

'The Four Rs' of global capitalism

By Michael A. Lebowitz

In Venezuela, people know what the 3Rs stand for: revise, rectify and re-impulse. Like Karl Marx, who stressed that the revolution advances by criticising itself, President Hugo Chavez has argued that it is necessary to recognise errors and to go beyond them in order to advance.

But who knows what the four Rs of global capitalism are? At the recent meeting in Davos, Switzerland, of the wheelers and dealers of global capitalism, the conference theme was 'Rethink, Redesign, Rebuild -- Improve the State of the World'. But what did they do? Although we don't know what happened in their dinner meetings (which, as Adam Smith wisely observed, inevitably end up in a conspiracy against the public), there doesn't appear to be much sign that they improved the state of the world. Of course, there was never a question that these corporate giants and their faithful servants would rethink the logic of capital -- a logic of exploitation, expansion of capital, unending generation of needs and consumerism, and the destruction of what Marx called the original sources of wealth, human beings and nature. How could they? But did they redesign and rebuild in order to improve the state of the world for *capital*?

Not noticeably. However, that doesn't mean they have not already been advancing on their real 3Rs. To improve the state of world capitalism, *Reverse* has become a major theme -- especially in the western hemisphere. Given the growing rejection of neoliberalism and global capitalism that has been occurring in Latin America, given the inroads that have been made by a new conception of national sovereignty, international solidarity and socialism for the 21st century, capital sees the need to reverse those advances. Honduras, the Colombian military bases, subversion in Paraguay, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela -- all this is capital's effort to improve the state of its world.

Of course, as we know, global capitalism has had its problems lately -- the economic crisis, which is the result of a long process of overaccumulation. And so, it is indeed engaged in a process of redesigning or, rather, *Restructuring*. It is important to recognise that a crisis in capitalism is not the same as a crisis of capitalism. For a crisis in capitalism to become a crisis of capitalism, you need actors who are prepared to put an end to capitalism. There is, though, no sign of that in the immediate future. And so, like before, capital will proceed to restructure itself. After the depression of the 1930s, capital restructured itself internationally through the Bretton Woods agreements that created the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. We can already see a similar attempt underway with the shift from the G7 to the G20 -- in other words, the incorporation of new emerging capitalist powers such as the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China). And, international capital clearly 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. *Reverse, Restructure and Resume* -- these are the 3Rs that global capitalism wants.

However, there is a *fourth* R of global capitalism. The very solution to the crisis that capital introduces -- that restructuring which brings the emerging capitalist countries to the central committee -- implies the right of the latter to be full members, i.e., to

achieve 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. And in this situation of true scarcity, how can capitalism solve this?

Capitalism, after all, is a system in which all capitals are trying to expand as much as possible. However, it is not a system in which all its members march in unison; and, as Lenin explained in relationship to World War I, the combination of uneven rates of development and scarcity is a major source of conflict among capitalist countries. In this situation, the new emerging powers want the fourth R-- *Redivision*. Redivision of resources, redivision of industrialisation, redivision 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.

Clearly, in this world of immense inequality, exclusion and starvation, redivision is necessary if we are ever to realise the ideal embodied in the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela of the importance of ensuring the overall human development of all people. We want a world, a socialist world, in which (as Marx and Engels stressed) "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all". But, *capitalist* redivision is a process of struggle over the right to exploit. It is a struggle not only among capitals but also against the exploited and excluded of the world.

Who would doubt that this struggle will become more intense as the logic of unremitting capitalist expansion comes up against the reality of natural limits? The slogan writers for Davos were right. We *do* need to "Rethink, Redesign, Rebuild -- Improve the State of the World". And, we need to *redivide*, too -- to create a world without capitalism. As Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez continue to remind us, humanity is faced with a critical choice -- socialism or barbarism?

[This article first appeared in the February 19, 2010, issue of [Correo del Orinoco](#), the new weekly English-language newspaper published in Venezuela. It has been post at [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) with Michael Lebowitz's permission. Michael A. Lebowitz is professor emeritus of economics at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and the author of [Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and [Build It Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century](#) (Monthly Review Press, 2006). He works with the Centro Internacional Miranda in Venezuela. His forthcoming book, [The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development](#), will published by Monthly Review Press this year.]

Published on February 19, 2010 by [Correo del Orinoco](#)