

Commentary on István Mészáros's *Beyond Capital*

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István Mészáros

The following commentary on István Mészáros's 985-page book *Beyond Capital* is not intended as a review of it.¹ It is, rather, a consideration of the differences in views expressed by Mészáros and myself regarding "the Socialist perspective," or as Mészáros sometimes puts it, "the socialist project," that relate mainly to our different understandings of the concept of "base and superstructure." In addition, I comment on the drearily familiar efforts, which Mészáros unfortunately echoes, to misrepresent the Marxist theory of base and superstructure as being an expression of mechanical economic determinism. Finally, I note two particular instances in which his argument is seriously impaired by a failure to apply the dialectical principle of interpenetration of opposites.

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Mészáros undertakes to grapple with the familiar problem of reconciling unexpungeable outrage at the ruinous course being imposed by capitalism, on one hand, and, on the other, the spectacular failure of the Bolshevik model of revolution to provide a socialist alternative to that ruin. He writes with a particular eye to his experiences in his native Hungary and his participation in political and ideological struggles in that country prior to the collapse of the Soviet government, and expands his work to the situation of capitalism world-wide and the problem of the transition to socialism as he saw it as of 1995, when his book was published. He argues that, "[T]he historical challenge for instituting a viable alternative to the given order also calls for a major reassessment of the socialist strategic framework and the conditions of its realization, in the light of twentieth century developments and disappointments."²

Mészáros theorizes a distinction between the historical category, *capital*, and the sub-category, modern *capitalism*. This concept so completely informs his presentation that it is appropriate to note that he extrapolates it from an analogy in Marx's *Grundrisse*. Just as the study of the evolution of human anatomy must start with its modern form, and on that basis puzzle out the successive evolutionary stages of its development, so in economic history, said Marx, features of modern capitalism, such as profit, interest, and rent derived from surplus labor of the lower classes, appeared through trading-capital and money-capital among the ancient Phoenicians and Carthaginians and the Lombards and Jews in medieval times, centuries before the commodification of labor power was to mark the rise of modern capitalism.³

Although Mészáros does not show any necessary connection between this distinction and transitioning to socialism, he makes use of it to stretch the domain of capital to cover both "Western" capitalism and "post-revolutionary" Soviet society, while insisting that the latter "was not capitalist, not even state capitalist."⁴ In order to do so he makes this esoteric bit of economic history from the *Grundrisse* a basis for rejection, or revision, of the fundamental proposition of historical materialism, the Marxist theory of base and superstructure: that the sum total of the "relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society -- the real foundation on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness."⁵ Obviously Mészáros's argument here presents a challenge to the argument of my essay, "Base and Superstructure and the Socialist Perspective."

Let's start with two definitions of "capital," Marx's and Mészáros's:

"Capital," said Marx, "is dead labor that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more it sucks."⁶

"Capital," says Mészáros, "is a command system whose mode of functioning is accumulation-oriented, and the accumulation can be secured in a number of different ways."⁷

By way of illustration, Mészáros continues: "In the Soviet Union surplus labour was extracted in a political way. . . . Under capitalism in the West what we have is an economically regulated extraction of surplus labor and surplus value."⁸

The significance of this distinction that Mészáros makes between the "economic" method and the "political" method of extracting surplus labor is of a piece with his distinction between "capital" and "capitalism," and is to be traced to his own original theory of "base and superstructure":

modern state was brought into being, becoming as integral a part of the "material base" of the system as the socioeconomic productive units themselves. . . . The question of the "legal and political superstructure" of which Marx speaks can only be made intelligible in terms of the modern state's massive materiality and necessary articulation as a fundamental command structure *sui generis*.⁹

Unfortunately, Mészáros resorts to a familiar vulgarization of the "base and superstructure" theory in order to discredit the concept of the relations of production as the base, by ascribing to it the character of "mechanical" economic "reductionism," i.e., the idea that the appearance of every development in the institutional and ideological life

of class society is the immediate and direct result of some particular economic event or motive. He writes:

