

Building Twenty-First Century Socialism

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ASPECTRE IS HAUNTING capitalism: the spectre of twenty-first century socialism. Increasingly the outlines of this spectre are becoming clear, and people are able to see enough to understand what it is not. The only thing that is not clear at this point is whether this spectre is actually an earthly presence.

Consider first what twenty-first century socialism is not. It is not the belief that by struggling within capitalism for reforms it is possible to change the nature of capitalism—that a better capitalism, a “third way,” can suspend the logic of capital. Twenty-first century socialism is not yesterday’s liberal package: social democracy. Further, from the standpoint of the twenty-first century, socialism should not be confused with state ownership of the means of production, so that all that it is necessary to do to achieve it is to nationalize everything. Nor does it accept the notion that anything that builds a nation’s productive capacity (thereby supposedly bringing it closer to socialism and communism) is justified, including gulags, dictatorship and, indeed, capitalism.

Finally, socialism for the twenty-first century is not based upon the concept of representative democracy—that institutional form in which rule by the people is transformed into voting periodically for those who will misrule them. All these fall into what one may call “yesterday’s socialist package.”

So, if twenty-first century socialism differs from yesterday’s packages, what is it?

Twenty-first century socialism stresses above everything else the centrality of human development. In this respect, it is a restoration of the focus of nineteenth-century socialists, including that of Karl Marx. The young Marx envisioned a “rich human being”—one who has developed his capacities and capabilities: “the rich man profoundly endowed with all the senses.” But it was not only a young, romantic, so-called “pre-Marxist” Marx who spoke so eloquently about rich human beings. In his last work, the *Grundrisse*, Marx returned to this conception of human wealth—to a rich human being—“as rich as possible in needs, because rich in qualities and relations.” Real wealth, he understood, is the development of human capacity—the “development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption.”

That these ideas live today can be seen very clearly in the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela. In its recognition that the goal of a human society must be that of “ensuring overall human development” (Article 299); in the declaration of Article 20 that “everyone has the right to the free development of his or her own personality”; and in the focus of Article 102 on “developing the creative potential of every human being and the full exercise of his or her

personality in a democratic society”—this theme of human development pervades the Bolivarian Constitution.

Further, this Constitution also focuses upon the question of how people develop their capacities and capabilities. Article 62 declares 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.” This focus upon practice as essential for human development was, of course, Marx’s central insight into how people change: the concept of revolutionary practice—“the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change.”

Look where this key link of human development and the simultaneous changing of circumstance and self-change leads:

- To democratic decision making in the workplace and the community.
- To a focus upon building solidarity and new, socialist human beings, rather than relying upon exchange relations (buying and selling) and material self-interest, which leads to a blind alley.
- To a new conception of the state as one which is not over and above civil society—a state which, Marx wrote, is our own power, rather than a power used.
- To a recognition of the need for a political instrument that respects the creative energy and revolutionary practice of masses rather than substitutes its own wisdom - for, as Rosa Luxemburg argued, “the working class demands the right to make its mistakes and learn in the dialectic of history. Let us speak plainly. Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.”

VENEZUELA’S SOCIALISM

Certainly socialism for the twenty-first century has been explicitly on the agenda in Venezuela since Hugo Chavez’s closing speech at the January, 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, when he surprised many people by saying, “We have to re-invent socialism.” At that time, Chavez emphasized that, “It can’t be the kind of socialism that we saw in the Soviet Union, but it will emerge as we develop new systems that are built on cooperation, not competition.” Capitalism has to be transcended, he argued, if we are ever going to end the poverty of the majority of the world. “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, a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything.”

Without question, there has been progress in this direction. Starting in 2004, oil revenues from the newly recaptured state oil company were directed to new missions, which have been

providing people with basic prerequisites for human development: education, healthcare and adequate, affordable food. Important steps, too, have been taken to develop each side of the elementary socialist triangle.

