

The Struggles for Bolivarian Socialism¹

Michael A. Lebowitz

Is the Bolivarian Revolution providing an alternative to capitalism? Certainly, that is its announced goal. And, it has proposed a unique path--- a profoundly democratic socialism as the only road to the full human development which the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela stresses. Without question, Hugo Chávez has succeeded in reclaiming “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.” However, to make that project real, many struggles lie ahead yet on the path.

At the core of the new socialism for the 21st Century as it has emerged in Venezuela is the communal council (based upon 200-400 families in existing urban neighbourhoods and 20-50 in the rural areas). Begun in 2006 to democratically diagnose community needs and priorities, the councils are small enough to permit the general assembly rather than elected representatives to be the supreme decision-making bodies in the community. And, with the shift of substantial resources from municipal levels to the community level, the councils have been envisioned as a basis not only for the transformation of people in the course of changing circumstances but also for productive activity based upon communal needs and communal purposes.

Following Chavez’s re-election in December 2006 on the explicit theme of building a new socialism, the communal councils were identified as the fundamental cell of Bolivarian socialism and the basis for a new state. “All power to the communal councils!” Chávez declared; and an “explosion in communal power” has been designated as the fifth of the “five motors” driving toward socialism. The logic is one of a profound decentralisation of decision-making and power; and, as with the third motor, “Moral y Luces”, a major educational and ideological campaign, the consistent theme is the stress upon revolutionary practice in order to build socialism.² Citing Marx and Che Guevara, Chávez has insisted (e.g., in “Aló Presidente” #279, 27 March 2007) that it is only through practice that new socialist human beings produce themselves.

And, the kind of practice required is not that which is based upon self-interest (the “infection”, the virus inherited from capitalism) and in producing for the purpose of exchange but, rather, is practice in producing directly for society’s needs and building solidarity. In this respect, the third motor of ideological struggle and the democratic transformative practices embodied in the fifth motor’s explosion of communal power are two sides of the same coin and require each other. Without the side of ideological struggle, the focus upon needs becomes a struggle for old needs, the values generated within capitalist society; and without transformative democratic practices, the ideological appeals alone lead ultimately to a combination of commandism and cynicism.

Socialist practice, though, is not only conceived as occurring within communities. Since his re-election, Chávez has stressed what he calls “the elementary triangle” of

¹ These are excerpts from ‘Venezuela: A Good Example of the Bad Left of Latin America,’ published in *Monthly Review* (July-August 2007).

² The other three motors so far identified are (1) the enabling law, which will allow Chávez to bypass the legislature in specific areas for a given time period, (2) constitutional change and (4) a change in the geometry (i.e., political subdivisions) of the country.

socialism: units of social property, social production, and satisfaction of the needs of communities. Will capitalism provide boots for poor children? Capitalism, he has noted, says the market will solve this, but in socialism we can plan to produce these directly for the children who need good boots. Chávez, thus, has taken a further step since the election: while continuing to stress the importance of worker participation, he argues that it is not *sufficient*; it is necessary, for example, to guide cooperatives to move increasingly to become units of social property and to produce directly for communal needs. Thus, the new stress is not only upon social production but also social *property*, and the guarantor of social property (i.e., property of the society) must be the State--- “the Social State, not the bourgeois State, not the capitalist State” (“Aló Presidente” #264, 28 January 2007).

There can be little doubt that a battle of ideas against capitalism and for the creation of a new socialism with new values is well underway. Not only is there the growing articulation of characteristics of socialism for the 21st Century but also the development of a mass consciousness--- spread through Chávez’s televised speeches and the new ideological campaign.

But, the *idea* of this socialism cannot displace real capitalism. You need the power to foster the new productive relations while truncating the reproduction of capitalist productive relations. Winning “the battle of democracy” and using “political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie” remains as critical now as when Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*.

Using political supremacy to build new productive relations

More than a battle of ideas is taking place in Venezuela. In addition to the expansion of state sectors in oil and basic industry, the “new era” beginning in 2007 already has been marked by the nationalization of strategic sectors such as communications, electric power and the recovery of the dominant position for the State in the heavy oil fields where multinational firms had previously prevailed. Further, the offensive against the latifundia has resumed with several recent land seizures, and new state companies (including joint ventures with state firms from countries such as Iran) to produce means of production like tractors have been created.