[T]o consider the direct economic productive units¹⁰ of the capital system as the "material basis" on which the "superstructure" arises . . . [is] the crudely determined mechanical expression of the material base . . . [and is] mechanical reductionist. . . .¹¹

Mechanical reductionism, of course, could never explain how the "inner light" could lead first Quaker George Fox to denounce lifetime hereditary bond-servitude in Anglo-America and to mock the self-identification of colonists there as "whites"; nor why poor ante-bellum "white" nonslaveholders would "fold to their bosom the adder that stings them"¹² in the form of the monocultural plantation economy based on the racial oppression of African-Americans; nor why financially secure men of property like Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stuart Parnell risked their careers to champion the cause of revolutionary-minded poverty-ridden Irish peasants; nor explain why such wealthy men as Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, and Gerrit Smith elected to play prominent roles in the struggle against slavery. The truth remains that it was the class struggles of African-American bond-laborers, and of the poor Irish cotters and spalpeens against the economics of the plantation system in the South and English landlordism in Ireland that made the careers of O'Connell and Parnell, of Clarkson, Wilberforce and Gerrit Smith historically significant, and lent special luster to George Fox's heritage.

With regard to the "legal and political structure," the difference in the social status of persons of mixed Afro-Euro ancestry in the British West Indies, on the one hand, and in continental Anglo-America, on the other, is not explained by the need for the English to know they were "white,"¹³ but by the variations in the social control systems required to preserve the economic interests of the ruling class in securing the surplus labor of the bond laborers in each situation. And, as we have seen, the centuries-long conflict between the Irish and the English, from the early fourteenth century to the end of the middle of the seventeenth century, was first of all not due to clashes over laws regarding inheritance, family form and law; those cultural conflicts arose from irreconcilable differences in the economic relations of production between tribal pastoral Ireland and feudal agrarian England.

Mészáros uses this quixotic attack on Marx's base and superstructure concept as harboring "mechanical reductionism," especially to illustrate his theory regarding the "modern state," in which category he includes everything "from liberal democratic formations to extreme authoritarian capitalist states (like Hitler's Germany, or Pinochet's . . . Chile), and from post-colonial regimes to Soviet type postcapitalist states."¹⁴ But his argument misfires when he says that the base and superstructure concept "fails to explain how a totalizing and cohesion-producing 'superstructure' could arise on the basis of its total absence from the 'economic base.'"¹⁵ Do the producers cease to be proletarians dependent wholly on the sale of their labor power, and does the ruling class not accumulate capital on the basis of the surplus labor they take from the workers? Is it not the paramount purpose of the state to secure that accumulation, and is that not the basis on which the employer class shapes its state power? Was it not the perceived difficulties of democratic social control that led to the turn to undisguised dictatorship in Germany, and Chile? And was not the liquidation of the Soviet government, willing or not, *determined* by the superiority of the "free-wage labor" base over the less free wage labor base of the Soviet system? It was not the other way around; the abdication of "post-revolutionary" power was not part of some preconceived plan of an all-powerful state. That the form of the superstructure was determined by the base is in fact implicit in

Mészáros's own comment on "[t]he attempted switch from political to economic extraction of surplus-labour to 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' *without the people*." [16](#)

In conclusion, convinced of the correctness of his stand on the issue, Mészáros says, "If all this was only a matter of self-consuming academic arguments, it could be safely ignored. . . ." On that much, perhaps all can agree regardless of what side of the controversy one may take, and some might indeed ask, "What difference does it make, anyway? But when we come to Mészáros's treatment of the transition to socialism and to the operation of socialist society, one who questions his dismissal of the Marxist base and superstructure may find that indeed it is not a matter to be ignored.

