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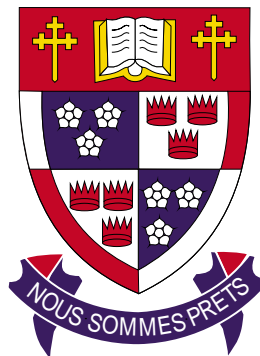
Discussion Papers

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**A Global Alternative to the
International Division of
Labour Under Capitalism**

M. Lebowitz

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

A Global Alternative to the International Division of Labour under Capitalism

Michael A. Lebowitz

Simon Fraser University (Canada)

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Criticising Capitalist Globalisation

There are many critiques of capitalist globalisation, ranging from the advocacy of particular reforms intended to mitigate its worst excesses to an argument calling for replacement of globalisation with national self-reliance. All imply an alternative to the present state.

But, what is the appropriate way to envision an alternative? One problem in framing alternatives is that in a given environment, rationality may itself be selected by the character of that environment. Consider the choice, for example, between selling one's labour-power and not selling it. The comment has often been made that the only thing worse than being exploited is not to be exploited at all (i.e., to be unemployed). With the same irony, one might propose that within the environment of capitalist globalisation, it is more rational to be exploited within that environment than to withdraw from the global economy into a self-reliant isolation. The problem here falls into the

general set of prisoner's dilemmas--- the rationality of a suboptimal choice when the existing structure makes irrational or impossible superior alternatives.

In such cases, envisioning a real alternative calls for thinking outside the existing structure. What insights are available by envisioning a 'counterfactual' alternative? This is precisely what underlies Marx's critique of capitalism. It is not the tendency of capital to usurp the lives of producers by driving the length and intensity of the work-day up to a maximum or the tendency of capital to drive down living standards to a physiological minimum which gives Marx's critique its particular force (although, obviously, he tells that story). Indeed, even when workers succeed in pushing in the opposite direction to capital and thereby lowering the workday and raising real wages, Marx's criticism of capitalism is no less powerful. The issue was slavery--- not the level of slave rations. Marx proceeds from the implicit perspective of a 'counterfactual' alternative--- a society in which social wealth, rather than accruing to the purchasers of labour-power, is employed by freely associated individuals to produce in accordance with "communal purposes and communal needs" (Marx, 1973: 158-9, 171-2). For Marx, in short, the concept of a better world, a communist society (without the statist connotation that communism developed in the last century), underlies his critique of capitalism.

In the same way, rather than focusing upon the excesses of capitalism and the need, accordingly, for reforms to capitalist globalisation, the critique of the existing structure may be best conducted from outside.

The concept of communist globalisation

There is an old proverb that if you don't know where you want to go, then any road will take you there. In seeking an alternative to the patterns characteristic of capitalist globalisation, it is crucial to know what the goal is. Does the conception of an alternative, for example, imply the same international division of labour--- modified only by the substitution of non-capitalist relations for the characteristic institutions of capitalism? Or, would that international division of labour differ substantially--- permitting people around the world to work with and share the social wealth produced by human beings as their common heritage? Certainly, even outside the framework of capitalist relations as such, there is the potential for considerable conflict. Whereas the poverty of some producers reflects their lack of access to the productive forces created historically by the collective worker, others have secured high standards of living as the result of their privileged access to those productive forces and their struggles to capture the fruits of the resulting social productivity. No magic wand can make this contradiction disappear.

For this reason, it is especially important to develop a clear idea of an alternative. Consider the concept of communist globalisation--- the concept of a global collective worker, a producer composed of differing limbs and organs from around the world, who produces the necessary inputs for that collective worker in "full self-awareness as one single social labour force" (Marx, 1977: 171). Such a concept provides the basis not only for a critique of capitalist globalisation but also points to a particular goal that transcends the existing structure.

When we conceive of a communist globalisation (i.e., conduct this ‘thought-experiment’), we see that producers here are consciously part of a global collective worker. They engage in cooperation, a combination of labours that produces a ‘multiplied productive force’, a higher social productivity than in the absence of this social combination (Lebowitz, 1992: 67-8). But communist globalisation involves far more than just a global collective worker *in itself*. Characteristic of the social relation among the producers in this structure is that they recognise their unity as members of the human family and act upon this basis to ensure the well-being of others within this family.

At the very core of the concept of communist globalisation, thus, is solidarity. And that immediately points beyond the existing international division of labour. In contrast to international trade based upon differential access to means of production and upon differential skills, the solidarity characteristic of the global collective worker *for itself* eliminates differentials based upon inequality by providing means of production and training to less advantaged producers. In this ‘association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (i.e., this relation in which interdependent utility functions are paramount), hitherto privileged regions would act to maximise the productive capability of the least well-off in the global society, and this activity would be its own reward. As a result, the emerging international division of labour would reflect differences that are the result not of inequality but, rather, of differences in natural conditions as well as social and cultural preferences.

