

Bringing a *Struggling* Ideology to its Knees

by MICHAEL A. LEBOWITZ

WE ARE IN THE MIDST of a class war. That's not unusual. There is always class war in capitalism – although sometimes it is hidden and sometimes there is the interlude of an apparent Carthaginian Peace. But now the class war has intensified because of the crisis in capitalism – a crisis rooted in the over-accumulation of capital. And, in this crisis, capital has intensified the class war against the working class. The working class is called upon to suffer austerity and cutbacks in order to bear the burden of capital's own failures.

This is a war conducted by capitalist states against workers to compel them to give up their achievements from past struggles. And, in some places (but, unfortunately, not all), we see that the working class is saying "No!" Of course there is a certain resistance, a struggle over wages and working conditions, a struggle to defend the victories from past battles.

But saying "no" is not enough.

As long as workers take the continued existence of capitalism as a given, those struggles occur within its bounds. In the end, even if there are occasional victories, their subordination to the logic of capital means that capitalism can emerge from this crisis by restructuring itself – as it did internationally with the Bretton Woods package after the crisis of the 1930s and as it did in the US beginning in the 1980s with the assault on the working class there. As is often noted, there is a big difference between a crisis in capitalism and a crisis of capitalism. The latter requires conscious actors prepared to put an end to capitalism.

But that requires a vision which can appear to workers as an alternative common sense, as their common sense. We must build that goal in our minds

before we can construct it in reality. But what is the vision of a new society whose requirements workers may look upon as "self-evident natural laws"? Clearly, it is not the results of 20th Century attempts to build socialism – attempts which, to use Marx's phrase, ended "in a miserable fit of the blues."

The "key link": human development and practice

"We have to re-invent socialism" – here was the statement with which Hugo Chavez electrified activists in his closing speech at the January 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. "It can't be the kind of socialism that we saw in the Soviet Union," he stressed, "but it will emerge as we develop new systems that are built on cooperation, not competition." If we are ever going to end the poverty of the majority of the world, capitalism must be transcended, Chavez argued. "But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion of the Soviet Union. We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything."

In short, neither expansion of the means of production nor direction by the state but human beings should be at the centre of the new socialist society. There, at its core, is the premise of socialism for the 21st century. A focus upon the full development of human potential was characteristic of much socialist thought in the 19th century. What Marx added to this emphasis upon human development was his understanding of how that development of human capacities occurs. We change only through real practice, by changing circumstances ourselves, he insisted. Marx's



concept of "revolutionary practice," is the red thread that runs throughout his work. But this process of changing ourselves is not at all limited to the sphere of political and economic struggle. In the very act of producing, Marx indicated, "the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and new ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language."

Socialism for the 21st Century

This combination of human development and practice constitutes the key link that we need to grasp, and it has been an important element in the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela since its beginning. The Bolivarian Constitution (adopted in 1999) recognized that the goal of a human society must be that of "ensuring overall human development" and focused upon "developing the creative potential of every human being and the full exercise of his or her personality in a democratic society." Further, it declared that participation by people in "forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs is the necessary way of achieving the involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective."

Of course, we all know that there is an enormous gap between the real world and the words of the best constitution (and the Bolivarian Constitution was hardly perfect). However, the emergence in Venezuela in recent years of communal councils, communes and workers control in recovered factories and state sectors is clearly an attempt to link human development and practice in the realization of this new vision of society.

Creating the conditions in workplaces and communities by which people can develop their capacities is an essential aspect of the concept of socialism for the 21st century. But it is only one element. How can the worker's own need for development be realised if capital owns our social heritage – the products of the social brain and the social hand? And, how can we develop our own potential if we look upon other producers as enemies or as our markets – i.e., if individual material self-interest is our motivation?

"The elementary triangle of socialism" (social property, social production and satisfaction of social needs) that Chavez identified in January 2007, is a step forward toward a conception of an alternative system whose unifying theme is human development:

A. Social ownership of the means of production is critical within this structure because it is the only way to ensure that our communal, social pro-

ductivity is directed to the free development of all rather than used to satisfy the private goals of capitalists, groups of producers, or state bureaucrats.

B. Social Production organised by workers builds new relations among producers – relations of cooperation and solidarity. It allows workers to end "the crippling of body and mind" and the loss of "every atom of freedom, both in bodily and in intellectual activity" that comes from the separation of head and hand. It is a condition for the full development of workers' capabilities – a condition for the production of rich human beings.