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In place of Marx's "relations of production", i.e., capital as a dialectical unity of opposites, Mészáros poses a dialectical relationship between the "fundamental socioeconomic forms" [17](#) and the "modern state":

The modern state . . . comes into being not *after* the articulations of the fundamental socioeconomic forms, nor as more or less *determined* by the latter. . . . The modern state . . . [is] as integral a part of the "material base" of the system as the socioeconomic reproductive units themselves. . . . [This unfolding relationship] is characterized by the category of *simultaneity* and not those of "before" and "after". . . . [I]n relation to the the question of "determinations" we can properly talk only of *co-determinations*. . . . [T]he dynamics of development must be characterized not under the category of "*as a result*" of but in terms of "*conjunction with*" whenever we want to make intelligible the changes in capital's social metabolic control arising from the dialectical reciprocity between the socioeconomic and political command structures. . . . [T]he state . . . has *its own superstructure* . . . just as the direct material reproductive structures themselves have their own superstructural dimensions. [18](#)

He adjures us that

There can be no question of a *unidirectional determination* of the modern state by an independent material base. For capital's socioeconomic base and its state formation are totally inconceivable separately. [19](#) . . . If that were not the case, the socialist emancipatory enterprise would be condemned to futility. For the always successfully prevailing homology of all basic structures and functions . . . would produce a veritable "iron cage" for all times . . . from which there could be absolutely no escape. [20](#)

Obviously, this thesis as developed by Mészáros does have bearing on basic concerns addressed in my "Base and Superstructure and the Socialist Perspective." First, what is meant by the transition to socialism; what would such a society be like? Second, what is to be done beforehand that will apply lessons we have learned from the tragic failure of the past attempts to make that transition? [21](#)

Mészáros opens Chapter 11 of his book with the thoughtful question: "How did it come about that Marxism succeeded in identifying the ultimate targets of a radical socialist transformation but not the forms and modalities of transition with a fully elaborated theory of transition through which that target could be reached?" [22](#) That same

question is also implied by my essay, "Base and Superstructure and the Socialist Perspective." Is Marx's failure to give attention to the manner of revolutionary transition to socialism to be traced to the absorption of Marx and Engels in the social ferment attending the bourgeois revolutionary period in Europe, from 1848 to the Paris Commune, when the "seizure of power" was the all-consuming purpose?²³ Was it simply a belief that once the fetishism of commodities was cleared away by the proletarian revolution, a rational cooperative relations of production would naturally be arranged, in a way the Utopian Socialists could only dream of?²⁴

Mészáros's answer in regard to the lessons to be learned today from the failure of the October revolution stresses *objective* factors that were not present for the Bolsheviks. These factors are treated under the heading, "Relative and Absolute Limits of the Capital System as a unique -- in human history quite exceptional -- mode of social metabolic reproduction."²⁵ (Although there is no subject index in the book, I believe that this is the first time that the term, "social metabolic reproduction" occurs.²⁶) Among those limits Mészáros mentions 1) the irreconcilable antagonism between a "handful of global players," and "national states"; 2) "the catastrophic impact of the productive practices of 'advanced' capital on the environment . . ."; 3) "the total inability of the capital system to meet the irrepressible challenge of women's liberation, of substantive equality"; and 4) chronic mass unemployment. These four delimiting factors of capitalism are universally recognized by seekers after socialism. These factors are to ripen as a result of capital's inability to solve the contradiction between production and control, between production and consumption, and between production and distribution.²⁷ But the prospective socialist harvest, he says, can come only by way of the world anti-imperialist revolution. Because, he explains, until capital has reached the stage of "its full expansion into an all-embracing world system," and "the *structural* limits of capital [have] come into play, . . . capital maintains the dynamism inherent in its historical ascendancy. And . . . its power to bend, subdue, and crush the forces that oppose it." Because of the still unexhausted "viability of capital,"²⁸ says Mészáros, society must first undergo a "long and tormented historical development," during which it achieves a sufficient "material foundation." Mészáros appears to interpret that phrase, "sufficient 'material foundation,'"²⁹ in terms of increased productivity of labor. But even then Mészáros does not address the problem of how the working classes of the world are to become able to translate the "structural limits of capital" into a transition to socialism. Incidentally, a critical look is in order in regard to Mészáros's treatment of the first and the third of these four listed factors in light of the dialectical principle of the interpenetration of opposites and of common everyday working-class practical experience.

If the resistance of the peoples of the nations outside the "metropole" tends to limit the power of capital, the power of capital at the same time brings to bear the counter-revolutionary chauvinizing influence of bourgeois ideology within the working class of the countries of the metropole. If the women's liberation struggle presents obstacles to the exploitative power of capital, capital, at the same time, reinforces its power by the seduction of the class-exploited men by male privileges.

