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# MONTHLY REVIEW

VOL. 66  
NO. 11

APRIL  
2015

AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

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US\$6 / CAN\$6 / £4.50 / £4.00



# Chávez and the Communal State

**By John Bellamy Foster**

April 1, 2015

On October 20, 2012, less than two weeks after being reelected to his fourth term as Venezuelan president and only months before his death, Hugo Chávez delivered his crucial *El Golpe de Timón* (“Strike at the Helm”) speech to the first meeting of his ministers in the new revolutionary cycle.<sup>1</sup> Chávez surprised even some of his strongest supporters by his insistence on the need for changes at the top in order to promote an immediate leap forward in the creation of what is referred to as “the communal state.” This was to accelerate the shift of power to the population that had begun with the formation of the communal councils (groupings of families involved in self-governance projects—in densely populated urban areas, 200–400 families; in rural areas, 50–100 families). The main aim in the new revolutionary cycle, he insisted, was to speed up the registration of communes, the key structure of the communal state. In the communes, residents in geographical areas smaller than a city unite in a number of community councils with the object of self-governance through a communal parliament, constructed on participatory principles. The communes are political-economic-cultural structures engaged in such areas as food production, food security, housing, communications, culture, communal exchange, community banking, and justice systems. All of this had been legally constituted by the passage of the Organic Laws of Popular Power in 2010, including, most notably, the Organic Law of the Communes and the Organic Law of the Communal Economic System.

Chávez’s “Strike at the Helm” speech, which insisted on the rapid construction of communes, was to be one of the most important and memorable speeches of his career. It offers the key to the past, present, and future of the Venezuelan revolution. More than that, it presents us with new insights into the whole question of the transition to socialism in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

In March 2011, when I was the sole U.S. participant in a small group of socialist intellectuals from the Americas and Europe invited to Caracas to

confer with the country's top ministers on the future of the Bolivarian Revolution, it was already apparent that the full implementation of Venezuela's 2010 "Organic Law of the Commons," the most crucial enactment of the revolution, faced major obstacles.<sup>3</sup> Although there were thousands of communal councils there were as yet no registered communes – the larger territorial organizations of which communal councils were to form a part, and which would represent the real basis for popular power. Nor at that point, during a presidential election cycle that was to determine the future of the Bolivarian Revolution, was it easy to move forward in this respect. Indeed, there was clearly considerable confusion at the ministerial level around the question of how the establishment of the communes, the most important element in the revolutionary process, would be accomplished, if at all.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, it was a historic moment when Chávez in his October 2012 speech crossed this Rubicon. He insisted on a full-scale socialist political transformation, with the intention of decisively shifting political power to the people, and by that means making the revolution irreversible. In addressing the communes in his "Strike at the Helm" speech, Chávez commenced by referring to István Mészáros's *Beyond Capital*, not only in order to lay down certain basic principles, but also with the aim of once again urging those engaged in the Bolivarian Revolution to study Mészáros's analysis, as the most developed and strategic theory of socialist transition:

Here I have a [book written by] István Mészáros, chapter XIX called "The Communal System and the Law of Value." There is a sentence that I underlined a while ago, I am going to read it to you, ministers and vice president, speaking of the economy, of economic development, speaking of the social impulses of the revolution: "The yardstick," says Mészáros, "of socialist achievements is the extent to which the adopted measures and policies actively contribute to the constitution and deep-rooted consolidation of a *substantively* democratic...mode of overall social control and self-management."

Therefore we arrive at the issue of democracy. Socialism is in its essence truly democratic, while, on the other hand, there is capitalism: quintessentially anti-democratic and exclusive, the imposition of capital by the capitalist elite. But socialism is none of these things, socialism liberates; socialism is democracy and democracy is socialism, in politics, the social sphere, and in economics.<sup>5</sup>

Presenting an age-old principle of revolutionary theory, associated most famously with Marx, Chávez argued: "It must always be this way: first the

political revolution, political liberation and then economic revolution. We must maintain political liberation and from that point the political battle is a permanent one, the cultural battle, the social battle.”<sup>6</sup> The problem of a transition to socialism was then, first of all, a political one: creating an alternative popular, participatory, protagonist base. Only then could changes in economics, production, and property take place. This new popular base of power had to have equivalent power in the organization of what Mészáros called the necessary “social metabolic reproduction” to that of capital itself, displacing the latter. It needed, in Chávez’s words, to “form part of a systematic plan, of something new, like a network...a network that works like a gigantic spider’s web covering the new territory.” Indeed, “if it didn’t work this way,” he insisted, “it would all be doomed to fail; it would be absorbed by the old system, which would swallow it up, because capitalism is an enormous amoeba, it is a monster.”

Chávez’s analysis was clearly rooted in Mészáros’s concept of “social metabolic reproduction.” The capital system, in this view, was an overall system of reproduction, a kind of organic metabolism, albeit in a form that alienated human beings from themselves, each other, their communities, and external nature. To create a genuine socialist political economy thus required instituting an alternative communal state, as the basis of social production and exchange; one that would have an organic metabolism that was as vital (indeed more vital since unalienated) as capitalism itself, basing itself on the power of protagonist democracy. As Chávez insisted in his “Strike at the Helm” speech, such a democratic-communal political organization, as an absolute necessity of socialism, stood in sharp contrast to the practice that emerged in the Soviet Union where “there was never democracy, there wasn’t socialism, it was diverted.” Hence, the goal in the transition to twenty-first-century socialism, he said, was to create “a new democratic hegemony which obliges us not to impose, but rather to convince.”

