

# The alternative to capitalism - democratic protagonism in the 21st century

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## THE ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALISM – DEMOCRATIC PROTAGONISM IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

### ABSTRACT

The paper explores the possibility of creating a positive vision of post-capitalist society and economy, a blue-print for future society with reminiscence to the existing valuable drafts such as Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*. Also, it focuses on shortcomings of that blue-print that became evident through the experiences of 20th-century real socialisms. Following Canadian Marxist Michael Lebowitz, the paper elaborates on how the vision of socialism for the 21st century should place central emphasis on the importance of changing the social relations of production. The central problem is located in the "vanguard relations of production", the central power and hierarchical authority in the hand of the party vanguard. The paper stresses the importance of the communist party as central to the articulation of the interests of the proletarian class as a whole, a class whose central interest is the overthrow of capitalism. However, the project of overthrowing capitalism must include the recognition of the practical comprehension of the importance of the democratic protagonism. Workers cannot be subordinated as passive observers of the system change. A change in social circumstances should simultaneously mean a change in the actors themselves – the socialist protagonists.

### KEYWORDS

*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, democratic protagonism, avant-garde party, socialisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-capitalist left, real socialisms

### A Positive Vision of the Future Socialist Society/Theoretical Compasses

The anti-capitalist left today is in a deep crisis, frightened or confused, in any case unsure of what to do. The defeat of the real socialisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left it speechless, as if it did not know how to approach these historical attempts, what lessons should be drawn from them for the current and future of anti-capitalist struggles. A critical return to Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* reminds us that the fundamental determination and task of communists is to articulate the interests of the proletarian class as a whole, a class

whose central interest is the overthrow of capitalism, the overthrow of the ruling capitalist class and its socio-economic function (Marx and Engels 1967).

This interest is not always evident in the particular historical struggles of workers and the disenfranchised, often they are not in the line with the class interests of the proletariat as a whole, and it is the task of communists to understand and theoretically articulate general interests in the form of a vision for proletariat in a way that it can still be constituted into a class. Such vision is important because it is necessary to give positive determinations of the goals of the fight against capitalism, and thus to enable the consideration of more concrete programmatic, organizational and strategic steps for the purpose of reaching these goals. The conflict is surely between “hope and resignation”, as Søren Mau stated, between giving up the hope and believing in “the actual possibility of organizing our shared life in an entirely different and better way” (Mau 2023). Overcoming capitalism without positive vision of post-capitalist society and economy, remains only a negatively defined goal reduced to indefinite abstraction of its own demand or slogan.

175 years after the publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* communism was not fought or reached as “historical inevitability”, and the specter of communism is no longer haunting Europe and does not worry the ruling forces of the capitalist world, as the introduction of the *Manifesto* depicted the social and political climate in the heated Europe in 1848 with militant optimism, pregnant with concrete Utopian hope. Today, 175 years after the *Manifesto* and after unsuccessful real socialist attempts, what can we say more concretely about the positive vision of post-capitalist society and the process of achieving it? In order to consider possible answer to that question, it is useful to look at the programmatic part of the *Manifesto*, that is, the ideas articulated in it about what steps are necessary and what conditions need to be met in order to overthrow the ‘bourgeois relations of production’.

From today’s historical perspective, it is clear that the issue of *abolishing private property*, which the *Manifesto* emphasizes as a fundamental political goal and the theory of communists summed up in one phrase (Marx, Engels 1967: 235), is by no means sufficient (even if it is still necessary) to ensure a society of “free and associated producers” (Lebowitz 2010: 109) beyond the class relations of hierarchy and domination. Also, organizing the proletariat into a political force that will conquer the state and implement the dictatorship of the proletariat in order to “wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class; and to increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible” (Marx and Engels 1967: 243) turned out to be flawed in the form of an avant-garde party that led the construction of real socialism in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today we know that such a strategy for overthrowing “the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms” (Marx and Engels 1967: 244), where it was implemented, did not lead to an association “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx and Engels 1967: 244). Instead of the free association of

producers and the free and all-round development of all people, real socialist attempts led to the continuation of hierarchical rule in the form of a party-bureaucratic apparatus, the alienating atomization and dominance of the self-interested orientation of the working masses, and the absence of conditions for protagonist action and democratic participation of people in all key decisions that concern them – as workers, producers and members of the local community and society (Cockshott 2012; Lebowitz 2012).