Much more, however, needs to be done: if the Venezuelan economy is to be transformed and freed from its dependence upon oil, new productive sectors (in agriculture and industry) and a new infrastructure that can open vast parts of the interior of the country must be developed. The resources are there, and so is a working class either largely unemployed or in the informal sector by default (i.e., part of the reserve army). If the Bolivarian Revolution is serious about pursuing the process of extensive development implied, though, an inevitable tendency will be to plan and administer this process from above through the State.

But, where will self-management, co-management, worker management--- ‘forms of association guided by the values of mutual cooperation and solidarity’ stressed in the Bolivarian Constitution fit in? In fact, the experience in the state sector has not been encouraging: with the exception of the aluminum firm ALCASA and the electrical distribution firm in the Andes (CADELA), worker management in the state sector has

been thwarted and has moved backward in what are called ‘strategic’ state industries (especially PDVSA itself). Rather than a process in which workers have been transforming themselves in production through self-management, they have been dominated from the top through the hierarchical patterns characteristic of state capitalist and statist firms. And these reversals have demoralised militant workers; confining them to the adversarial role that they play in capitalism, all the self-oriented tendencies of the old society (which in Venezuela means the struggle to capture rents) are reinforced.

The promise now is that this pattern will *change*--- that the motor of Moral y Luces will involve both ideological education and training for worker management in all enterprises (through a transforming of the workday to include education) and that workers councils will be legislated in all enterprises not only to take on more and more functions of management but also to be oriented toward communal needs. Certainly, these themes are exciting: clear moves toward democratic, participatory and protagonistic production are essential if people are not to remain the fragmented, crippled human beings that capitalism produces. Yet, the gap between promises from the top and the realization of promises in practice is often very significant in Venezuela; and, in the particular case, experience to date indicates that there is considerable resistance from managers and ministers to the loss of control from above.

Unfortunately, to counter this problem and to make those promises real, there is no unified collective subject making demands from below for workers control. Not only is the organised working class outside of state administration small (given the pattern of economic development and neoliberalism over the last half century) but intense factional struggles within the Chavist labour movement (UNT) have effectively crippled the organised working class as a major actor for now.

Creating the collective worker for itself

Who, then, are the subjects of this revolutionary process? Once we think about the communal councils as sites where people produce not only solutions to their needs but also produce themselves as collective workers for themselves, then it is possible to see a definite link between the two motors (the explosion of communal power and Moral y Luces) and the other major campaign of this moment--- the creation of the new unified socialist party

“The explosion of communal power” and the process of building this new party have much in common. Both are mobilizing large numbers of people and have a common enemy in the clientalism and corruption which continue to infect the 5th Republic; both potentially challenge those people in party and state for whom development of the capabilities and capacities of the masses is not as compelling as the desire for the accumulation of power and comfort for their families; and both reflect the link between Chávez and the masses, a dialectic in which Chávez openly calls upon people to take power (“the multitude, the multitude!”) and is in turn driven forward by the needs and demands of the people themselves.

But, what about socialist productive relations? To the degree that the two motors and the building of the unified socialist party of Venezuela (provisionally designated the PSUV) are successful in building the capabilities and capacities of the masses and

strengthening a new social relation of collective producers, the invasion of the sphere of production by this relation is inevitable: the same people who are transforming themselves “into the object *and the subject* of power” in their communities are not likely to settle for less in their workplaces or in decisions in society as a whole. In fact, the process is already beginning--- with the linking of communal councils with both local cooperatives and state enterprises in order to direct production to meet local needs. To the extent that workers councils and communal councils begin coordinating their activity, the collective producers will be well on their way to seizing possession of production.

Obstacles along the path

However, the success of this process is not at all inevitable. There are, as there have always been in the Bolivarian Revolution, powerful tendencies within which point in the opposite direction. Not only the strong inclination of government ministers and managers in important state sectors to plan and direct everything from above (a pattern which has successfully crippled independent workers movements) and not only the continuing culture of corruption and clientalism which can be the basis for the emergence of a new oligarchy. There is also a very clear tendency which supports the growth of a domestic capitalist class as one leg upon which the Bolivarian Revolution must walk for the foreseeable future.