Chávez went on to suggest that for all of the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution it had not yet taken the decisive step: the real transfer of power to the people, the creation of the communes. Although the first commune had been registered in August 2012, the process had been slow, not conforming to the necessary acceleration of revolutionary progress.<sup>7</sup> Without the communes, the communal state (“the commune”) could not be built. Demanding of the government the “Self-Criticism Which Clarifies,” Chávez asked “Where is the commune?” Turning to Vice President Nicolás Maduro, he said: “Nicolás I entrust you with this task as I would entrust my life to you: the communes.... There is already a Law of the Communes, of

communal economy. Therefore, how will we make it happen...?"<sup>8</sup> The communes of the people that were already in the making, Chávez stated, "dictate that we search out the Law of the Communes, that we read it, and study it. Many people, I am sure, and I am not necessarily speaking about those of you here, haven't read it, because it is believed that it isn't important to us. Many people haven't even read the Law of Communal Economy because they believe No, it doesn't have anything to do with me." In answer, Chávez declared, the principles should be "either independence or nothing, either the commune or nothing."<sup>9</sup>

What made the communes so important was that "Socialism Cannot Be Made By Decree." The formation of socialism, Chávez stated, "is about creating, as Mészáros says, a coordinated combination of parallel systems and from there the regionalization, the initiative districts. But we still haven't created a single one, and we have the law, we have our decree, but it was just a decree, and inside the initiative districts are the communes." How then to create the communes?

A similar, integrated approach was to be directed at other areas of the Bolivarian Revolution. Chávez insisted "we must implant social property with the spirit of socialism." This meant that parallel, interconnected developments should take place, social housing should be coupled with social production, social property in land should support "small producers," transportation and highways would need to be geared to communities and their cultural and economic needs. Efficiency in meeting all these needs demanded "a level of communication, of coordination, a crossing, or an intersection of plans, of diagnosis, of problems, of coordinated action. It's like a war.... We are nothing without integrating our vision, in our work, in everything, it will be hard but we will persevere." Likewise there was a need for "Reinforcing the National Public Media System." Speaking especially to Ernesto Villegas, Minister of Popular Power for Communication and Information, Chávez asked Villegas to convert himself "into the leader of this system" and demanded greater popular involvement and communication at every level. "Why not," he asked, "have [television] programs with workers? Where we can voice our self-criticisms, we should not be afraid to criticize, nor to self-criticize. We need it, it gives us nourishment."

The creation of the communes demanded also the furthering of social property, of communication, and of a national media system, so that all of these developments in the formation of a protagonist democracy could feed on each other, generating an entirely different social metabolism. But the core

of the new cycle of revolutionary transition, Chávez insisted, was to be the creation of the communes upon which the future of the Bolivarian Revolution depended: “*either the commune or nothing.*”

## The Political Theory of the Communal State

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Despite the extraordinary role he played in the liberation struggles in South America against Spain, resulting in his being given the unique title *El Libertador* in Venezuela, Simón Bolívar famously described himself as “a weak piece of straw caught up in the revolutionary hurricane,” thereby dramatizing how he had been swept along by the force of the revolution of the people. There is no doubt that Chávez viewed the part that he himself had played in the revolutionary hurricane of the Bolivarian Revolution in these same terms, even quoting Bolívar in this respect.<sup>10</sup> Chávez constantly stressed the role of the people as the protagonist of the revolution, and tied the Bolivarian struggle to the larger insurgent tradition in Venezuela, represented by the heroic triad of: Bolívar, *El Libertador* himself; Simón Rodríguez, Bolívar’s teacher and mentor; and Ezequiel Zamora, the leader of the peasant revolt of the 1850s and ’60s. In this way Chávez depicted as the historical antecedents of the Bolivarian Revolution: (1) the great struggle for liberation from Spain, legal equality, and the freeing of the slaves via Bolívar; (2) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the French Revolution, and utopian socialism via Rodríguez; and (3) the continual struggles for freedom on the part of Venezuela’s peasants via Zamora.

Chávez portrayed the Bolivarian Revolution as the outcome of a historical process with deep, centuries-long roots, arising out of interconnected liberation struggles in Europe and the Americas: marking a long struggle for freedom. This conception was later extended through the critical incorporation of Marxian theory and a thoroughgoing reexamination of the question of the state, as it had presented itself in the revolutions of the twentieth century.

All of this contributed to a view of the institutionalization of popular power as the main revolutionary objective in a socialist transition, and to a critique in this respect of the Soviet model. The new, emerging synthesis was what Chávez called the new model of “twenty-first-century socialism,” and what Marta Harnecker has referred to as a “*sui generis* revolution.”<sup>11</sup> The key strategic element in Chávez’s overall conception was Mészáros’s notion of capital as an alienated system of social metabolic reproduction and the need

to replace this with an organic system of social metabolic reproduction emanating from below.