C. Satisfaction of communal needs and purposes as the goal of productive activity means that, instead of interacting as separate and indifferent individuals, we function as members of a community. Rather than looking upon our own capacity as our property and as a means of securing as much as possible in an exchange, we start from the recognition of our common humanity and, thus, of the importance of conditions in which everyone is able to develop her full potential. When our productive activity is oriented to the needs of others, it both builds solidarity among people and produces socialist human beings.

Subordinating the old society

Of course, a new system such as this does not drop from the sky. When a new system emerges, it necessarily inherits premises from the old. These old ways must be subordinated by the new and gradually eliminated.

So, what is to be subordinated? Social ownership of the means of production must supplant private ownership; worker management must replace despotism in the workplace; and productive activity based upon solidarity and community must subordinate individual self-interest. And, of course, the old state must be transcended, replaced by new organs which foster the simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change – those local councils (which Chavez has called "the cells of a new socialist state") and workers councils.

Obviously, this cannot happen overnight. It also, however, is something that cannot take place in stages. The idea of putting off some questions until a later (beautiful) stage is prepared is alien to a concept of an organic system. The concept of socialism for the 21st Century as an organic system theoretically posits what the experience of the 20th Century has demonstrated – the need to build all sides of the socialist triangle. One war, three fronts. In the absence of a

FURTHER READING
 Lebowitz, Michael A.
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struggle to subordinate all the elements of the old society, the new society is inevitably infected by the old society. All sides of the socialist triangle must be built together.

The Spectre of Barbarism

If we are to turn a crisis in capitalism into a crisis of capitalism, the vision of a socialist alternative is essential. We need to struggle to build a new common sense based upon "the worker's own need for development." How else can we do that except by putting forward explicitly the vision of a socialist alternative?

What happens if we don't take this on? In the absence of strong political movements on the left, the response in the United States in particular and in other advanced capitalist countries is likely to be one best analyzed not by political economists but, rather, by psychologists. For example, in the United States the reaction to the changing world capitalist economy is a tendency toward protectionism, xenophobia (manifested in particular against Muslims), quick military solutions, racism and attacks upon immigrants who are seen as stealing good jobs. In short, the likely response will be the search for scapegoats – those responsible for stealing the birthrights of true Americans. As we can see already in Europe (for example, in the fascist attacks upon the Roma people in Hungary and in the emergence of the Nazi and fascist movement here in Greece), this is another aspect of the spectre of barbarism.

We need to understand, too, that the old concepts of socialism, the characteristics of socialism of the 20th century, will never challenge the mass psychology which prevails in advanced capitalist countries. If there is anything clear in the public reaction to the initial appearance of this crisis, it is that the concept of a big state, of verticalism, of interference by distant entities (not only big government but also big companies) is precisely what people do not want. For them, that is the enemy.

By contrast, the concept of socialism for the 21st century, with its emphasis upon communal councils, workers councils and local democracy in general, is the only way to make inroads on the working class of advanced capitalist countries at this point. What people do respond to favourably is the idea of local decision-making and the ability to make the decisions that affect their lives – precisely because that option has been removed in advanced capitalist countries. Those are the elements needed for the battle of ideas in order to struggle against barbarism.

But what happens if we are not able to turn this crisis in capitalism into a crisis of capitalism? As I mentioned before, capital will proceed to restructure

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itself. Just as it restructured itself internationally after the depression of the 1930s through those Bretton Woods agreements (which created the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), there is a similar attempt underway with the shift from the G7 to the G20. Capital is attempting to respond to the crisis through the incorporation of new emerging capitalist powers such as the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China). It hopes that through this process of restructuring in which it brings the new important capitalist actors to the head table for international discussions, it will be able to resume its process of growth in accordance with the logic of capital.

However, the very solution to the crisis that capital introduces implies the right of emerging countries to be full members of the global capitalist order i.e., to achieve the levels of consumption and economic development equal to the present levels of the North. Yet we know that the world's resources and the earth itself cannot possibly sustain this. In this situation, the new emerging powers will want redistribution. Redistribution of resources, redistribution of industrialisation, redistribution of the right to emit carbon – the struggle is on. It is a struggle over access by capital to scarce resources, energy, water and food.

Who doubts that this struggle will become more intense as the logic of unremitting capitalist expansion comes up against the reality of natural limits? Who doubts that the spectre of barbarism is becoming clearer every day?

Clearly, in this world of immense inequality, exclusion and starvation, we do need redistribution. We need a socialist redistribution if we are ever to realize the ideal of ensuring the overall human development of all people. If we want a world in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all," we need to redistribute now – to create a world without capitalism. As Rosa Luxemburg said (and as Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez continue to remind us), humanity is faced at this very moment with a critical choice – socialism or barbarism? ■

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