Thus, communist globalisation would produce its own particular international division of labour. Insofar as local producers are capable of providing for many local needs using the most advanced productive forces, similar patterns of productive activity

would tend to be reproduced throughout the world--- thereby making unnecessary much energy-intensive shipping and transport over long distances. Reinforcing this tendency, too, would be the free movement of producers without regard for national boundaries--- a movement driven not by inequity but by the opportunity to associate with others in the quest for full development of their human potential. Although only the freely associated producers would determine the extent of the change (in accordance with their desire for the full development of all), it is certain that in place of much current long-distance trade, there would be direct cooperation among those producers.

This change would occur not only because of the removal of inequality as a basis for trade (and indeed the ending of the exchange of commodities as such). There would be an even more dramatic contrast to the current international division of labour. Given that the concept of the collective worker for itself is rooted in conscious cooperation and solidarity among producers, there is no place within communist globalisation for competition between producers. Rather than motivating producers to develop and utilise their individual capacities in cooperation, competition divides the collective worker. With the assurance that their needs can be satisfied simply as the result of membership in the global community, individual producers work well not out of the fear of the consequence of doing otherwise but, rather, because of the satisfaction they receive from their activity. Precisely because of the nature of their social relations, they are alert to better ways of doing things and accordingly constantly innovate--- not because of their separation and divisions but because of their unity.

Thus, the concept of communist globalisation is rooted in community and in the solidarity between freely associated communities. In contrast, particular to capitalist

globalisation is that it drives toward the destruction of community and solidarity.

Characteristics of capitalist globalisation

There are two sides to capitalist globalisation. One aspect of capital has always been its tendency to create the global collective worker in itself. As Marx stressed, capital tends to tear ‘down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces’ (Marx, 1973: 410). Since capital’s drive for surplus value leads it to search for new consumers and new sources of raw materials, inherent within capital is the concept of the world market. In this particular respect, its tendency to develop productive forces is consistent with that of communist globalisation but it takes a specific capitalist-form.

However, while capital benefits from the increase in social productivity arising out of the development of the global collective worker, its goal is not productivity or efficiency as such. Rather, capital is driven by its desire for profits, for surplus value; and, the condition of its success in this project is that workers not capture the fruits of productivity change. Thus, also inherent in the concept of capital is that capital must divide and separate workers in order to weaken them in relation to capital. By increasing the degree of separation among workers (and thereby their difficulty in forming and maintaining coalitions), capital does not merely reduce the ability of workers to benefit from productivity increase but it also generates a tendency toward increases in the length and intensity of the workday and decreases in the real wage (Lebowitz, 1992: 69-70).

Thus, essential to the calculations of capital with respect to particular innovations is their anticipated effect not only upon productivity but also upon the ability of workers to combine; the bottom line for capital is the combined effect of these two factors rather than productivity effects alone. Because capital only innovates within the framework of specific social relations, its innovations and the specific productive forces developed are never neutral--- they embody capital's goals within the context of a two-sided struggle (Lebowitz, 1992:86-7).

In the same way, decisions within capitalism as to the location of production are never based simply upon efficiency considerations. The locus of capital's investment decisions is influenced significantly by the search for sources of cheap labour (as well as low taxes and lax environmental regulations). In this respect, the international division of labour generated by capitalist globalisation necessarily differs from that which would prevail if productivity and efficiency were the goals.

By locating production operations in regions where historically developed social needs are low, capital can significantly lower the costs of production relative to those in existing centres of production to the extent that a productivity gap does not counterbalance the reduced wage bill. More than customary wage levels, however, affect such decisions: authoritarianism and government repression of trade union organising offer the absolute advantage of repression to capitalist firms prepared to use such localities as export platforms. Since substantial rents of repression are available to capital in such favourable environments, the incentive to relocate production operations is high.

Here we have a clear demonstration of Marx's proposition that it is through the competition of individual capitals that the inner laws of capital are executed. Precisely

because capitals operating in specific localities benefit from the differential exploitation of workers through the suppression of worker and citizen rights, they are able to win the battle of competition. The resulting tendency generates a race to the bottom, which brings with it a rising degree of exploitation on a global scale. Of course, this has always been capital's tendency--- to attempt to drive wages down to their minimum and the length and intensity of the workday to their maximum; and, the worker's tendency is to press in the opposite direction. Yet, what changes is the respective power of the combatants--- the result of the increase in the degree of separation among workers that accompanies the process of capitalist globalisation. In the 'Worker's Dilemma', so long as groups of workers are separated and function atomistically, rationality for each group of workers calls for it to make concessions (and indeed continuing concessions) over wages and working conditions in order to preserve jobs (Lebowitz, 1988). Of course, the most desirable recourse for workers as a whole is to unite around the world to eliminate capital's ability to separate and defeat them; yet, this is precisely what capitalist globalisation, combined with repression of worker and citizen rights, makes difficult.