Writing from Yare prison in 1993 – where he had been confined for his role in the abortive military coup unleashed by the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario* (MBR-200) following the *Caracazo* uprising and subsequent state repression – Chávez insisted that “the sovereign people must transform itself into the object *and the subject* of power. This option is not negotiable for revolutionaries.” He argued on this basis for a vast structural change in the political system:

a veritable polycentric distribution of power, displacing power from the centre towards the periphery, increasing the effective power of the decision making and the autonomy of the particular communities and municipalities. The Electoral Assemblies of each municipality and state will elect Electoral Councils which will possess a permanent character and will function in absolute independence from the political parties. They will be able to establish and direct the most diverse mechanisms of Direct Democracy: popular assemblies, referenda, plebiscites, popular initiatives, vetoes, revocation, etc.... Thus the concept of *participatory democracy* will be changed into a form in which democracy based on popular sovereignty constitutes itself as the *protagonist* of power. It is precisely at such borders that we must draw the limits of advance of Bolivarian democracy. Then we shall be very near to the territory of *utopia*.<sup>12</sup>

Chávez’s initial Bolivarian revolutionary strategy was thus envisioned as one that would promote a participatory and protagonist form of democracy. It would institute structures of direct democracy and popular power, retaining a relation to existing political structures but nonetheless constituting a revolutionary attack on bourgeois representative democracy. It was this vision that Chávez was to promote as a “Third Way” when he ran for and won election as president in 1998, followed by the election of a constituent assembly and codification of these principles into a new Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in 1999.<sup>13</sup> Yet, these changes were only made possible by a massive revolutionary popular mobilization, which had its own logic, and revolutionary political thrust.

In political theory going back to the eighteenth century the question of democratic popular power and its relation to the state is often treated as one of *constituent* versus *constituted* power. The best known contemporary work on this history is Antonio Negri’s *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, which Chávez read in prison concurrently with Rousseau’s *Social Contract*.<sup>14</sup> Constituent power, or direct democracy based

on popular sovereignty, of the kind theorized by Rousseau, is generally considered by political theorists to be the rare exception, exercising its force in modern times mainly in periods of revolutionary ferment. From the standpoint of constituent power, the political is not a separate, superstructural realm alienated from the people, but must be rooted in popular sovereignty. Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel writes in a similar vein of the “necessary institutionalization of the power of the people,” which he calls *potestas*. This is the real delegation of power, which is democratic only insofar as it conforms with the *potentia* (constituent power) of the people.<sup>15</sup>

In sharp contrast to constituent power, constituted power goes hand in hand with the subordination of labor to capital, for which such concentrated state power is essential. Here political representation, the mainstay of the bourgeois liberal-democratic state, “presents itself,” in Negri’s words, as a “centralized mediation” between the people and the state apparatus.<sup>16</sup> Edmund Burke penned the classic defense of limited democratic or representative government as a form of constituted power—whereby representatives, once they are elected, are free for their entire term of office to make decisions independent of and even in opposition to their constituencies—in his famous “Speech to the Electors of Bristol” in 1774. Political representatives, Burke argued, owe to their constituencies only their independent judgments. “Your representative...betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it [his judgment] to your opinion.” In his 1791 *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, one of his works in response to the French Revolution, Burke coupled a long, vituperative attack on Rousseau, with the contention that “the people at large, when once these miserable sheep have broken the field,” were ill fit to rule, representing a “retrograde order of society.”<sup>17</sup>

Marx, in sharp contrast to such reigning liberal views, can be seen as arguing passionately for a system of constituent power in the first draft of *The Civil War in France*, defending the Paris Commune, when he stated:

The true antithesis to the *Empire itself*—that is to the state power, the centralized executive, of which the Second Empire was only the exhausting formula—was *the Commune*.... This was, therefore, a Revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican, or Imperialist form of State Power. It was a Revolution against the *State* itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. It was not a revolution to transfer it from one fraction of the ruling classes to the other, but a Revolution to break down this horrid machinery of Class domination itself. It was not one of those dwarfish struggles between



the executive and the parliamentary forms of class domination, but a revolt against both these forms, integrating each other.<sup>18</sup>

In the final version of *The Civil War in France*, Marx stated: “The Communal Constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society.... It was essentially a working-class government...the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour.”<sup>19</sup>

Lenin too had addressed such issues, in *The State and Revolution*, which was based primarily on Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune and argued for the withering away of the state. A more direct response to the institutionalization of constituent power was his article on “Dual Power,” addressing the emergence of the Congress of Soviets of Soldiers’, Workers’, and Peasants’ Deputies in the 1917 revolution. “The basic question of every revolution,” he wrote, “is that of state power.” The emergence of the Soviets represented, “an entirely different kind of power,” the “direct initiative of the people from below.” Lenin recognized the need for a system of dual power in the revolution itself. Nevertheless, the constituent power of the Soviet was largely displaced by the time of Lenin’s death in 1924, and thereafter more completely—the result of a complex series of historical circumstances, emanating from party, state, bureaucracy, and the pressure of external forces, leading to a new kind of constituted, and ultimately repressive, power.<sup>20</sup>

Dario Azzellini, writing in 2013 on “The Communal State: Communal Councils, Communes, and Workplace Democracy,” presented the dynamic tension between dual—constituent and constituted—power as the secret of the entire Bolivarian Revolution. Venezuela, we are told, adopted “a two-track approach,” participatory and antagonistic democracy, on the one hand, constituted power within the state, on the other.<sup>21</sup> The complex aspect of the revolution under Chávez, however, was that the constituted state power had as its main objective the creation of a communal state, the shifting of power to the populace through a myriad of structures: constituent assemblies, plebiscites, social missions, cooperatives, socialist workers councils, communal councils, communes, and communal cities. The emphasis on the promotion of constituent power was already underway by the time of the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002 (defeated by the Venezuelan population who rose up against the coup). It was accelerated in 2005 with Chávez’s declaration of the new strategy of “socialism in the twenty-first century” and his insistence that it was necessary to build a communal economy and state.

