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Venezuela

The Challenge of Socialism in the 21st Century

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There is a tension at the heart of Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution. It's been there for several years. But it has come to the forefront in recent months, since Hugo Chavez' re-election as president in December 2006, his announcement of 'five motors' to drive the country's passage towards 'socialism of the 21st century', and his call for a new united socialist party to organise that transition. It is the tension between the revolution's anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist achievements – which are undeniable – and its socialist promise – which remains just that, a promise.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bolivarzapche.jpg>]

It was of course the depth of Venezuela's structural reforms – its often noisy but nonetheless real break with the market-driven priorities of the Washington consensus – that first established the process as a beacon for the global justice movement and the international left. It was this consistent anti-neoliberal stance that lay behind the welcome given to Hugo Chavez at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2005, even before the Venezuelan leader had made any commitment to the 'S' word.

That impact reached well beyond Latin America and the traditional solidarity circles of Europe and North America. A couple of examples are illustrative. One comes from Indonesia, where the new left party PAPERNAS repeatedly refers to the Venezuelan example to explain and justify its platform for re-asserting national sovereignty over the country's natural resources and economic development. Another comes from Egypt, where there is a tradition in the Cairo bazaar of giving the names of public figures to the dates on sale, as a measure of the quality of each batch of these dried fruit. Following last year's war in Lebanon, it was no surprise that the poorest, bitterest varieties were called 'Bush', 'Blair' and 'Olmert'. Nor was it much surprise to find that the very finest, sweetest dates were called 'Nasrallah', after the leader of Hezbollah. But among the group of other tasty varieties, following up a little way behind, was one called 'Chavez'. The Venezuelan leader had of course withdrawn his ambassador from Israel in protest at the aggression.

All this merely illustrates the extraordinary resonance that Venezuela's bold opposition to Empire has had among tens of millions of those Fanon once called "the wretched of the earth" – a resonance that began to be felt after the defeat of the anti-Chavez coup in April 2002 and the development of the health and literacy 'Missions' from 2003, and which is unlike anything experienced for a couple of decades.

But more recently, something else has emerged to give the Venezuelan process a bigger, more profound impact still. This began with Chavez' invitation in 2005 to begin discussing 'socialism of the 21st century', a discussion which continues even more intensely today after the commitment he made in December 2006 that this is now the main challenge for the next period in Venezuela. Of course this is of critical importance for the struggle inside Venezuela. But it also transforms its international potential.

Firstly for those of us in countries where the word 'socialism' has been erased from most people's political vocabulary for the last 17 years or more, it has suddenly become possible to talk about socialism without appearing to have just flown in from another galaxy. More than that, Venezuela is the first living laboratory – at least since Nicaragua in the 1980s – to test out what exactly socialist democracy might look like in the 21st century, and what strategies are available to get to it. Some of these strategic questions have begun to reappear in theoretical form in recent years. For example there has been an important debate in the pages of the French LCR's *Critique Communiste*, involving Daniel Bensaid, Antoine Artous, Alex Callinicos and others. Among the central questions they raise: under current conditions, does a socialist revolution and the building of a new kind of state necessarily entail one crucial, explosive moment when the old state apparatus collapses, some kind of 'storming of the winter

palace', the result of an insurrectionary general strike or maybe a prolonged, popular, military struggle? Or is it possible to envisage the emergence of new state structures defending a new set of class interests, alongside or even within the old state which defends the old class interests?

This is probably the most decisive question now facing the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela. For at the risk of simplification, the political process in Venezuela can be described as a nationalist, anti-neoliberal, anti-imperialist revolution, within which there is a socialist revolution struggling to get out. And paradoxically, both aspects are crystallised in the personality of Chavez himself. The socialist revolution is struggling to get out because this is a process which first developed out of a conventional (that is bourgeois representative) electoral victory in 1998, with the backing of quite a broad cross-class alliance, and which at least up until the failed coup of April 2002, did little to step beyond that institutional framework. Certainly the new Bolivarian Constitution of 2000 overhauled those institutions, and had many radical things to say about popular participation and the centrality of human needs and human potential. But it did not challenge the basic premises (either of delegated, representative democracy, or of private property relations). And to some extent it entrenched the class alliance that had backed it.

Since the uprising against the coup in 2002, and especially since the struggle to resist the employers' lockout at the end of that year, the popular mobilizations, the Missions, the urban land committees, some sporadic or partial experiences of workers' control, some of the rural and urban co-operatives, and most recently the emerging Communal Councils, have begun to move beyond the old framework and even to 'defy' it. But still the central levers of power in Venezuela – including the office of the presidency itself – remain institutionally located, even 'trapped', within the old administrative structures. The problem for the Bolivarian movement – and perhaps for most conceivable revolutionary situations in today's world – is how do you get around the existing apparatus, when you first came to power through it (ie. you were elected into office). In the case of Venezuela, this problem is connected to another: how can the movement develop a real collective leadership and free itself from the overarching dominance of one revolutionary 'caudillo', however honest and able, as Chavez himself seems to recognise it must?

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/swop.jpg>]

Two of the most recent developments in Venezuela, and one slightly older one, seem to point towards a possible solution. The latter is the experience of co-management with workers' control developed in a few workplaces since early 2005, most importantly at the ALCASA aluminium plant in Ciudad Guayana. This experiment remains very limited in its spread, patchy in its application, and there are some worrying signs that it has fallen out of favour with the central leadership. Chavez made almost no mention of it at all in his keynote speeches of December and January outlining the priorities of the new period of the revolution. But it remains the most ambitious and inspiring example so far of a radical alternative to the old system. The two more recent developments are the call for a new United Socialist Party, as "the most democratic party Venezuela has ever seen", and the "revolutionary explosion of communal power" that Chavez identified as the fifth and most important motor of Venezuela's transition to a socialism of the 21st century.

