

# Venezuela and the Bolivarian Revolution - The Chávez Hypothesis: Vicissitudes of a Strategic Project

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What does Chavism really stand for? What are its main accomplishments and its main failures? What was the soldier-become-president Hugo Chávez trying to achieve, and how far did he go in achieving it? Most often it is taken for granted that Chávez, who was elected president of Venezuela in 1998, began with an anti-neoliberal project that became, with time, anti-imperialist and then later aspired to socialism. It is also usually argued that, unfortunately, Chávez went very little of the way to achieving the latter goal. Chávez's project suffered, this story goes, because it was only discursively socialist; that is, it proposed socialism as a goal but could not really begin the transition, being unable to go beyond mere discourse to concrete social and economic facts. That being the case, a part of the Left praises the Venezuelan leader for what it sees as an essentially verbal achievement. This group contends that Chávez fulfilled an important task for humanity by merely recovering and promoting the word socialism after the fall of the Eastern bloc. Others, generally from the so-called Hard Left, are more skeptical. They highlight Chávez's failure to significantly alter the structure of the society or the economy.

In my view, this mainstream leftist narrative about Chávez, in either of its two versions, is not exactly wrong but it is profoundly impoverished. Moreover, it is impoverished in ways that reflect deep-rooted prejudices of the Left, the most glaring of which has to do with its neglect of politics as a specific sphere of human activity. The Left's undervaluing of politics leads it to perform a rapid triage with the Chávez legacy. On the procrustean bed of vulgar historical materialism, it generally spreads the Chávez phenomenon between, on the one hand, a mere discourse that is acknowledged to be avant-garde and interesting and, on the other hand, the unaltered hard economic facts. Yet this view leaves out almost entirely the specifically political mediation between these two realms. By denying the existence of politics as a semiautonomous sphere, the Left pushes more elements into the category of "mere discourse" than really belong there, and it simultaneously turns "hard economic facts and transformations" into an excessively simplistic category. Such a meat-and-potatoes view of economic facts is not only problematic in itself; it has the additional limitation that – precisely because it is "politics-free" – it would make any transition to socialism virtually impossible.

If we make an effort to recover Chávez's specifically political practice, what emerges is a Chávez quite different from the figure normally presented: a charismatic, improvising, often exaggerated leader. Instead, Hugo Chávez should be credited with recovering an explicitly political dimension to revolutionary thought. This is especially the case because, like Lenin before him, Chávez assigned a central importance to strategic thought and the forming of strategic hypotheses. In effect, this is the best way to understand Chávez's Bolívarianism, which many see as merely picturesque or ornamental. In fact, the Venezuelan leader's recovery of Bolívar constitutes a critical, repoliticizing adjustment to an overly mechanistic Left tradition.

## **Chávez vs. the Marxist Tradition**

Despite the widespread tendency to overlook them, it is easy to document the many programmatic elements in Chávez's overall practice. The Venezuelan leader was indeed charismatic, but he continually developed a wide range of books, programs, and pamphlets. Even before taking power, he produced the *Libro Azul* (1992), the *Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana* (1996), and *La propuesta de Hugo Chávez para transformar Venezuela* (1996). This substantial body of writing constitutes less than a third of his output! The surprising thing, which must be symptomatic of both Eurocentrism and a problem more specific to the Left, is how little interest there is in Chávez's programmatic contributions. My belief is that this is an instance of the Left's undervaluing of politics which has proximate causes in ingrained practices of the twentieth-century Left and more distant ones in Marx himself.

Though the latter is a large theme, it is perhaps enough to point out here how Marxism was born in a context marked by scientism – a strong attraction that almost all thinkers of the time felt to the model of natural science – which tended to push politics into the category of something spectral or phantasmal. Economics and its critique was another matter; the classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, whom Marx read avidly, did develop a body of rigorous laws that resemble those of natural science. Jacques Derrida, in his *Specters of Marx*, has carefully charted Marx's complex relation to the spectral and the uncertain, showing Marx's (frustrated) desire to exclude it from his work. Key moments in this struggle include Marx's encounter with the "specter of communism" that he tries to dispel by forming a party with a public program, a Manifesto in 1848. He proclaims in that text that that proletariat's victory falls out from a more or less mechanical trajectory and is "inevitable." Four years later, in *The 18 Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx battles again with the spirits of the past (die *Geister der Vergangenheit*) which, though useful in bourgeois revolution, are said to make havoc (like poltergeists) in a worker's one. Marx now calls for a *tabula rasa*, for learning a new language. He wants a politics that is free from this sort of contamination and haunting (but, as is said about the poltergeists in the Spielberg film, "They're here"). Shortly after, he immerses himself in the critique of political economy and projects but never returns to a work on the state.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida's interest is to show how uncertainty infects the certain, a commonplace of poststructuralism. My point is a different one. It is that in a context marked by scientism, politics itself – because it involves an irreducible element of human motivation and projection, and hence also uncertainty – will always seem spectral or phantasmal. This is also true because the grammar of politics is always affected by tradition; the forms of the past contaminate the actors of today. There are no frictionless, Galilean surfaces for political actors. In a Left tradition that has held more dearly to scientism and illuminism than the Right, it is hardly surprising that political thought has generally been more sophisticated in rightwing thinkers such as Carl Schmitt or in exceptional, heretical leftists such as Antonio Gramsci or Walter Benjamin. In Marx, a visceral hatred of the abuse of political authority and a leeriness of political leaders' uncontrollable nature

causes him to lump Louis Bonaparte, Faustin Soulouque, Simon Bolívar, and Fernande Lassalle into the same basket as mere adventurers. There often emerges in Marx, as a counterpart, the fantasy of a mechanical – adventure free – path to power, that has tended to remain with the Left.