THE SOCIALIST TRIANGLE

1. *Social Property*: There has been an expansion of state property, which can be a threshold to socialist property (because it is possible to direct state property to satisfy social needs). In addition to the expansion of state sectors in oil and basic industry, and last year's acquisition of strategic sectors like communications, electric power and the recovery of the dominant position for the state in the heavy oil fields, so far this year a major dairy company and most recently a steel company have been added. The steel company, Sidor, had been privatized by a previous government. Further, the offensive against the latifundia has resumed with several land seizures (or "recoveries"), and new state companies (including joint ventures with state firms from countries like Iran) have been created to produce means of production like tractors.
2. *Social Production*: While the government has continued to seek ways to encourage worker management - in particular by supporting cooperatives and recovered factories - this side of the triangle is the least developed, so far. In part, this is because of opposition within the state to worker management in strategic sectors like oil and energy and in part because of opposition from traditional trade unions to co-management structures and workers' councils. What has been happening is a continued search for forms, with the government moving from exploring co-operatives as the desired form, to companies of social production, and now to the exploration of the concept of *socialist companies*. Every day one hears of new ideas in this direction. Progress in this area, unfortunately, has been held up by intense battles and chaos between Chavist trade-union currents, and this has been a source of incredible frustration for many—including Chavez. In this process, Chavez continues to exhort the working class to play a leadership role. After this year's takeover of dairy producer Los Andes, he argued that, "workers' committees must be created, socialist committees, in order to transform the factory from inside. The workers must know what is happening in the company, participate in decision-making in the firm."
3. *Production for Social Needs*: Throughout the country, there are many experiments attempting to link producers and consumers directly— especially in the sphere of agricultural products and in local trading with local currencies. To be able to identify social needs, however, new institutions are required—and the most significant advance that has occurred is the development in 2006 of communal councils. These councils are an extraordinary experiment in bringing power to people in their neighbourhoods, creating an institutional form in which they can diagnose their needs collectively and determine priorities for their communities. Of course, the idea of participatory diagnosis and budgeting is not unique to Venezuela; it is occurring in a number of communities elsewhere (the most famous example being Porto Alegre, Brazil). But what is unique in Venezuela is the size of the units in

question. In urban areas, communal councils represent two hundred to four hundred families (as many as a thousand people); in rural areas, as few as twenty families. It means that the councils are choosing not distant representatives, but, rather, their neighbours, people they know well—and not as representatives, but as voceros, spokespersons for the ultimate decision-making body, the general assembly (which, of course, meets in the neighbourhood, thereby allowing everyone to participate).

COMMUNITY COUNCILS

In the communal councils one may have the embryo for a new state from below, and that was recognized explicitly by Chavez last year when he proclaimed, "All Power to the Communal Councils." Now, of course, the communal councils are small, and the problems of society go well beyond those that can be resolved at the neighbourhood level. That is understood, and Chavez has called the councils themselves the cell of a new socialist state. They are seen as the building blocks—essential because they are allowing people to develop confidence and capacities in dealing with problems they understand.

Observing the sense of pride in these communities is very moving. However, it is obviously necessary to begin to combine the communal councils into larger associations in order to deal with larger problems. And that is precisely what is happening now, with the creation of pilot projects to combine some of the more advanced groups of councils into socialist communes. The process envisioned is very clearly one of trying to build a new state from below.

OBSTACLES

Can twenty-first century socialism succeed in Venezuela? To understand its possibilities, you have to know something about the nature of that country's society. Here are some of the obstacles to building socialism for the twenty-first century in Venezuela.

When one talks about Venezuela, one has to begin with oil. Not only the effect of oil exports upon the hollowing-out of the economy, such that local manufacturing and agriculture effectively disappeared—the result of an exchange rate that made it much cheaper to import everything rather than produce it domestically. Despite rich agricultural land, Venezuela was importing seventy per cent of its food. So, there was massive migration from the countryside to live in the cities. As for industry, it was largely import-processing—processing food, assembling cars and assorted other import-related sectors. Oil production itself doesn't generate many jobs, so there's unemployment, an informal sector (about half of the working class) and poverty—extreme social debt and inequality.

Unlike the classic picture of a state resting upon civil society, in Venezuela civil society rests upon the state. And the state is suspended upon an oil geyser. Not surprisingly, access to the state for the purpose of gaining access to oil rents has been a national preoccupation. In this poverty-stricken society, there has been an orgy of rent seeking; a culture of corruption and clientelism; parasitic capitalists who don't invest; a labour aristocracy whose trade-union

leaders sell jobs; a party system that functions as an alternating transmission belt for elections and access to state jobs; and a state that mostly does not work because it is filled with incompetent sinecurists—but, when it does, is completely top-down.

All of this was present in Venezuela when Chavez was elected in 1998. And, one would have to be truly naive to think that it disappeared when Chavez came to office. On the contrary, it pervades Chavism—the corruption, the clientelism, the nature of the state, the nature of the party (including the new party currently being built) and the gap between the organized working class and the poor in the informal sector. It's all there, and it is entirely contrary to everything in the concept of socialism for the twenty-first century.