Together these three seem to re-assert an old truth. The solution can only be democracy – the radical extension of democracy into every area of social life – because that, in the end, is what socialism is. Indeed 'collective ownership' of the means of production is pointless unless it means the extension of democratic, collective control over the economy.

This is how President Chavez described the challenge of communal power on 8 January as he swore in his new government.

"This year with the Communal Councils we need to go beyond the local. We need to begin to create, by law in the first instance, a kind of regional, local and national confederation of Communal Councils. We have to move towards

the creation of a communal state. And the old bourgeois state, which is still there, still alive and kicking, we have to begin dismantling it bit by bit, as we build up the communal state, the socialist state, the Bolivarian state - a state that is capable of carrying through a revolution. Almost all states have been born to prevent revolutions. So we have quite a task: to convert a counter-revolutionary state into a revolutionary state."

This is indeed a far-reaching vision. The Venezuelan revolutionary and former minister Roland Denis – often a critic of Chavez from the left – is surely right when he says the communal councils – which are intended to bring together 200-400 families to discuss and decide on local spending and development plans – offer an historic opportunity to do away with the bourgeois state. In theory there are already 18,000 of them. This should rise to 30,000. In practice many of them have yet to get up and running.

But there are two related problems with the Communal Councils as presently conceived. One is that they are not entirely autonomous. They were created and are regulated by law, a law drawn up and passed by the 'old state', even if an old state inhabited by chavistas. This is significantly different from the Participatory Budget of Porto Alegre and some of its other more radical manifestations elsewhere in Brazil, which to a considerable degree have inspired the Venezuelan initiative. There the PB was set up 'informally' by a convergence of the social movements in the poor neighbourhoods and the party (the Workers' Party or PT) that was in local government, taking advantage of a loophole in Brazil's post-dictatorship constitution. One of its fundamental guiding principles was that it should be autonomous and self-regulated; there was never any legislation on the PB, it drew up its own rules and could modify them at will, and neither the representatives of local government nor of the party had any direct say in the matter.

Secondly, and again unlike the PB in Porto Alegre, the Communal Councils do not have sovereign decision making power over 100% of local budgets (another of the cardinal principles of the Porto Alegre experience, although one that was only partially exercised). In fact the money that Venezuela's communal councils discuss and spend comes in lump sums allocated directly by the Presidential Commission for Communal Power – a total of about \$ 1.6bn last year, and around twice that this year. They do not control existing public budgets and it remains unclear what relationship they will have with resources and administrative structures that currently come under the elected mayors, governors and local assemblies – whether they will begin to absorb and supersede these or merely exist alongside them.

Both of these problems are partly a result of another. In spite of the explosion of all kinds of local mobilization in recent years, Venezuela has neither a tradition of strongly organised social movements nor a mass revolutionary, or even just class-struggle, party, which can organise such initiatives. To some degree the 'Chavez phenomenon' stands in for both.

This is why the call to build a new United Socialist Party (PSUV) is potentially such an important step. It might just be the best way of moving beyond the reliance on one central leader. But only on the condition that it is a genuinely open and democratic party, and not some monolithic instrument for relaying decisions that have already been taken. This is a big challenge for Venezuela's several small currents and parties that already identify themselves as marxists or socialists. The most important of these from an explicitly revolutionary marxist tradition – the PRS or Revolution and Socialism Party which includes the central leaders of the currently divided UNT trade union federation – has just split over the issue, with some of its best known leaders opting to join the PSUV project, while others have decided to remain outside. In our view the former group are absolutely right to argue that this opportunity must not be missed and that it is precisely because there are real dangers of the project being hijacked by some of the old bureaucratic elements that revolutionaries must fight to ensure that the PSUV is fully democratic and does not include representatives of the Venezuelan capitalist class or the new bureaucracy that has been undermining the Bolivarian revolution from within. This is very similar to the fight waged by comrades of the Brazilian section of the FI in the 1980s to develop the new PT as a "workers' party without bosses" and one which had the maximum internal democracy, with full rights for tendencies, the proportional representation of minorities in the leadership, a 30% quota for women, and so on – a fight that was largely successful and played a key part in making the PT such a beacon for

the international left for a decade or more.

To sum up, there would seem to be three immediate and medium-term challenges facing the revolutionary process in Venezuela.

- 1) Can the new party become a real, mass revolutionary party – which means can it provide a thoroughly pluralist, democratic space for organising and co-ordinating the activity of all sectors and currents of the Venezuelan working class (in its broadest sense) and other oppressed sections of society?
- 2) Can the exemplary experiences of workers' co-management with workers control, begun in ALCASA and elsewhere, be extended through much wider sections of the public and private sectors? And can these begin to link up with and involve the Communal Councils and other forms of popular territorial power in exerting democratic control over workplaces and the wider economy?
- 3) Can the new Communal Councils become real centres of popular power, taking on sovereign decision-making power over all aspects of local and regional budgets and development plans? And can these bodies link up nationally to build a new kind of state that defends popular interests.

In other words, the immediate challenges are democratic. They point towards the radical extension of participatory democracy beyond the formal political sphere into every nook and cranny of the social edifice. And that of course is what socialism – before, during and after the 21st century – was always meant to look like. An unprecedented deepening of democratic rights. Looked at in this way, the question of nationalizations and the expropriation of private capital becomes a natural consequence rather than a pre-condition. For as soon as capital ceases to be controlled by capitalists, but rather is submitted to the democratic decisions of the workforce and the community, locally and nationally, then it ceases to function as private capital and begins to obey a very different logic – that of human needs and potential, and just as urgently now, that of environmental survival. And the journey between these two points is also one of the things the theory of permanent revolution set out to analyse, some one hundred years ago.