Thus, capital tends to create a specifically capitalist international division of labour--- one in which the location of productive activity is not neutral but reflects its ability to separate workers.

The struggle against capitalist globalisation

Consider the situation of workers in high wage regions. Given continuing incentives for capital to relocate to low wage regions, workers elsewhere face the real prospect that standards of life achieved as the result of much struggle will be levelled downward. Accordingly, in the absence of international unity among workers, a trade

policy of 'social tariffs' which removes the cost advantages that capital gains by suppressing workers' and citizen's rights appears to them as a second best solution. If they are not able to exert power (except momentarily) in either the labour market or the sphere of production, then only by affecting capital's ability to realise profits through the sale of commodities can workers in high wage regions pressure capital (Lebowitz, 1988). Social tariffs (much like consumer boycotts) are intended to support the levelling of wages and working conditions *upward* rather than downward; they are a response to capital's increase in the degree of separation of workers. Workers attempt here (in Marx's words) to use the power of the state, 'now used against them, into their own agency. They effect by a general act what they would vainly attempt by a multitude of isolated individual efforts' (Marx, 1866:344-5). By offering a basis for struggle, they help to prevent a situation where, as Marx warned, workers can become 'a heart-broken, a weak-minded, a worn-out, unresisting mass' (Marx and Engels, 1979:169).

Nevertheless, not only is this protectionist stance often accompanied by the growth of xenophobia and racism (i.e., the very opposite of international solidarity), but it is manifestly a trade practice designed to protect workers in a privileged part of the world. Not surprisingly, its advocacy generates resentment and reduces solidarity around the world. On the other side, the demands for unfettered access to markets of manufactures produced in low wage countries necessarily threaten workers faced with low-wage competition. Precisely because the contradictions among producers within capitalist globalisation are so profound, the concept of a counter-factual alternative may be useful in contributing to struggles against capitalist globalisation.

Consider some insights flowing from the concept of communist globalisation.

Compared to the international division of labour within communist globalisation, too much industry is currently concentrated in the privileged countries that have been historically the source of manufactured exports for the world. Reducing the proportion of the collective worker located in such countries, however, should occur *not* because labour there is too expensive (which is capital's perspective) but, rather, because improvement of productive forces and standards in less developed areas must be a conscious goal. Thus, the concept of communist globalisation points to the importance of a focus upon solidarity and aid--- between countries, between communities, between organised workers--- in current activity. The immediate goal is to abolish every barrier to the full development of producers in less privileged sections of the world.

Yet, consistent with the concept of communist globalisation, this process should not encourage competition, which is the way that capital divides and weakens workers. On the contrary, social tariffs (which do not affect commodities which are cheaper because of productivity advantages) are one of the few weapons available to reduce capital's ability to divide workers. Rather than permitting capital to obliterate the gains that workers have made through their struggles, social tariffs substitute the needs of the collective worker for the rules of capital; they are part of a challenge to every so-called trade agreement or international organisation such as the WTO which has as its purpose the enforcement of capital's rules and the negation of democratic control over communities.

Parts do not exist in isolation. Rather, they 'acquire properties by virtue of being parts of a particular whole, properties they do not have in isolation or as parts of another whole' (Levins and Lewontin, 1985:273, 3). Combined with support for significant

transfers of real resources to less developed regions, for the struggles of workers in those regions and for the free movement of workers (i.e., open borders), social tariffs lose their protectionist colouration; they can be seen a part of a particular whole--- one that represents a global alternative to capitalist globalisation. This is a conception that does not reject international institutions as such but demands that those institutions be transformed to serve the global collective worker rather than capital, demands that the full development of human potential rather than the accumulation of capital be the goal.

There are many parts to this global alternative that point to immediate policy goals. Rather, for example, than demanding the impoverishment of less developed regions in order to make them more competitive exporters, this alternative calls for support for local development on the basis of a healthy home market. Similarly, rather than retaining the crippling international debt burdens facing less developed countries, this alternative identifies the debt owed by more developed nations--- their responsibility to share the common heritage of human beings.

Once the concept of communist globalisation is articulated, it is possible to identify the consistency of various parts with that whole. However, if you don't know where you want to go, then any road will take you there.

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