Among the few theoreticians who approached the consideration of a positive vision of a future socialist society (Itoh 1995; Devine 1988; Albert 2003; Saros 2014; Hudis 2012), against the background of criticism of historical attempts to build socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the inadequate or one-sided theory by which they were guided or justified, recently deceased Canadian Marxist Michael Lebowitz stands out. Therefore, we will briefly repeat some of his theses in which he explains what was theoretically wrong, one-sided or overlooked in understanding the key conditions for overthrowing capitalism and building socialism.

To begin with, Lebowitz points out that if you don't know where you want to go, than any road will get you there (Lebowitz 2010: 26). In other words, we need a vision of the future society and an adequate, therefore materialistic and historical, understanding of its conditions. Today's nominally anti-capitalist left avoids theoretical consideration of a systemic alternative to capitalism and focuses almost exclusively on criticizing the political economy of capitalism. The reluctance to articulate a positive vision or a blueprint of a socialist alternative is justified by referring to Marx, who also did not present any detailed blueprint of the future society and who criticized such conceptions as Utopian, stressing that an alternative mode of production must arise from concrete historical dynamics, and not from the imagination and designs of some isolated individual, however ingenious he may be. "Theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer" (Marx, Engels 1967: 235). Nevertheless, both in the *Manifesto* and in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and in many other places in his various writings, Marx laid out a whole series of concrete steps that reflect his vision of the path towards the abolition of the "bourgeois relations of production", decades before the first historical attempts to build a socialist economy. Before we go through some examples it should be emphasized how important it is to keep in mind the importance of the concrete vision of the socialist alternatives.

Today, after the historical experience with the real socialisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their overthrow and the restoration of capitalism, the anti-capitalist left must offer a much more concrete vision of the socio-economic system with which it wants to replace capitalism than it could before the mentioned real socialist attempts. This vision must, on the one hand, by presenting a draft of its own political economy and political constitution, answer the question of how it will overcome or avoid repeating the unquestionable failures and limitations of real socialism, but on the other hand, and much more importantly

– it must return to the fundamental reasons for justice and the desirability of the new socialist society.

Such a vision should be a ‘theoretical compass’ in relation to the concrete historical struggles of workers and the disenfranchised, while a political party guided by such a vision must recognize and be aware of interests and needs in workers’ struggles that can only be satisfied through a radical change in the ruling relations of production. In the context of the general weakness of today’s anti-capitalist movements and organizations, such a vision is apparently rightly criticized in the *Communist Manifesto* for critical-utopian socialism and communism – that are a “fantastic pictures of future society, painted at a time when the proletariat is still in a very undeveloped state [...]” that “correspond with the first instinctive yearnings of that class for a general reconstruction of society” (Marx, Engels 1967: 255). And indeed, today the conditions of class domination are blurred again, the majority of the disenfranchised recognized it “in their earliest indistinct and undefined forms only” (Marx, Engels 1967: 255).

Therefore, the propositions of a positive vision of the future socialist society can and should provide “the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class” (Marx, Engels 1967: 255), as the contributions of critical-utopian socialism and communism were positively evaluated in the *Communist Manifesto*. However, in contrast to the historical time of the creation of the *Communist Manifesto*, its authors, especially Marx, left us with an unsurpassed critique of the political economy of capitalism, its forms and fundamental structural laws and tendencies, and thus enabled us to objectively see the necessary conditions for overcoming its systemic logic. Articulating the vision of the future socialist society, which will be based on Marx’s and Marxist criticism of political economy and on the critical appropriation of the experiences of historical real socialisms, certainly reduces the unsustainable or unfounded aspects of the positive vision of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nevertheless, Marx’s project remained unfinished and in some aspects problematic from today’s perspective, and it is precisely on his critical appropriation that the Marxist left should theoretically shed light on the class logic of subjugation and alienation in current capitalism and historical real socialisms and develop a vision of a future socialist system in which such negativities will be overcome. Michael Lebowitz embarked on just such an undertaking – the correction and supplement of Marx’s unfinished theoretical project, the criticism of the actually existing socialisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the formulation of a vision of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Lebowitz’s vision is based on the so-called socialist triangle. These are three interrelated conditions, the fulfillment of which is necessary in order to build socialism as an organic socio-economic system whose *raison d’être* will be the full and comprehensive development of all people. Those three key conditions