Chávez was to draw increasingly on Mészáros's *Beyond Capital* as a source of theoretical and strategic insight and revolutionary inspiration. In 1993, when Mészáros was completing *Beyond Capital*, he read Chávez's political pamphlet, *Pueblo, Sufragio y Democracia*, written while Chávez was confined in Yare prison (and quoted from above). Mészáros not only laid stress on the extraordinary revolutionary conception of Chávez, but connected it to the theory of constitutive power embedded in Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Rousseau, Mészáros argued, had insisted, rightly, on the fact that the legislative power cannot be represented, and must rest *directly* on the people's sovereignty, expressing the general will. However, Rousseau, in contrast to standard interpretations, had argued quite differently with respect to the executive power: that it could and must be *delegated*.<sup>22</sup> A socialist revolution, building on this conception and recognizing the failure of the Soviet model, would need to rely on a combination of direct and delegated power controlled by the associated producers: going against representative government and the separation of the state from the people. It would have to put political revolution, and the reabsorption of the state within society, before even economic emancipation, creating the cell structure for a socialist revolution. The division between political and civil society would have to be dissolved altogether. "For without the progressive and ultimately complete transfer of material reproductive and distributive decision making to the associated producers there can be no hope for the members of the postrevolutionary community of transforming themselves into the *subject* of power."<sup>23</sup>

Chávez was soon aware of Mészáros's analysis. Beginning in 2001 with the appearance of the Spanish translation of *Beyond Capital*, Chávez began studying it voraciously, meeting on a number of occasions with Mészáros for extensive talks. Two strategic elements of Mészáros's work were central for Chávez. The first of these, as we have seen, was Mészáros's conception, drawn from Marx, of capital as a system of social metabolic reproduction, a self-reinforcing, integrated system of complex reproductive relations, which could not simply be abolished, but which had to be replaced with an alternative organic metabolism, based in communal relations.<sup>24</sup> The second was Mészáros's understanding of the necessary framework of "The Communal System and the Law of Value," which provided the strategic foundation for the revolutionary institutionalization of a system of "communal social relations," whereby the population reabsorbed sovereign rule into itself: a new kind of communal state or system. Such shifting of power to the people was at the same time a way of making the revolution, in

Mészáros's terms, "irreversible," since the people would defend what was their own.<sup>25</sup> In the Organic Law of the Commune, passed in 2010, those elected by the communal assemblies are not representatives, as in bourgeois representative democracy, but delegates or spokespeople, *voceros*.<sup>26</sup>

It was in 2005, as a key part of the building of twenty-first century socialism, that Chávez, rooting his analysis in Mészáros's work, began to call for the immediate building of a communal economy and state: "The Point of Archimedes, this expression taken from the wonderful book of István Mészáros, a communal system of production and of consumption—that is what we are creating, we know we are building this. We have to create a communal system of production and consumption—a new system.... Let us remember that Archimedes said: 'You give me an intervention point [a point on which to stand] and I will move the world.' This is the point from which to move the world today."<sup>27</sup> Such a permanent political revolution was the means to the creation of new, creative, socialist human beings able to make their own culture, their own economy, their own history, and their own individual and collective needs. As Mészáros put it in 2007, in his article "Bolívar and Chávez: The Spirit of Radical Determination," "it remains as true today as it was in Bolívar's time that one cannot envisage the sustainable functioning of humanity's social *macrocosm* without overcoming the internal antagonisms of its *microcosms*: the adversarial/conflictual constitutive cells of our society under capital's mode of social metabolic control. For a cohesive and socially viable macrocosm is conceivable only on the basis of the corresponding and humanly rewarding constitutive cells of interpersonal relations."<sup>28</sup> This demanded substantive equality in the cell structure of society: the family, community, and communal structures.<sup>29</sup>

The goal of twentieth-century socialism initiated by Chávez, as Michael Lebowitz has pointed out, was to build "socialism as an organic system." In January 2007, Chávez presented the general economic-social objectives of the Bolivarian socialist revolution by introducing (once again on the basis of Mészáros) the notion of "'the elementary triangle of socialism'—the combination of social property, social production, and satisfaction of social needs." For Lebowitz—who, at Chávez's request, had played a key mediating role in the interpretation of the relevant passages of Mészáros's *Beyond Capital* in this respect, leading to Chávez's formulation of the elementary triangle of socialism—this represented a crucial theoretical turning point:

Once again, Chávez's theoretical step can be traced back to Mészáros's *Beyond Capital*. Drawing upon Marx, Mészáros had argued the necessity to understand capitalism as an organic system, a specific

combination of production-distribution-consumption, in which all the elements coexist simultaneously and support one another. The failure of the socialist experiments of the twentieth century, he proposed, occurred because of the failure to go beyond “the vicious circle of the capital relation,” the combination of circuits “all intertwined and mutually reinforcing one another” that thereby reinforced “the perverse dialectic of the incurably wasteful capital system.” In short, the lack of success (or effort) in superseding all parts of “the totality of existing reproductive relations” meant the failure to go “beyond capital.”<sup>30</sup>