Mészáros points to the changed situation of the working class since Marx's time, resulting from the super-exploitation of labor in countries outside the "metropolitan" countries. "[F]rom the margin of differential advantage-yielding *differential rates of profit* and super-profit," he says. "a certain portion can be allocated to the 'metropolitan' labour force. This is how the *differential rate of exploitation* . . . render[s] problematical the idea of simultaneous action by the working classes of the 'dominant peoples' for the duration the conditions described above," i.e., of imperialism. In amplification of this point, Mészáros refers to deals for defense employment by the "Western working class."

He then adds, "An equally striking complicity is manifested in the 'metropolitan' working class' participation as a *beneficiary*, in the continued exploitation of the so-called 'third world' . . ." [30](#)

This notion that the workers in general -- not just the petit-bourgeoisified "aristocracy of labor" -- of the "metropole actually *benefit* from the exploitation of the peoples of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, has been discussed at some length and found faulty, at least with respect to the generally underpaid workers of the United States. For, if that were indeed the case, what interest could "labor" have in a transition to socialism? In the United States, the "white-skin privileges" of the European-American workers have been shown to be historically a baited hook whereby they allow themselves to be "landed" at the mercy of the employing class. Mészáros ignores the relation of this "problematical" circumstance to the necessity of disposing of it as fatal to prospects for a transition to socialism.

Mészáros devotes the nearly forty-page Section 5.3 of the book to the second of the two issues, "the total inability of the capital system to meet the irrepressible challenge of women's liberation, of substantive equality." Marxists know well that the root of all forms of social oppression, including male supremacy, are traceable to the fact of private ownership of the means of production, and that the solution will require "social appropriation" of those means of production. But Mészáros proceeds from this basic idea to the disparagement of intermediate struggle for "equality of opportunity" (p. 189), whatever may be the "hierarchical" form given to society, including its patriarchal family "microcosm." "The most important aspect of the family for the maintenance of capital over society," he writes, "is the perpetuation -- and internalization -- of . . . the *I know my place in society*' syndrome of internalized subservience . . ." (p. 190). He asserts, without offering supporting argument, that "post-capitalist" societies cannot open the way for the feminist agenda, since [under] the hierarchically managed extraction of surplus labour, "under no circumstances can they be allowed to question the established division of labour and their own role in the inherited family structure . . . [including] the 'second shift' for women, starting after they return home from their place of work." (pp. 209-10)

Brave words, but their effect is to shield from criticism male supremacism among class-exploited male workers. Lenin, whatever "post-capitalist" errors he may have made, knew about the "limits of capital" and their relationship to gender oppression, and he provided an example of sensitivity to proletarian male supremacism that Mészáros might have followed. In his famous interview with the German Communist leader Clara Zetkin in 1920, he said: "Unfortunately it is still true to say of many of our comrades, 'scratch a Communist and find a Philistine.' Of course, you must scratch their sensitive spot, their mentality regarding women. Could there be more damning proof of this than the calm acquiescence of men who see how women grow worn out in the petty monotonous household work. . . . So few men -- even among the proletariat -- realize how much effort and trouble they could save women, even quite do away with, if they were to lend a hand in 'woman's work.' But no, that is contrary to the 'right and dignity of a man.' They want their peace and comfort. . . . The old master right of the man still lives in secret." [31](#)

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"The urgent need for a theory of transition," says Mészáros, "appeared on the historical agenda with the October revolution, but it asserted itself in an unavoidably *partial* form . . . because of the weight of the local constraints and contradictions. . . . But even more so . . . [because of] the essentially *defensive* historical determinations to

which the struggling socialist forces of the period were subjected in their unequal confrontations with capital."[32](#)

My disagreement with Mészáros about the transition to socialism is related to the way in which he thus accounts for the failure of the Russian Revolution. That the Bolsheviks faced overwhelming difficulties in maintaining state power is well known. But what was the Bolsheviks' strategy for providing *a social base for socialism*? That is the most fundamental question posed by the misdirection of the October revolution for those seeking a "theory of transition." How could such internal contradictions and domestic and foreign capitalist opposition, to which Mészáros ascribes the failure of the October revolution, be transcended? What lessons in strategy are to be drawn? That is an avowed concern of both Mészáros's book and of my Stony Brook essay.