for future socialism are social ownership of the means of production, social production organized by workers, and production focused on jointly determined communal needs and purposes (Lebowitz 2010: 86–87).

Let's briefly consider why these three conditions are crucial according to Lebowitz. Social ownership of the means of production is important so that social production can be directed towards the creation of material conditions that will enable the free development of all, instead of being used to satisfy the private interests of capitalists, different groups of producers (as in Yugoslav market socialism, where social ownership was reduced to group ownership in individual enterprises) or state bureaucrats and partitocracy (as in administratively planned Soviet-type economies with the state as the owner of the means of production).

In all three cases, that is, in capitalism and the historical variations of real socialism, social ownership has not been effectively established. One of the reasons is that in none of these systems is social production generally organized by the workers, so the second condition or the second side of the 'socialist triangle' is not fulfilled. In order for social production to be effectively organized by workers (associated producers), it is necessary to overcome the social division into intellectual and manual labor, i.e. to overcome the functional fixation and stratification of workers according to such a division. Only when all workers in their fulfillment of socially necessary work combine thinking and doing to an equal extent, will they all be able to develop capacities for equal participation in organizing production. Therefore, one of the foundations of the socialist transformation is the concretization of the vision of how to gradually end the social division into intellectual and manual work (and into intellectual, management and executive positions).

In addition to Lebowitz, the central importance of overcoming the division into intellectual and manual labour is emphasized by some other theorists of the participatory economy, such as Robert Hahnel and Michael Albert, who designed the so-called balanced job complex as a concept of operative combination of different work tasks - where no worker would be fixed only on intellectual or exclusively manual tasks (Albert 2003; Hahnel, Wright 2014). This is important in order to ensure an even combination of relatively empowering and less empowering jobs for all workers, which would only develop capacities for effective worker organization of production.

The fulfillment of the third condition – social production aimed at satisfying jointly determined communal and social needs – is necessary in order to overcome the self-interested and 'compensatory' orientation as structurally encouraged by capitalist and real socialist relations of production (Lebowitz calls them: vanguard relations of production because the central power and hierarchical management authority was held by the party vanguard (Lebowitz 2012)).

The central concept that Lebowitz points out was neglected by the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary parties when they led the construction of real socialisms is Marx's materialistic insight from his *Theses on Feuerbach* that people will not develop capacities for democratic protagonism if someone else 'from

above' changes their social circumstances in which they live and work. On the contrary, Marx points out in *Theses* that only when people actively participate in changing the social circumstances in which they live and work, can they also change themselves and develop their own capacities in that process (Marx, Engels 1976). Marx defines this double and simultaneous change as the formula of revolutionary practice – “the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing” (Marx, Engels 1976: 4).

The coincidence of the changing social circumstances and of human activity or self-change is, after all, the essence of Marx's view of ‘the self-creation of man as a process’ (Lebowitz 2003: 181). The worker as outcome of his own labor, indeed, enters into discussion not only by young Marx but also in *Capital* – where Marx discusses that the worker “acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature” (Marx 1977: 283). Lebowitz therefore concludes “every labor process inside and outside the formal process of production (that is, every act of production, every human activity) has as its result joint product – both the change in the object of labor and the change in the laborer herself” (Lebowitz 2010: 52).