The goal of the creation of a communal system of production and exchange required first the formation of communal councils, proposed by Chávez in 2005, based on already existing revolutionary developments in this area. This was followed by his promotion of the larger communes, in 2007 – territorial entities large enough to act as the basis of the new communal state. In a speech in 2010 entitled “Onward Towards the Communal State!” – the same year as the enactment of the Organic Law of the Commune – Chávez declared: “Simón Rodríguez was right when he said in his *American Societies* in 1828: ‘You will see that there are two kinds of politics: popular and governmental; and that the people are more political than their governments.’” He also quoted the Venezuelan revolutionary, Kléber Ramírez, who said in 1992, in what Chávez called “the purest Robinsonian spirit” (referring to the ideas of Simón Rodríguez): “The time has come for the communities to assume the powers of the state; which will lead administratively to the total transformation of the Venezuelan state and socially to the real exercise of sovereignty by society through communal powers.” As Chávez himself put it: “By socialism we mean unlimited democracy.... From this comes our firm conviction that the best and most radically democratic of the options for defeating bureaucracy and corruption is the construction of a communal state which is able to test an alternative institutional structure at the same time as it permanently reinvents itself.... Let’s go, with Zamora, Robinson [Rodríguez] and Bolívar, towards a Communal State! Towards Socialism!”<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, what was most extraordinary about Chávez’s leadership in the Bolivarian revolutionary process was that at each new, successive phase over a fourteen-year period (during which Venezuela had sixteen nationwide votes), he sought to shift more and more power and responsibility to the population, encouraging their own self-organization and the invention of new structures with which to direct and delegate power from below. Hence the Bolivarian Revolution under Chávez’s guidance and inspiration relentlessly sought to devolve the sovereign power, formerly constituted in

the state, transferring it to the people themselves.<sup>32</sup> His “Strike at the Helm” speech, insisting on “the commune or nothing,” was an attempt to fulfill the promise of twenty-first century socialism by bringing about the most urgent shift: the creation of an irreversible socialist revolution.

## Maduro and the Communal State

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In the two years since Chávez’s death, the Venezuelan opposition and the United States have stepped up the attempts to overturn the democratically established Bolivarian Republic through pressures exerted both within and without. New presidential elections were held in April 2013, and Nicolás Maduro—who as vice president under Chávez became interim president on the latter’s death, serving in that capacity for a month—was elected by a slim margin. From the moment of Maduro’s ascendance to the presidency, the political and economic pressures imposed on Venezuela have been relentless. A key factor threatening the Bolivarian Republic has been the 38 percent drop in oil prices between June and December 2014, caused by the increased supply of oil and natural gas from fracking—together with the decision of Saudi Arabia to maintain production rather than support prices and the slowdown in economic growth in China and Europe.<sup>33</sup> The result has been a severe economic crisis in Venezuela. The crisis was complicated by the violent tactics of the Venezuelan opposition’s “exit now” strategy in spring 2014, aimed at bringing down the government, leaving forty-three people dead. The pressure on the Bolivarian Republic has been further intensified with widespread hoarding of imported goods—a form of economic corruption introduced by vested interests of the rentier-importer economy, directed at thwarting price controls introduced to regulate the growing inflation. In addition, food purchased at relatively low prices in Venezuela has been transported over the border to sell for higher prices in Colombia.

Seeing Venezuela as vulnerable, Washington introduced sanctions (restricting visas and freezing assets of Venezuelan officials) under the name of the “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014.” In February 2015 (as the present article was being written), Venezuela thwarted a coup plot against the government, which would have taken the combined form of: (1) an economic assault on the country, (2) violent, opposition-led demonstrations, (3) the bribing of key officials, and (4) a series of coordinated bombings of government buildings and strategic sites throughout the country. The bombings, it was soon discovered, were to be carried out by a Brazilian-manufactured Super Tuscano attack aircraft, registered to

Blackwater Worldwide—pointing to Washington’s involvement in the planned coup. Subsequent evidence (including a recorded Skype call) revealed that the coup was planned in the United States. On March 3, Maduro indicated that a member of the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela had met with the opposition, handing over documents related to the preparation of the coup.<sup>34</sup>

Yet even while these crises and attacks on the Bolivarian Revolution were occurring, Maduro’s government was pushing the revolution forward. The key slogan of Maduro’s presidential campaign was the “Commune or Nothing!” taken from Chávez’s “Strike at the Helm” speech. At the time that Chávez gave his speech to the ministry of the new revolutionary cycle in October 2012, there were almost no registered communes—although many were in formation (some of which had begun to emerge at the grassroots level as early as 2010). By September 2013 there were more than 40,000 registered communal councils (some going back to 2006), while the number of registered communes had topped a thousand, with substantial political power devolving to the emerging communal state.<sup>35</sup> Despite cutbacks in government spending (starting with his own salary), Maduro increased the 2015 budget for the communes by 62 percent. He has called the communes “the maximum expression of democracy” and “pure socialism.” The goal, he declared at the National Communal Economy Conference in February 2014, was not just creating the communal state but the communal economy as well: “democratizing property, generating new forms of social property such as communal ones, is necessary for strengthening participative and protagonistic democracy.”<sup>36</sup>