Mészáros says, "The positive outcome depends not on the recognition by intellectuals that the historical justification of the capital system is over, but on the material force of a conscious social agency that will eradicate capital." He concludes somberly, "If that agency proves to be unequal to the task, there can be no hope for the socialist project. But, then, there can be no hope for the survival of mankind."[33](#)

As to what that "material agency" is to be, Mészáros says simply in the traditional way, "the only social agency capable of taking up the challenge [is] labour."[34](#)

To answer that question requires attention to the *subjective*, conscious factor of revolution -- an aspect that Mészáros completely ignores, except in this single reference to "a conscious social agency," and in suggestions regarding proper socialist administration.

"[T]he process of socialist transformation," says Mészáros, ". . . is conceivable only as a form of transitional restructuring based on the inherited and progressively alterable leverage of material mediations."[35](#) He had illustrated his concept by metaphorical reference to an anecdote left by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), regarding the ruse by which Goethe's father evaded the municipal building code in Frankfurt.[36](#)

In Mészáros's opinion, "[I]t is not possible to pull down the existing building and erect a wholly new edifice in its place on totally new foundations. Life must go on in the shored up house during the entire course of the rebuilding, 'taking away one story after another from the bottom upwards, slipping in the new structure, so that in the end none of the old house should be left.' . . . Indeed [Mészáros continues], the task is even more difficult than that [i.e., than that tackled by Goethe's father]. . . . Disconcertingly, the 'expropriation of the expropriators' leaves the edifice of the capital system standing."[37](#)

But how would the internal social contradictions and domestic and foreign capitalist opposition, to which he ascribes the failure of the October revolution, be transcended by the Mészáros/Goethe "shoring up" and story-by-story-by-story strategy? Mészáros apparently would rely on certain favorable objective factors noted above.[38](#) He relates these factors to consideration of "the socialist perspective" but only by way of the world anti-imperialist revolution; he does not otherwise concern himself with the organic relationship of the day-to-day anti-capitalist struggle to the socialist perspective.

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Every page of Mészáros's book is informed with a determination to prevent a repetition of the misdirection of the Soviet-style social order. Benefiting from his own experiences in Hungary's "post-revolutionary" society and the struggle to overthrow it, he is committed to "the socialist project," as he often terms it.

In a single paragraph, Mészáros sums up his argument about a socialist state, by an analogy between the capitalist social order and socialist social order. It incorporates his erroneous revision of the Marxist concept of base and superstructure, derived from his concept of a base and superstructure as a dialectical unity of co-valent opposites of the legal and political superstructure, and the relations of production. In his concept of socialist society, the analog for the relations of production is "the productive constituent cells"; and for the capitalist superstructure his analog is be the top half of "the socialist hegemonic alternative," i.e., "the most comprehensive productive and distributive relations" The paragraph is so crucial to the issue between us, that it needs to be read in full:

The real issue, then, is the dialectical relationship between the *whole* and its *parts*. Under the capital system the top echelons of its command structure with their perverse centrality, usurp the place of the whole and dominate the parts, imposing on everyone their *partiality* as the "*interest of the whole*." This is how capital's self-asserting totality can assert itself -- by undialectically short-circuiting the whole/part relationship -- as an organic system. The socialist hegemonic alternative therefore involves the reconstitution of the objective dialectic of the parts and the whole in a non-adversarial way, from the smallest reproductive constituent cells to the most comprehensive productive and distributive relations. The success of planning depends on the willing coordination of their productive and distributive activities by those who have to realize the consciously envisaged aim. Thus genuine planning is inconceivable without substantive democratic decision making from below through which both the lateral coordination and the comprehensive integration of reproductive practices become feasible. And *vice versa*. For without the consciously planned and comprehensively coordinated exercise of their creative energies and skills, all talk about the democratic decision making of the individuals is without substance. Only the two together can define the elementary requirements of the socialist hegemonic alternative to capital's social metabolic order.³⁹