Unfortunately, Lebowitz points out, this other side – the change in the people themselves and their capacities – was neglected or suppressed in the construction of real socialisms (Lebowitz 2016). Although the ultimate nominal goal of the vanguard party in real socialism was “system change”, “the responsibility of organizing, guiding, and orienting the working class, all working people, and social organizations” was on the vanguard party (Lebowitz 2012: 69) (as Stalin put it, “the Party must stand at the head of the working class” (Lebowitz 2012: 70)), the working class was represented and led by the party. Workers did not have the possibility to exercise the management over the productive forces, but were only passive observers of the system change.

In this sense, the twentieth century has clearly shown that the rule of the working class (proletariat) is not ensured by winning elections or ‘conquering the state’, the real battle for democracy as the rule of ‘ordinary people’ and workers implies the creation of institutions that will provide space for members of society to develop capacities through protagonist action. Real socialism of the Soviet type, after the slogan under which the revolution was conducted – “all power to the Soviets” – completely subordinated the mentioned “protagonistic” institutions to the domination of the communist party and the bureaucratic apparatus, while the introduction of Yugoslav self-management was also a positive step, but especially after 1965 and the liberal reforms, it was limited by the market coordination of production and the orientation of companies to achieve the highest possible income on the market. There was no democratically planned production to meet communal and social needs, so the market mechanism of production regulation encouraged the petrification of hierarchical structures within companies and made it impossible to end the division into managerial (intellectual) and executive (manual) jobs. This resulted in the divergence of interests between management (technocratic) structures and manual-executive labor.



Lebowitz criticizes the vanguard Marxism who enthroned in real socialism vanguard state ownership and vanguard planning (Lebowitz 2012: 132), the real-socialist exclusive focus on the development of productive forces and on the issue of distribution (distribution according to work), while neglecting and postponing for a later stage the issue of changing relations of production (which, for example, marked the establishment of the soviets as a body of workers' control and management, Lebowitz 2016). Namely, the new socialist society starts from the inherited elements of the old society. Marx saw socialism as a process by which the elements of the old, capitalist society are systematically subordinated to the new socialist mode of production, and in the process, the 'missing organs' are built in order to develop the new system into an organic whole that by itself creates the assumptions of its own reproduction (Lebowitz 2016). The Bolsheviks and other revolutionary parties that led the construction of real socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faced with major problems of an underdeveloped production base, a hostile environment and domestic reactionary forces, distorted Marx's theory of social transformation based on revolutionary practice (Lebowitz 2016).

Socialism is no longer theoretically interpreted as a process of changing relations of production, but the construction of a post-capitalist society is divided into two phases – lower socialist and higher communist. In the lower phase, according to the theory of the Bolsheviks (Lebowitz 2015), the primary focus should be on the rapid development of the productive forces with the acceptance of the inherited elements of the old society – the historical and moral structure of needs and the way they are determined, the technological-production structure (Lenin's elevation of Fordism; Lenin 1918/1972) as well as the acceptance of the labor power as an individual ownership for the disposal and use of which an exchange equivalent is required in the social product (distribution according to work). Only in the future, indeterminately distant phase, when the enormous development of productive forces and the increase in labor productivity will ensure universal material abundance, will the communist phase be reached, in which everyone will contribute according to their abilities, and appropriate from the social product according to their needs.

However, such acceptance of the inherited elements of the old society meant neglecting the importance of revolutionary practice – the insight that a change in social circumstances should simultaneously mean a change in the people themselves – the socialist protagonists. Along with the inherited treatment of labor power as the individual property of workers, it was accepted that socialism should be built on the inherited foundations of people's self-interested orientation. If people in the lower, socialist stage are inherently oriented towards equivalent compensation for their own work contribution then it is most important to provide material incentives to encourage them to do well. Such logic is followed by the already mentioned focus on the rapid development of productive forces and the growth of labor productivity, where in an uncertain communist future, material abundance would enable people to work voluntarily according to their own abilities, and appropriate from the social



product accordance with their own needs. In other words, the new socialist man and his structure of needs would not be the result of a change in the social relations of production, but a mere consequence of the development of the productive forces.