Although the communes are at the heart of the Bolivarian Revolution, they do not stand alone. Venezuela has moved forward in promoting the elementary triangle of socialism. The Bolivarian Revolution has thus progressed on multiple fronts. Already by 2011, 3.6 million acres of land had been expropriated for distribution. By 2010, over 70,000 cooperatives had been formed with some 2 million members. At the same time 26,000 agricultural units had been developed in the cities and suburbs aimed at food security and food sovereignty. Socialist workers councils have proliferated. “The most successful attempt at a democratization of ownership and administration of the means of production,” Azzellini states, “is the model of Enterprises of Communal Social Property (ESPQ), promoted to create local production units and community service enterprises.” These enterprises “are collective property of the communities, which decide on the organizational structure of enterprises, the workers incorporated and the eventual use of profits.” The

Bolivarian state has promoted these collective enterprises since 2009, and by 2013 there were several thousand.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless it is the growth of the communes that occupies a central place, creating a system of dual power with regional and local governments, understood as a process of co-responsibility—but with the stipulation that local governments should be “obedient” to the communes and that more and more political power will devolve to the communal state. In September 2014, Maduro announced the program called the “Five Big Revolutions”: (1) the economic revolution, promoting social production; (2) the knowledge revolution, emphasizing education, culture, and science; (3) the social missions, crucial to building socialism; (4) the creation of a new democratic and communal state, ending “what remains of the bourgeois state”; and (5) the “territorial socialism” revolution, requiring the creation of a “new ecosocialist model.”

One of the five “historical objectives” of Venezuela’s present national development plan, drawn up by Chávez, is to “contribute to the preservation of planetary life and to save the human species.” In May 2014, over a thousand Venezuelan environmental organizations met in a conference aimed at promoting “ecosocialism.” The primary goal of Bolivarian ecosocialism is to emphasize local, sustainable, communal, and diversified production. The “ecosocialist model,” Maduro argues, is “not about environmentalism, it’s about ecosocialism, environmentalism is not enough.”<sup>38</sup> As Chávez repeatedly warned, it was necessary for Venezuela to break with its dependence on the rentier-oil economy.

## Lessons in the Transition to Socialism

“Transitions from one social order to another,” Paul Sweezy stated, “involve the most difficult and profound problems of historical materialism.” Such revolutionary historical transitions are never the same, occur over protracted periods, with all sorts of forward and backward motions, and arise within unique conditions and cultures. Nevertheless, broad conclusions can be drawn. The greatest difficulty, Sweezy emphasized, is posed by the fact “that the transition to socialism does not, and in the nature of the case cannot, take the same course as the transition from feudalism to capitalism.” Bourgeois society arose as a kind of alternative cell structure within feudal society, which was not immediately threatening or antagonistic to the latter. A “newly emergent ensemble of social relations” and with it a new kind of

human nature, laws, and customs emerged, particularly in the urban centers of feudal society. As Sweezy stated: “Bourgeois relations grew up within the framework of feudal society and molded bourgeois human nature over a period of several centuries.” This is not possible in the same way with respect to the transition of capitalism to socialism. There are no pores in bourgeois society in which socialist relations can readily emerge; rather capitalism is an aggressive social metabolic system of reproduction that constantly moves to incorporate everything within itself.<sup>39</sup> This is what Mészáros means when he refers to the centrifugal tendencies that characterize capital as a system, constantly seeking to reproduce its own organic, if alienated, microcosms, integrating this with its destructive macrocosm.<sup>40</sup>

Socialist and radical democratic strategies have thus generally focused by default on seizing the state and using the state apparatus or constituted power as the sole means of instituting socialism. But in the process the revolutionary, constituent power becomes first subordinated and then negated. The result is a new system of political alienation. The force of the people and the people’s sovereignty is lost. Indeed, in Chávez’s analysis, like that of Mészáros, the Soviet model of the state, standing above society, perpetuated the necessary element (the political alienation enforcing economic alienation) of the capital system, even with the formal abolition of capitalism and private ownership. The simple replacement of private property by state property (a change in social ownership) does not alter the essential relations. Rather, a “withering away of the state,” as Marx and Engels contended, is necessary in any socialist transition.<sup>41</sup>

This has been the conundrum that all attempts at the transition to socialism have faced. The Venezuelan revolution, as a *sui generis* revolution arising out of roots in both Latin American and European revolutionary traditions, has sought, as we have seen, to cut this Gordian knot with a sword, through the promotion, growing in each new revolutionary cycle, of participatory and protagonist democracy, as a constitutive basis for what Marx called the absorption of the state by society. At the same time, more and more parts of the economy are removed – as Che insisted in his famous “Man and Socialism in Cuba” speech – from the domination of the law of value. The new social foundation is thus to be increasingly based on communal production and exchange – relying on the exchange of use values and of direct labor, a new social accountancy.<sup>42</sup> The goal is to produce the communal cell structure for an organic socialist metabolism, nurturing new, creative, human-social relations, in revolutionary opposition to capitalist class relations: the concrete



constitutional construction at every level of the collective power of the people.