The key to our difference lies in that phrase, "non-adversarial." If the memory were not so fresh in our minds of the practice of "democratic centralism," which permitted the suppression of dissent as political heresy, perhaps one might say that the line between the permissible "non-adversarial" and the impermissible "adversarial" would be drawn at the arguments that serve the common aim. But "democratic centralism" was not a dialectical unity of opposites, of "the parts and the whole," but a means of counter-posing authority and democracy. In short, the "centralizing" of the authority to define, over arbitrarily rather long periods of time, what was to be "non-adversarial," made it possible to fatally ignore the indispensable role of the individual deviation in preserving the integrity of the collective purpose, and consequently to lapse into the authoritative habits of the old ruling classes.

How is "willing coordination" to be achieved between the hegemon and the "productive constituent cells," "without which all talk about the democratic decision making of the individuals is without substance?"⁴⁰ Mészáros's program for

accomplishing that aim emphasizes the indispensable factors of rationality, accountancy, putting quality before quantity in production, and the institution of an incentive system that is tied to the promotion of consumption. All that is detailed along the following lines:

"One of the most important questions of any socialist strategy concerns the accountancy used for orienting and evaluating the particular steps and measures that must be adopted in the course of transition from the established order to almost radically different one."

"The practical realization of the principles of *socialist accountancy* is a necessary and integral constituent of the originally envisaged socialist order."

"*Quality* as the fundamental principle of socialist accountancy is relevant because only through the criterion of quality is it possible to confer non-fetishistic meaning on *quantity*."

"The socialist principle concerning the relationship between individuals and *their* society . . . is also a vital 'insurance policy' for a sustainable future, on account of its firm quality-orientation. That is how the necessary requirement of accountancy can be brought into harmony with the aspirations of social individuals."

"Only within the framework of socialist accountancy is it possible to envisage overcoming scarcity."

"[A] dynamic socialist reproductive order, controlled by the self-determined individuals, is unthinkable without its own system of incentives befitting its fundamental aims; one which positively combines the individual motivating dimension with the systemic requirements of overall social metabolic control."[41](#)

Having noted "how Marx's once justifiable optimistic expectations have turned sour,"[42](#) Mézáros should have taken thought unto himself as to how guiding principles can be made flesh, lest the same be said of his rules of proper behavior in a socialist society. In the end his recipe of proper conduct in a socialist order -- although it contains some undeniably essential ingredients -- will, left as it is, be no more than a wish-list that fails the test of how to guarantee against the sadly familiar relapse into bourgeois habits. For the realization of that aim, he should have remembered the ancient wisdom and asked, who will be the guarantors?[43](#)

As absolutely essential as "willing coordination" for a common purpose will be, it will not magically appear just because socialism is "declared"; it must be *learned* deliberately and by experience *ahead of time*. That is what is fatally lacking in Mézáros's prospectus. How could he not have asked such logical questions? In my opinion, that lapse must be linked to his theory of the "*simultaneity*" of base and superstructure, according to which the socialist superstructure, the hegemonic "most comprehensive productive and distributive relations," and the "productive constituent cells" must come on the historic scene complete and integral, by the rule of "simultaneity."

He was aware of the Marxist historical materialist theory according to which the pre-condition for the appearance of modern capitalism was the development of the capitalist

form of production relations within the womb of feudal society, and that the capitalist legal and political superstructure was not simultaneous with that fact of life, but followed and was a result of the working of the pre-existing, germinating, base of relations of production. Why did Mészáros not consider that the base of socialist society would in like manner germinate within the womb of capitalist society? The reason, in my opinion, is that he could not conceive of the existence of the base, the relations of production, independent of and prior to the presence of a corresponding political and legal superstructure. That is why it did not occur to him to ask, "What is to be the base, that is, what are the relations of production under socialism?" He speaks of the socialist "productive constituent cell," but it does not occur to him to put it under the analytical microscope after the manner of Marx's study of the wage-labor relation of production.