Lebowitz points out that such an approach and theory completely departs from Marx's understanding of revolutionary transformation (Lebowitz 2016). Namely, Marx nowhere suggested that it is possible to reach a future state of material abundance, state of satisfaction of the principle "to each according their own needs", by building on the defective legacy of capitalism. On the contrary, ignoring the change in relations of production and relying on the unquestionable individual ownership of labor power as the basis for materially compensating workers meant that the starting point was that workers demand as much as possible from society in exchange for the disposal and use of their property – labor power. Workers within such relations of production view labor as a mere means of obtaining goods – alienated labor for the acquisition of alienated products of labor, alienated from the means of production and in relations of alienation with other workers and members of society. Lebowitz asks a rhetorical question – can the stage of material abundance ever be reached under such conditions? If alienated labor leads to an insatiable compensatory need to own objects/commodities, can scarcity ever come to an end (Lebowitz 2016)?

Lebowitz believes that the vision of socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must place central emphasis on the importance of changing the social relations of production (Lebowitz 2016). This includes, among other things, the creation of an institutional framework for protagonist action aimed at jointly determining the needs and purposes of social production. This process of joint determination of needs and purposes, according to which the structure of social production and division of labor will be planned, was missing in the real socialisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, it was not participatory and protagonist-based. For this reason, the needs and desires of the atomized working masses and in real socialisms tended to be more and more determined by the consumerist standard of individual commodity ownership or personal ownership and consumption. The referent for comparison was capitalism and its consumption structure, while production technology was transferred or copied from advanced capitalist countries (Khrushchev's announcement and projection at the party congress held in the early 1960s that the USSR would reach and overtake the capitalist West and especially USA already in the 1980s (Spufford 2010)).

In such a situation of atomization of the working masses, underdeveloped institutional forms for the joint (collective) determination of the needs and purposes of social production, and the capitalist consumer standard as a norm, real socialism increasingly lost its progressive social-transformative meaning and legitimization by such a mission in relation to capitalism. Even more, the institutions and mechanisms of regulation of production and allocation of resources in real socialisms – from administrative central-planning to hybrid administrative-market – led to increasing technological backwardness, economic

inefficiencies and irrationality and decreasing satisfaction of the adopted consumer norms as directed by the developed capitalist world with which comparison was made and one's own achievements were evaluated. All this, together with political authoritarianism, the privileges of the party nomenclature and the bureaucratic apparatus, and the lack of civil liberties, contributed to the loss of ideological legitimization of real socialism.

## Socialist Party

One could say that the focus on the democratic protagonism, revolutionary practice of development of capacities through protagonist action, on double and simultaneous change – of circumstances of changes of the conditions of production and changes of the workers themselves are in conflict with the previous conclusion that it is the party that should shape a positive vision of the future socialist society. The attitude of the anti-capitalist left towards democracy is, indeed, ambivalent.

On the one hand, the anti-capitalist left sees the basic condition for the success of a democratic rebellion in the awareness of disenfranchised social groups about the class character of their disenfranchisement, and at the same time expects and calls for a spontaneous democratic rebellion and resistance of the disenfranchised, who themselves must develop the capacity to act. Spreading this class awareness of the disenfranchised and directing their 'democratic impulse' is seen as the task of organizations that should be mediators of the 'advanced class consciousness'<sup>1</sup>. They have yet to enable the constitution of the disenfranchised into a class political subject ('for themselves'). Marx described this ambivalent situation where workers are not yet political subject for themselves, not yet a class for itself. "Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle [...] this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests" (Marx 1956: 145).

Unfortunately, 'advanced class consciousness' is determined by adequate knowledge of the class dynamics of capitalist relations. This knowledge is not evenly spread among members of disenfranchised social groups. Its bearers are, above all, those more advanced individuals who, as the 'class vanguard', lead the political organization and raise class awareness of the disenfranchised. To this extent, it is assumed that anti-capitalist organizations, above all political parties, use the 'democratic impulse' and the energy of resistance and

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1 For the debate on democracy and the role of avant-garde principle in party organization, see for example Paul Cockshott's essay "Ideas of Leadership and Democracy", in *Arguments for Socialism* (pp. 137–160); also, at more general level those questions are raised by Jaques Ranciere in *Hatred od Democracy* (2006) and by Alain Badiou in *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010).

rebellion of the disenfranchised, but as long as ‘advanced class consciousness’ and knowledge are not evenly spread among the ‘class base’, it is not rational for the aforementioned organizations to function and decide democratic in the ‘full’ sense.

