



The Contradictions of "Real Socialism": The Conductor and the Conducted

Michael Lebowitz

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What was “real socialism”—the term which originated in twentieth-century socialist societies for the purpose of distinguishing them from abstract, theoretical socialism? In this volume, Michael A. Lebowitz considers the nature, tendencies, and contradictions of those societies. Beginning with the constant presence of shortages within “real socialism,” Lebowitz searches for the inner relations which generate these patterns. He finds these, in particular, in what he calls “vanguard relations of production,” a relation which takes the apparent form of a social contract where workers obtain benefits not available to their counterparts in capitalism but lack the power to decide within the workplace and society.

While these societies were able to claim major achievements in areas from health care to education to popular culture, the separation of thinking and doing prevented workers from developing their capacities as fully developed human beings. The relationship within “real socialism” between the vanguard as conductor and a conducted working class, however, did not only lead to the deformation of workers and those elements necessary for the building of socialism; it also created the conditions in which enterprise managers emerged as an incipient capitalist class, which was an immediate source of the crises of “real socialism.” As he argued in *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, Lebowitz stresses the necessity to go beyond the hierarchy inherent in the relation of conductor and conducted (and beyond the “vanguard Marxism” which supports this) to create the conditions in which people can transform themselves through their conscious cooperation and practice—i.e., a society of free and associated producers.

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