No Chavists these days, of course, openly argue that socialism for the 21st Century should *depend* upon capital. Rather, all insist that the process at this point requires the Bolivarian Revolution to tame private capital through “socialist conditionality” – i.e., by establishing new ground rules as conditions under which private capital can serve the revolution. In its best versions, this may be seen as a process of transition, that process of making “despotic inroads” and wresting, “by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie.” Certainly, measures such as opening the books, imposing workers councils with power, demanding accountability to communal councils and transforming the workday by introducing education for worker management introduce an alien logic into capitalism – the logic of new socialist productive relations within capitalist firms.

However, the lack of clarity as to the nature of those ground rules means that mixed signals are being sent out. The “realistic” message that Venezuela is likely to have a “mixed economy” for a long time, that there is a place for private capital in the Bolivarian Revolution, and that a sufficient condition for access to state business and state credit is a commitment by capital to the interests of communities and workers has brought with it the formation of organizations such as Conseven, the “Confederation of Socialist Industrialists” and other private capitalist organizations busily defining private capital as socialist property. “Productive socialism”, it is being said in meetings of “Chavist” capitalists around the country, requires private capitalists as part of the socialist model.

In this case, rather than the "elementary triangle" of socialism (units of social property, organized by workers through social production, for the satisfaction of communal needs), what is strengthened is the “capitalist triangle”: private ownership of the means of production, exploitation of wage laborers, for the purpose of profits.

However lofty the language of social responsibility, the pursuit of profits dominates: commitment to the community becomes, effectively, a "tax", and worker participation becomes shares in the company to induce workers to commit themselves to producing profits. As may be seen from the disappointing experience of the EPS (which have followed this pattern), capital accepts these constraints as conditions in order to ensure its right to exploit and generate profits until it is strong enough itself to impose *capitalist* conditionality.

The Bolivarian Revolution, like all revolutionary processes, produces its own potential gravediggers. To the extent that it fosters the infection of the logic of capital, the Bolivarian Revolution does not walk on two legs but, rather, has one leg walking backward. When we acknowledge that this tendency is flourishing within the process and add it to the continuing pattern of clientalism and corruption, the remaining enclaves of old capitalist power (in banking, import-processing, land-ownership and the media), and the constant presence and threat of US imperialism, it is obvious that there are formidable barriers to the struggle for socialism in Venezuela.

The revolutionary dialectic

And, yet, it moves. The Bolivarian Revolution has driven beyond the barriers constantly placed before it (and has itself developed qualitatively in the process) precisely because of its dialectic between leadership and the movement of masses. That is why the development of the collective worker for itself through the explosion of communal power, the ideological campaign of Moral y Luces and the mobilization of a new party from below is essential for the next steps. The support of masses and the continued willingness of the Bolivarian leadership to move in rather than give in when capital goes on strike (as it inevitably does) drives the revolution forward.

In a relatively short time, the Bolivarian Revolution has come a long way. It still faces many problems, and its success will only occur as the result of struggle. Not only a struggle against US imperialism, the champion of barbarism around the world, which is threatened by any suggestion that there is an alternative to its rule. And, not only against the domestic oligarchy with its capitalist enclaves in the mass media, banks, processing sectors and the latifundia. The really difficult struggle, I've argued (e.g., in my book, *Build it Now: Socialism for the 21st Century*), is within the Bolivarian Revolution itself---in the divergence between a would-be new Bolivarian oligarchy and the masses of excluded and exploited.

Venezuela's lesson needs to be understood and communicated widely: its focus upon human development and revolutionary practice, its missions in education and health and its creation of communal councils as the basis for a revolutionary democratic state cannot help but inspire masses elsewhere and create the condition for a revolutionary leadership to emerge. The real lesson of the Bolivarian revolution, though, is what can happen when there is a dialectic of masses which understand that there is an alternative and a revolutionary leadership prepared to move in rather than give in.