Otherwise, it is said, it is not possible to secure the political strength and unity that are necessary to successfully work to abolish the social conditions of disenfranchisement. According to this logic, ‘full’ democracy in anti-capitalist organizations would mean the leadership of class-unconscious or insufficiently conscious people, which would paralyze or weaken its action or direct it in the wrong direction. Because of this, some anti-capitalist organizations both call for and limit democracy. The leading role of the ‘class vanguard’ is emphasized as necessary until the social and material conditions for ‘full’ democracy are established. The ‘class vanguard’, the best, most determined and most conscious individuals, supposedly know how to reach that goal, that’s why they should be chosen to lead and decide on behalf of the disenfranchised base that they organize politically. Once the goal is reached and the social conditions of class domination are abolished, then the need for a ‘class vanguard’ will cease and ‘full’ democracy as the rule of ‘ordinary people’ will be possible.

However, past historical experiences have shown that all anti-capitalist parties (but also trade unions and reformist, social-democratic parties), which were organized according to the representative principle of the ‘avant-garde’, ended up as oligarchies or autocracies. Thus, they ended up as the rule of a small elite and/or one leader, where the democratic base remained a mere object. The initial difference in class consciousness, where the party vanguard consisted of the best (initiators, chosen as the best), with the institutionalization of their leadership role began to materialize more and more as a difference in interests in relation to the base. The basis for the development of different interests arose from the institutionalized asymmetry of power, which was materialized by the formal leadership position of the ‘avant-garde’ based on the authority to rule, that is, the authority to lead the class struggle. At the same time, there was no essential difference regarding the fact whether the anti-capitalist party won power and established a one-party system or was just one of the actors of the struggle within or outside the ruling framework of capitalist parliamentarism. In both cases, the power asymmetry and interest gap between the party’s vanguard and the party’s base was reinforced, rather than reduced or abolished.

Anti-capitalist parties are often led by the vanguard, which believes that the “transmission” of “advanced class consciousness” from the vanguard to the democratic base will be facilitated and at the same time will not lead to obstructions of insufficiently developed class consciousness and reactionary opinions of the democratic base, if “class-advanced individuals” are formally elected as the governing (representative/executive) body of the party. Then the real informal authority of their “advanced class consciousness” gets formal confirmation to be an authority whose views and proposals should be taken as authoritative in determining what is politically correct and true and which should thus become the basis of a common position (consensus), decisions and

direction of the organization. Namely, if the authority to lead is formalized on the basis of 'more advanced class consciousness', then those who lead (the 'party vanguard') are not only placed in the position of educators in relation to those brought up in the democratic base, but this difference is structurally strengthened through different evaluation of experiences and knowledge arising from the different formal position of those who lead and those who are led (regardless of the fact that it is declaratively emphasized that educators must also be educated).

The leading perspective and experience acquired by the 'party vanguard', as the 'conductor' of class organization, is on the one hand different from the perspective, experience and knowledge of those it leads, and on the other hand, by the very fact of formalization, it is confirmed as correct and true. This means that the party vanguard, and not the democratic base, is the true subject of political change, which, by changing social circumstances, allegedly enables the democratic base to constitute itself as a political subject capable of democratic rule.

However, if those who make up the democratic base do not change social circumstances themselves, but the party vanguard does it instead of them and in their name and 'in their interest', they remain the object and not the subject of political changes, the changes come to them 'from above', and they are not changed or trained for democratic government. The democratic base (workers, disenfranchised) can become a political subject only if it participates equally and actively in common changes in social circumstances. This means that it is not acceptable to institutionalize the asymmetry of decision-making power between the party vanguard and the democratic base, where the party vanguard will be selected according to the criteria of 'the most advanced' and 'the best'. If someone is better and more advanced, his or her influence on the democratic base must be 'horizontal' and informal, so his/her position must not be institutionalized and formalized as the position of a 'subject supposed to know'. Only then are truly more advanced class consciousnesses not reduced to the position of supposedly more advanced class consciousness, because the 'assumption of advancedness' by the very act of its formalization turns into the power of structural domination.