Whatever the final outcome of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution it has forever changed the debate on the transition to socialism, mapping a whole new terrain of struggle. The struggle is determined by the endless quest for the widest possible human fulfillment, and the satisfaction of people's own needs. Twenty-first century socialism, Chávez insisted, is the active, relentless pursuit of the values always associated with socialism, namely, "love, solidarity, equality between men and women and equity among all" – the social institutionalization of which becomes possible as the result of a practice that is uncompromising and irreversible. "When one sees a people voting for *crazy things* like the construction of Bolivarian socialism or the preservation of the planet," Venezuela's Minister for Communes, Reinaldo Iturriza, declares, "one knows that one is in the presence of a revolution."<sup>43</sup>

## Notes

1. *El Golpe de Timón* is a nautical idiom that translates literally as "Strike at the Helm," the title that is used here. It is quite similar in its meaning to "Shift the Helm" or "Right the Helm," common nautical terms in English; see Admiral W.H Smyth, *Sailor's Word Book* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1996), 380, 574. But Chávez was clearly emphasizing the need for a strong collective political effort to strike at the helm or right the rudder of the state in order to get back on course, and hence the literal "Strike at the Helm" is most appropriate. An English translation of the entire speech has been posted under this title on the *Monthly Review* website. All unreferenced quotes from Chávez in this article are taken from that speech.
2. On the definition of community councils and communes see *Leyes del Poder Popular* (Caracas, 2011); Marta Harnecker, *A World to Build* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), 72–74, 133–39; Frederick B. Mills, "The Commune or Nothing': Popular Power and the State in Venezuela," Council on Hemispheric Affairs, September 26, 2013, <http://coha.org>. On the mass popular basis of the Venezuelan Revolution see George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
3. Although our group of socialist intellectual invitees (including István Mészáros and Eduard Dussel, both of whose work is treated below) had lengthy discussions with the Bolivarian Ministers, with the meetings presided over by Vice President Elías-Jose Jaua Milano (now Venezuela's Foreign Minister), a sudden onset of illness prevented President Chávez himself from meeting with us as scheduled. My own role in the discussions was mainly to put a strong case

for a social-ecological metabolism as a defining aspect of twenty-first century socialism.

4. A key issue that arose in our discussions was the conflict in jurisdiction between regional and municipal governments and the communal councils, which would become more complex with the emergence of the communes.
5. In the first paragraph of his sentence here Chávez was quoting from István Mészáros's *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 739. Chávez himself was using the Spanish translation, *Más Allá del capital: Hacia una teoría de la transición* (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos, 2001).
6. As Marx put it, "political emancipation" must necessarily proceed "human emancipation." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 3, 155.
7. The Organic Law of the Communes had been passed in December 2010. For Chávez the fact that almost two years later there were still virtually no registered communes, despite all the work done at the ground level to organize the communes was a failure of the government, requiring self-criticism.
8. Chávez's emphasis on self-criticism was understood as a crucial dialectical-strategic component of the revolutionary process. Thus Mészáros has insisted on the imperative of "a dialectical correlation between the qualitatively different type of organic system needed in the future and the necessary orienting principle of self-critique in conjunction with which that new type becomes feasible at all." István Mészáros, "The Communal System and the Principle of Self-Critique," *Monthly Review* 59, no. 10 (March 2008): 36.
9. In his "Strike at the Helm" speech Chávez added: "Once I actually had Carmen Meléndez make, I don't remember how many, copies of Mao Zedong's writings on communes from his little red book, now I want to make 30 more copies to give, once again, to each minister."
10. Simón Bolívar, *Selected Works* (New York: Colonial Press, 1951), vol. 1, 174; Jon Lee Anderson, "The Revolutionary," *New Yorker*, September 10, 2001, <http://newyorker.com>. The translation from Bolívar is according to Anderson's rendition. See also Miguel Acosta Saignes, *Bolívar: Acción del hombre de las dificultades* (Caracas: Government of Venezuela, 2010), 481-94. István Mészáros, "Bolívar and Chávez: The Spirit of Radical Determination," *Monthly Review* 59, no. 3 (July-August 2007): 58.
11. Marta Harnecker, "Venezuela: A Sui Generis Revolution," September 16, 2003, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>.
12. Chávez quoted in Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 710-11; on the Caracazo economic uprising, the subsequent state massacre, and the MBR-200 coup attempt see Bart Jones, *¡Hugo!: The Hugo Chávez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2007), 125-76.
13. Harnecker, *A World to Build*, 59.
14. Antonio Negri, *Insurgencias: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Hugo Chávez, *Understanding the*

- Venezuelan Revolution: Hugo Chávez Talks to Marta Harnecker* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 41; George Ciccariello-Maher, "Dual Power in the Venezuelan Revolution," *Monthly Review* 59, no. 4 (September 2007): 44, 55.
15. Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 18–20. In an approach that parallels the distinction between constituent and constituted power, Dussel uses the term *potentia* to refer to direct, undifferentiated, unconstituted, consensual power, and *potestas* to refer to institutional, controlled, constituted power. The issues of democracy and unalienated power then becomes one of keeping *potestas* in accord with *potentia*.
  16. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 313.
  17. Edmund Burke, "Speech to the Electors of Bristol," in *Works*, vol. 2 (London: John C. Ninmo, 1887), 90–98, and *Letter to a Member of Parliament* (London: J. Dodsley, 1791), 11–13, 31. Burke is a complex figure but Negri's interpretation of him as representing a reform-based advocate of constituent power, "who wrote a revolutionary work against the [French] revolution" misses the main thrust of his political theory. This complements Negri's odd downgrading of Rousseau, as a theorist of constituent power with "a paradoxical relation to the masses." See Negri, *Insurgencies*, 195–202, 232–40.
  18. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 150.
  19. Marx and Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, 75–76.
  20. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 24 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974, first printing), 38–39. See also Tamás Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 180–90. On Lenin's resistance at the end of his life to the bureaucratization of the Soviet state see Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggles* (New York: Pantheon, 1968).
  21. Dario Azzellini, "The Communal State: Communal Councils, Communes, and Workplace Democracy," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 25–30, <https://nacla.org>. On the 1998 Bolivarian Constitution see Michael A. Lebowitz, *Build It Now* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006), 49–50, 72, 89–95.
  22. Negri here makes the mistake of saying that "Rousseau distinguished the legislative from the executive power," making a "purely terminological distinction, which derives from Montesquieu and Locke" — as if this were not a crucial component of Rousseau's thought. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 199.
  23. Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 709–12; Jean-Jacque Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 82, 114–15.
  24. For a summary of this aspect of Mészáros thought see John Bellamy Foster, "Foreword," in István Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Change* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 1–21.
  25. Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 758–68; István Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 251–53.