Because of the inescapable dialectical unity of consumption and production, social production must occur under socialism, and, therefore, socialist relations of production, when class differences no longer exist. In my thesis of "Base and Superstructure and the Socialist Perspective," I suggest that the socialist base is the dialectical unity of opposites of individual and collective;⁴⁴ and that it must be the conscious purpose of socialist-minded people with that perspective in mind to develop the principles of the collective, so conceived, in the course of the many-faceted anti-capitalist struggles that take place, as it were, in the womb of capitalist society. That is where the answer is to be found to the question, who will be the guarantors? -- *in the base* -- by its nature of mutually dependent yet opposing elements.

Mészáros reminds of us of Marx's expectation of a "long and tormented" road ahead before the human life-process is based on material production by freely associating individuals in accordance with a settled plan.⁴⁵ It is in the interest of making that road perhaps shorter, but in any case, more certain of its desired end, that my essay on "Base and Superstructure and the Socialist Perspective," is offered.

Notes

¹ István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (New York, 1995). I presume that his work, written over the period 1959-1990, has received reviews, but I have not read them. This essay is intended as a response to doubts expressed by my good friend Gregory Meyerson, co-editor of the electronic journal *Cultural Logic*, concerning remarks, titled "Base and Superstructure and the Socialist Perspective," that I made at a panel of the biennial conference on "How Class Works," held under the sponsorship of the Department of Economics Center for Study of Working Class Life, Director Michael Zweig, at the University of the State of New York - Stony Brook in June 2004.

² István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition* (New York, 1995), p.vii.

³ Karl Marx, *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse)* as found on the Internet at "Karl Marx Grundrisse," Section 1, "Production, Consumption, Distribution, Exchange (Circulation), subsection 3, "The Method of Political Economy," beginning at the eighth paragraph, "Bourgeois society is the most developed. . . ." In *Beyond Capital*, it is cited at pp. 601-2, and footnoted as "*Grundrisse*, pp. 105-109." (I

have not yet found the necessary information for a proper bibliographical citation of the edition used by Mészáros.)

[4](#) Pages 629-30. In seeking to make the case that the Soviet system was not state capitalism, Mészáros writes that Lenin "admitted" that NEP was based on vain hopes. That seems to be a somewhat tendentious interpretation; a fuller citation was needed: "we went too far in introducing the NEP," said Lenin, "*in that we lost sight of the cooperatives, . . . But it will take a whole historical epoch to get the whole population to take part in the work of the co-operatives through NEP. (The Essentials of Lenin in Two Volumes [London, 1947], 2 : 831-32; (Pravda, January 4, 1923, my emphasis -- TWA)* That hardly qualifies as a repudiation of what Lenin had said fifteen months earlier in justification of NEP, that, "a number of transitional stages are necessary -- state capitalism and Socialism -- in order to prepare by many years of effort for the transition to Communism." (Ibid. p.752, Pravda, October 18, 1921)

Reporting for the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party on January 27, 1922, Lenin, speaking again on the question of state capitalism, remarked: "It did not occur to Marx to write a word on this subject, and he died without leaving a single precise statement or definite instructions on it." He continues, "State capitalism is capitalism that we must confine to certain limits; we have not yet been able to confine it to those limits." (Ibid, 2:781)

It is worth noting that Martin Hart-Landsberg and Paul Burkett in their just published, *China and Socialism: Market Reforms and Class Struggle*, do not indulge in any such confusion in their detailed study of the transformation of China -- via "market socialism" -- into "an increasingly hierarchical and brutal form of capitalism." (*Monthly Review*, July-August 2004), p. 26)

[5](#) Karl Marx, *A Critique of Political Economy* (1859; Chicago, 1904), p. 11 (Author's Preface).

[6](#) *Capital*, Volume One, (New York, Modern Library edition, n.d.) p. 257.

[7](#) *Beyond Capital*, p. 980.

[8](#) Ibid. On the face of it, this distinction would seem to be of little importance as far as we, the "gravediggers of capitalism," are concerned. But hear him out.

[9](#) Pages 59-60.

[10](#) Mészáros often uses of this term to mean, or as corresponding to, what Marx meant by "relations of production."