## Conclusion

Today, when the anti-capitalist left is weak and when 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Jameson 2003: 76), overcoming the ideological "prohibition to think", *Denkverbot* (Žižek 2002: 3) is necessary for anti-capitalist politicization to gain a clear direction and a positive idea of what to fight for when fighting against capitalism. Therefore, it is necessary for the left to start articulating a narrative in which the vision of a socialist alternative for the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be outlined. This vision should not be understood as blueprint of final and definitive historical destination, but as a possible route (future routes towards socialism will necessarily differ with

regard to the different historical contexts or different socio-economic formations). It must show people the possibility of a much more desirable way of organizing economic activities than is the case with capitalism. In other words, it must be inspiring.

Also, it must answer well-founded doubts as to whether the stated vision is a real possibility or just a fantasy – therefore, it must show how it will concretely answer the questions that must be answered in every economic system (what, how and for whom to produce?) and how it will solve problems that will inevitably arise and that can be anticipated. In addition, it must ultimately challenge popular misconceptions and ideologemes about what is inconsistent with the fundamental goals of the vision of future socialism.

Unfortunately, today's left is blocked in articulating a vision of a socialist alternative. One of the more important reasons is that the ruling capitalist forces managed to ideologically impose as a matter of course such an interpretation of the failure of real-socialism, which was also accepted by the left - that any new attempt to build a socialist alternative will inevitably lead to the repetition of everything that has already been historically “tried” and ultimately failed and rejected. However, the anti-capitalist left must not agree to such a verdict, but must critically redeem the real socialisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the egalitarian inspiration that caused them to be created and sustained for so long. Of course, at the same time, he must critically expose their indisputable contradictions, failures and limitations, and clarify which necessary conditions need to be taken care of so that they are not repeated in a future attempt.

If, on the other hand, the left continues to agree to ideological judgments regarding historical real socialisms and the (im)possibility of different future socialisms, the only thing left is the bad utopia of “repairing” capitalism and an alibi orientation towards social democratic solutions that have already proven to be unsustainable because they accept the subordination of the realization of socialist goals and values to the needs of capital reproduction or the ‘health’ of the capitalist ‘economic machine’.

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## Alternativa kapitalizmu – demokratski protagonizam u 21. veku

### Apstrakt

Rad ispituje mogućnosti stvaranja pozitivne vizije post-kapitalističkog društva i ekonomije, nacrt budućeg društva uz evociranje vrednih nacrti kao što je *Komunistički manifest* Marksa i Engelsa. Također se fokusira na nedostatke tog nacrti koji su postali očiti usled realsocijalističkih iskustava dvadesetog veka. Sledeći kanadskog marksistu Majkla Lebovica, rad obrađuje kako bi vizija socijalizma za 21. vek trebala staviti snažan naglasak na važnost društvene promene proizvodnih odnosa. Središnji problem je lociran u „avangardnim proizvodnim odnosima“, centralnoj moći i hijerarhijskom autoritetu u rukama partijske avangarde. Rad naglašava važnost komunističke partije kao ključne u artikulaciji interesa proleterijske klase u celini, klase čiji je glavni interes svrgavanje kapitalizma. Međutim, projekat svrgavanja kapitalizma mora uključiti delatnu spoznaju važnosti demokratskog protagonizma. Radnici ne mogu biti podređeni kao pasivni promatrači systemske promene. Promena društvenih odnosa mora simultano značiti i promenu samih aktera – društvenih protagonista.

Ključne reči: *Manifest Komunističke partije*, demokratski protagonizam, avangardna partija, socijalizmi 20. veka, antikapitalistička leвица, realni socijalizmi