26. Harnecker, *A World to Build*, 74–77; *Leyes del Poder Popular*, 57 (Ley Orgánica De Las Comunas, Artículo 35). The committee that drafted the organic law of the commons was chaired by David Velásquez, then a member of the Communist Party and later minister of participation and Social Development. See Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez*, 245.
27. Chávez quoted in Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 80–81; István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 76–77.
28. Mészáros, “Bolívar and Chávez,” 61.
29. Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 187–223.
30. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative*, 24–25, 85; Michael A. Lebowitz, “Proposing a Path to Socialism: Two Papers for Hugo Chávez,” *Monthly Review* 65, no. 10 (March 2014): 1–19; Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 823.
31. Hugo Chávez, “Onwards Towards a Communal State,” February 21, 2010 (posted February 25, 2010), <http://venezuelanalysis.com>; Jones, ¡Hugo!, 472; Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez*, 18–19. When in Europe for around a quarter-century, Bolívar’s teacher, Simón Rodríguez, used the name Samuel Robinson (taken from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which he admired). He later resumed his original name in returning to South America at age fifty-four. Bolívar often referred to him affectionately as “Robinson” and his thought is often referred to as “Robinsonian.” See Richard Gott, *In the Shadow of the Liberator: Hugo Chávez and the Transformation of Venezuela* (London: Verso, 2000), 109–17.
32. Roger Burbach, Michael Fox, and Federico Fuentes, *Latin America's Turbulent Transitions* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 159.
33. “Why the Oil Price is Falling,” *Economist*, December 8, 2014, <http://economist.com>. It is conceivable that Saudi Arabia was encouraged to maintain its production levels by the United States, thereby keeping oil prices low and destabilizing a number of states that the United States has targeted in its geopolitical strategy, including Russia, Iran and Venezuela; while Saudi Arabia itself has a direct interest in the destabilization of Iran. See Jackie Northam, “Why Does Saudi Arabia Seem So Comfortable with Falling Oil Prices?,” October 28, 2014, <http://npr.org>.
34. William Camacaro and Frederick B. Mills, “Rapprochement Between the United States and Cuba and Sanctions Against Venezuela,” January 2–4, 2015, <http://counterpunch.org>; Lucas Koerner, “Amid International Outcry, Venezuelan Officials Allege Blackwater, U.S. and Canadian Links to Thwarted Coup,” February 16, 2015, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>; Telesur, “Coup Plot in Venezuela Thwarted,” February 13, 2015, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>; “Maduro Outlines More Evidence of Coup Plot Planned in New York,” March 3, 2015, <http://telesurtv.net>; Carl Meacham, “Oil-Poor and On the Brink of Default: Is Change Imminent in Venezuela?,” Center for Strategic International

- Studies, December 11, 2014; George Ciccariello-Maher, "Venezuela at a Tipping Point," September 8, 2014, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>.
35. Ewan Robertson, "Expectations Surpassed as Over 1000 Communes Registered in Venezuela," September 9, 2013, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>.
  36. "On Venezuela's Communes, Idyllic Future Is Just Over the Rainbow," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2014, <http://washingtonpost.com>; Tamara Pearson, "National Communal Economy Conference Calls for Communal Markets, Increased Funding of Communal Banks in Venezuela," February 4, 2014, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>.
  37. Burbach, Fox, and Fuentes, *Latin America's Turbulent Transitions*, 61, 68–70; Mills, "'The Communes or Nothing,'" Azzellini, "The Communal State."
  38. Telesur, "Maduro Announces 'Five Big Revolutions' in Venezuela, Overhauls Cabinet," September 3, 2014, <http://venezuelanalysis.org>; Ewan Robertson, "Venezuelan Leftists Meet to Discuss Future Directions in Political Ideology and Eco-socialism," <http://venezuelanalysis.org>, May 12, 2014.
  39. Paul M. Sweezy and Charles Bettelheim, *On the Transition to Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 107–12.
  40. Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 411.
  41. See Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 246–50; Harnecker, *A World to Build*, 59, 71; Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), 387.
  42. Che Guevara, "Man and Socialism in Cuba," <http://marxists.org>; Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 758–70.
  43. Chávez quoted in Harnecker, *A World to Build*, 58; Reinaldo Iturriza, "Desiring the Commune," August 10, 2012, <http://venezuelanalysis.com>.

Source:



Monthly Review, 2015, Volume 66, Issue 11 (April)

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