[11](#) Page 61.

[12](#) George W. Summers of Kanawha County Virginia (now West Virginia), speaking to the Virginia House of Delegates during the debate on slavery, following Nat Turner's Rebellion. (*Richmond Enquirer*, 2 February 1832, and cited in Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2 vols. [New York, 1994, 1997] 2:257).

[13](#) Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), p. xiv.

[14](#) Page 50.

[15](#) Page 61.

[16](#) Chapter 17, section 4.1, at pp. 654-57. The quotation is taken from the caption of this section. Emphasis added.

[17](#) E. g., pp. 57-59. Mészáros seems deliberately to avoid the use of the term "relations of production," perhaps out of a desire to avoid wherever possible entanglement with Marx's ghost.

[18](#) Pages 57-58; 59.

[19](#) Page 58. On the contrary, Thaddeus Stevens, George W. Julian, William D. "Pig Iron" Kelly and other Radical members of the House of Representatives in the fight against President Andrew Johnson and during the Radical Reconstruction did conceive of it. They were enthusiastic champions of the development of an industrialized capitalist country without the white-supremacist state form. The passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution was an earnest of their ability to conceive of a wage-labor based state without racial oppression. Their failure was due to the white supremacist system that had originally been designed in around 1700 by the plantation bourgeoisie to protect the base, the chattel bond labor relation of production, to serve as a part of the "legal and political" superstructure of the United States government that, until the Civil War, was dominated by the slaveholders with the complicity of the majority of the European-American workers. In the end the industrial and financial bourgeoisie found that it could be serviceable to their program of social control, anachronistic as it was, and incorporated it into their own "legal and political" superstructure.

In relation to this last sentence, see, *inter alia*: George Ruble Woolfolk, *The Cotton Regency: The Northern Merchants and Reconstruction, 1869-1880* (New York, 1958); and Vincent P. De Santis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question, the New Departure Years, 1877-1897* (Baltimore, 1959).

[20](#) Page 58.

[21](#) Be it noted that our views seem to agree that the seizure of power is no shortcut to socialism.

[22](#) Page 424.

[23](#) Note Lenin's observation ". . . [O]n the question of state capitalism . . . [i]t did not occur to Marx to write a word on this subject; and he died without leaving a single precise statement or definite instructions on it. . . . State capitalism is capitalism that we must confine to certain limits; we have not yet been able to confine it to those limits." (*The Essentials of Lenin in Two Volumes* [London, 1947], 2: 781 [March 27, 1922])

[24](#) Neither Mészáros nor I directly attempt to address this question regarding the history of Marxism.

[25](#) Page xxii.

[26](#) While Mészáros does not provide a clear literal definition of the term, its constant repetition does make clear his belief in the absolute necessity for it in describing the hegemony of capital. As far as my understanding of the phrase goes, it means to refer to, not only the wage-labor/capital relation, but an evolution of a "capitalist relationship" through thousands of years, well before the era of wage-labor and capital.

[27](#) See p. 48.

[28](#) Page 485.

[29](#) Page 902, citing *Capital*, volume 1, p. 173 of the *New Left Review* edition, 1976.

[30](#) Page 457. Emphasis on "beneficiary" is added -- TWA.

[31](#) Clara Zetkin, *Lenin on the Woman Question* [New York, 1934], p. 19.

[32](#) Page 942.

[33](#) Page 811.

[34](#) Page 812.

[35](#) Page 493.

[36](#) See the quoted Goethe passage on p. 423.

[37](#) Page 493.

[38](#) See p. 9, above.

[39](#) Page 845.

[40](#) Page 845.

[41](#) These quotations are to be found, respectively, at pp. 813, 814, 816, 817, 621 and 822-23.

[42](#) Page 813.

[43](#) As the Roman satirist warned: *Sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

[44](#) This proceeds, in my opinion, from the logic of the Marxist rubric: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (*Communist Manifesto*).

[45](#) Mészáros's citation is *Capital*, Volume One, page 92 of the Penguin/New Left Review edition, Harmondsworth, 1976; I found it at page 92 of the Modern Library edition (New York, n.d.).