there is no
long-term tendency for the rate of profit to fall (pp. 100-110).

All that is left is a theory of 'class', which in Wright's hands seems to be defined in static sociological terms,
rather than anything remotely dialectical in nature. This is particularly true in his discussion of the
complexities of class structure in modern developed economies. Here he sees the capacity of a working class
to act collectively in a struggle against capitalism only declining over time. No potential countervailing
developments are considered. The growth of white-collar work simply diminishes the share of the working class in the population, rather than adding to its potential strength through the increasing proletarianisation of non-managerial professionals (p. 103).

Marx's method was at centre an historical one. He did not analyse capitalism by proceeding from abstract categories but from the historically constituted whole of the social system as it actually existed. Wright reproduces the worst defect of bourgeois sociological analysis by proceeding in the opposite direction. For example, in a hoary old chestnut of standard thinking, he declares that 'no actual living economy has ever been purely capitalist or statist or socialist, since it is never the case that the allocation, control, and use of economic resources is determined by a single form of power' (p. 123).

Unable to live up to positivist categories, reality is found wanting. The historically real development of capitalism as a whole system, dominated by a capitalist class, is hidden by this sort of formalistic analysis. The approach prevents Wright from seeing how capitalism enforces the dominance of a particular kind of productive relation throughout the whole system, however sociologically 'impure' some parts of the whole might be. Wright is forced to argue for 'real Utopias' because in abandoning the guts of Marxism, he loses all sense of the historical process by which capitalism might be vulnerable to attack and replacement by any social agent within it. Instead there are just 'utopian' propositions which must be dissected for their advantages and disadvantages by a disconnected academic process.

Moreover, 'in no developed capitalist society has the working class developed a collective capacity to challenge the foundations of capitalist power' (p. 106). This is to read history through the lens of right-wing triumphalism internalised as defeat. History becomes a flat surface where the contradictory whole and the contingent flow of class struggle is written out of bounds. It seems to be defeat, political and ideological, which leads Wright to spend so much space on tussling with 'ruling thoughts' rather than advancing to any advocacy of socialism of any kind.

Once Wright does reach the 'utopian' phase of his book, there is no sense of the institutions of power which are crucial to the enforcing of capitalism, or that these would be used against any really threatening alternative. Indeed when discussing power he rules out seeing it in clear class terms, reducing it to a concept of 'capacity' (p. 112). No doubt Wright could defend vigorously his rejection of Marxist methodology for standard sociological categories and analysis. However, it certainly rules out any revolutionary socialist praxis in favour of what becomes a moderate reformism within the bounds of the 'realistic'.

The increasingly limited ambitions undermine the plausibility of the routes to 'utopia' that he presents. There are of course many intriguing ideas, such as 'democracy cards' as an egalitarian way of financing elections (pp. 167-70), or a universal basic income (pp. 217-222). These are splendid notions in the abstract. Nonetheless it is hard to see them being implemented in a meaningful form without a politically powerful working-class movement. Additionally, in the right circumstances, the ruling class might be able to manage some of these innovations to the advantage of capitalist interests. The former situation renders the 'utopian' plan superfluous, and the latter pointless. In the discussion of universal basic income, the issue becomes one of the problem of capital flight from any country that implemented such a programme. The necessity of building a mass, organised class force that could realise this 'utopian' idea does not arise.

Wright, having defined away class power in the Marxist sense, is only interested in increasing 'social empowerment'. There are interesting discussions of some proposed empowering mechanisms, like municipal participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre. Wright does often effectively point to the strengths and limitations of such experiments. Other discussions, such as those of co-operatives and employee stock ownership, are unconvincing as alternatives to capitalism, even within Wright's terms, and are hard to see as utopian as such. Indeed, once it has been conceded that 'markets' are probably necessary, without any sense of the social power they give to existing class forces, the sense of a 'utopian' vision becomes quite elusive.
This is where Lebowitz's elaboration of socialism as 'real human development' is particularly refreshing. Lebowitz is much less detailed than Wright in his consideration of possible plans and practical alternatives, but that is actually a strength. It flows from a sound understanding of the meaning of contingency in the building of socialism in different circumstances. There are many possible demands and plans that a powerful mass movement could make, but their particulars are less important than the building of working class solidarity. That is the key germ of socialism, whatever particular historically contingent institutions socialist movements might create.

Even so there seems some ambiguity in Lebowitz's argument precisely around the building of a class power that could push society towards socialism. This hesitation may be related to his involvement with the 'Bolivarian revolution' in Venezuela. A detailed consideration of the 'Bolivarian revolution' from a perspective close to Lebowitz is the recent issue of Monthly Review, July-August 2010: Marta Harnecker, "Latin America and Twenty-First Century Socialism: Inventing to Avoid Mistakes." There is no question that Latin America is presently a beacon for anti-capitalism internationally. Nonetheless, in Venezuela and Bolivia alike, the relationships between leaders and the movements, and the working class in general, are seen by many revolutionary socialists as problematic. Lebowitz and Harnecker seem to see Chavez and Morales uncomplicatedly as part of a revolutionary process.

Lebowitz leaves the question of the party to a short section at the end of the book. The Socialist Alternative is gracefully concise, and much to be recommended, but the question of organisation surely needs more detailed consideration. Lebowitz recognises the crucial role of leadership, yet he seems to consider the revolutionary party mainly through the lens of the damage Stalinist parties did in the twentieth century. A genuine Leninist party is not however merely a hierarchical 'transmission belt' for orders (p. 162). Indeed Lebowitz's own arguments on the dialectics of alienation and liberation are deeply connected to issues of class consciousness and its relationship to the party, and arguably cry out for development in this direction.

All books that make a general case for socialism, from the popular pamphlet to the academic treatise, always invite invidious comparison to Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto. One of the many great strengths of that short book was its ability to convey highly complex and revolutionary ideas in remarkably simple form. It seems much harder now, for all sorts of reasons, to achieve anything like that wonderful mix of the profound and accessible. Maass avoids the complexity in favour of readability, and has produced a useful book, particularly in an American context, that might inspire many to political action. Wright no doubt wishes to inspire but seems unable to escape the deadening assumptions of pure academic sociology. Michael Lebowitz, however, has produced a very fine book, which does succeed in echoing the original triumph of dialectical praxis.

This review was first published in Counterfire on 24 September 2010; it is reproduced here for non-profit educational purposes.

URL: mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/alexander240910.html