INTERNAL STRUGGLES

Socialism doesn't drop from the sky. It is necessarily rooted in particular societies. Precisely because of these two, opposed tendencies, it is necessary to stress the internal struggle within Chavism as the main obstacle to the success of the Bolivarian Revolution. Obviously it is not the only obstacle—there is the existing oligarchy, the latifundists, who are the most reactionary and violent part of the opposition; the existing capitalists in their enclaves of import processing, finance and the media (their main weapon); and, of course, US imperialism. Not only was the US complicit in the 2002 coup that briefly removed Chavez, and in the oil lockout and sabotage later that year, but it also funds and trains the opposition, orchestrates the international media blitz against Venezuela (currently with the assistance of magical laptop computers produced by the US's Colombian clients) and it is in the process of bringing back the US Navy to patrol the waters off Venezuela.

Imperialism is no paper tiger, but the internal obstacles to socialism within Chavism are: the emerging new capitalists (the "bolibourgeoisie"), the high officials who are opposed to power from below in workplaces and communities, the party functionaries and nomen-klatura. The struggle between this "endogenous right" (the right from within Chavism) and the masses that have been mobilized is the ultimate conflict that will determine the fate of the Bolivarian Revolution.

WHO WILL WIN?

Who will win? Venezuela is no place for a revolutionary who suffers from bipolar disorder. There are the days of depression and despair; there are the days of manic exultation. In the end, it will all depend upon class struggle—and, when it comes to class struggle, there are no guarantees.

But let's assume a worse-case scenario—that the process in Venezuela degenerates, that it demoralizes its supporters, is defeated in one way or another by defectors, domestic capitalists, the military, or imperialism. Let's assume, in other words, that this particular earthly manifestation of the spectre of socialism for the twenty-first century is no more.

Think about this concept of socialism for the twenty-first century - about the focus upon human development as the goal, upon a democratic, participatory, protagonistic society as the necessary way for the complete development of people, individually and collectively. Think about the idea of communal councils in which people can collectively decide upon their needs, where they simultaneously change circumstances and themselves. Think about democracy in the workplace, about ending the divide between thinking and doing and being able to draw upon the tacit knowledge of workers to be able to produce better. Think in general about this concept of revolutionary democracy, which is central to the concept of socialism for the twenty-first century.

ANOTHER SPECTRE OUT THERE

This is not a concept just for Venezuela or Latin America or for the poor of the South. Why is this not a spectre that can appeal to Canadians in their communities and workplaces?

This is not just a nice wish. It is a necessity—because there is another spectre out there haunting humanity: the spectre of barbarism.

Think about capitalism. Its very essence is the drive to expand capital. In this picture, capital constantly generates more surplus value in the form of commodities, which must be sold, and constantly seeks to create new needs. So, one sees a growing circle—a spiral of growing alienated production, growing needs and growing consumption. But how long can that continue?

Everyone knows that the high levels of consumption achieved in certain parts of the world cannot be copied in the parts of the world that capital has newly incorporated into the world capitalist economy. Very simply, the earth cannot sustain it. Sooner or later, that circle will reach its limits, the limits of the earth to sustain more and more consumption of the earth's resources.

But well before one reaches the ultimate limits of the vicious circle of capitalism, there will inevitably arise the question of who is entitled to command those increasingly limited resources. To whom will go the oil, the metals, the water—all these requirements of modern life? Will it be the currently rich countries of capitalism, those that have been able to develop because others have not? Will they be able to maintain the vast advantages they have in terms of consumption of things and resources, and to use their power to grab the resources located in other countries?

Will newly emerging capitalist countries (and, indeed, those not emerging at all) be able to capture a "fair share"? Will the impoverished producers of the world—producers well aware of the standards of consumption elsewhere, a result of the mass media—accept that they are not entitled to the fruits of civilization? How will this be resolved?

The spectre of barbarism is haunting humanity. What is the alternative to it? Yesterday's liberalism—social democracy—has never understood the nature of capital, and accordingly offers only barbarism with a human face. Yesterday's socialist package, with its promise of

more rapid development of productive forces and its privileging of industrial workers—this, too, offers no alternative to the crisis humanity faces.

Whatever the ultimate fate of the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela, its principal contribution has been to restore hope. It has done this by revealing that there is an alternative to neoliberalism and the logic of capital. □

[source : *Marx Laboratory*]