### **Lenin as an Outlier**

If politics has generally been a weak suit for the Left, this does not mean that there are no exceptions. In what follows, I will argue that both Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) and Hugo Chávez break with the norm. One of Lenin's most unusual but definitive characteristics is that, precisely when he made his most strident claims to orthodoxy, he also allows the germ of the heterodox to enter his thinking. Daniel Bensaïd has shown how in *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin quotes Kautsky's claim that socialist science comes from outside the proletariat to introduce the highly unkaustkian claim that political consciousness is essentially separate from the economic struggle. This strong misreading of Kautsky constitutes an important breakthrough, because it introduces a more full-blown conception of the political sphere into the Left's discourse. Another rupture occurs when Lenin, who as a loyal Marxist should have eschewed anything associated with Bonapartism, allows himself to quote Napoleon's "*On s'engage et puis... on voit*" to describe his bold conduct in the October Revolution. In fact, Lenin's whole attitude in the critical year 1917 shows how he had come to terms with the specificity of a semiautonomous political sphere that includes wagers, risk, and even "providence," in addition to science.

Politics, of course, is not all uncertainty. Revolutionary political work involves a dialectical relation between, program and planning, on the one hand, and the inevitably contingent nature of outcomes on the other. Whatever the role that quick responses and intuitions may have in certain political situations, the revolutionary leadership requires a strategic vision that is to be tested in these changing circumstances. Unfortunately, the Left, in uncritically assimilating both Marx and his shortcomings, has become so doctrinal and weakly formulaic that it often imagines that simply by proclaiming communist society as the goal, it has a strategy. Nothing could be further from the truth, since a strategy is a way of getting to a goal. Again, in a similar manner, the Left sometimes substitutes Rosa Luxemburg's warning, "Socialism or Barbarism," for a strategic path. Nevertheless, a slogan, least of all one meant as an admonition, is not a strategy, which must be based on a developed, structured proposal. Furthermore, since this proposal will be tested in situations that are irreducibly complex, it must also have the character of a hypothesis. Neither proclaiming oneself "Marxist" or "communist" nor expressing consciousness of the bifurcating paths facing humanity can substitute for taking stakes in an explicitly-formulated strategic project.

In a recent biographical essay, Lars T. Lih shows how Lenin espoused a single strategic hypothesis throughout his entire adult life. After his student days, Lenin never abandoned this overall game plan, though he did adapt and modify it, especially after 1918. Hence, if we wish to contrast Lenin's thought with that of today's Left, we would do well to emphasize how Lenin never failed to have a full-blown concept of politics and, tied to that, a strategic vision that took the form of an explicitly-formulated hypothesis about the transition to socialism.

### **Lenin's "Other" Way**

Lih's on essay shows how Lenin's strategic hypothesis can be reduced to a single sentence:

*"The Russian proletariat carries out its world historical mission by becoming the vozhd (leader) of the narod (whole people), leading to a revolution that overthrows the tzar and institutes political*

*freedom, thus preparing the way for an eventual proletarian vlast (power) that will bring about socialism."*

Lenin originally formulated this three-part hypothesis as an alternative to the dead-end encountered by the Narodnaya Volya party, in which his brother Alexander Ulyanov militated. This underground group had come to place its hopes in achieving democratic freedoms in tsarist Russia through terror, but terror turned out to be counterproductive. By contrast, Lenin's hypothesis (his idea that "There must be another way, Sasha," as he is supposed to have said to his condemned brother) is a "stripped down" (Lih's words) adaptation of German social democracy's strategy. The key element that Lenin added to this adopted strategy – which proposed using a nationwide party to achieve a democratic platform from which the transition to socialism would begin – was a wager specific to the Russian situation. This was his idea that, despite the absence of political freedoms in Russia, a clandestine party of professional cadres could achieve the same ends that the Germans pursued openly under a less autocratic state.

Now Lenin remained, as we have said, essentially loyal his whole adult life to this central hypothesis, based on the supposition that the Russian proletariat, formed into a party, would be capable of rallying the whole Russian people in a project that would first win victory for democracy, before beginning a transition to socialism. The only important modification to the project came late in Lenin's life. This occurred in 1919 when, after the definitive failure of the Western revolutions and the demonstrated unwillingness of the poor peasantry to engage in class struggle in the countryside, Lenin decided to adjust the timeframes of his projected scenario. In effect, there would have to be a prolonged period of "holding-out," during which revolutionaries would need to devote themselves to "prolonged, slow, cautious, organizational work," popular education, and vigilance of the state bureaucracy.

It should be clear from the above that Lenin was worlds apart from the many "Marxists" and even "Leninists" whose political discourse is reduced to repeating a few simple phrases such as "professional revolutionaries," "taking power," "party of cadres," and "class struggle." Such a simplistic, reductive discourse is a conceptual straightjacket, and it resembles political aphasia more than political thought. In truth, Lenin had an extremely rich conception of political activity, and he was open to the most extravagant and inventive possibilities. In fact, his use of German train carriages is very common and quotidian compared to the collaboration he once explored with the rebel priest Georgy Gapon following the 1905 Revolution (despite the priest's known relations with the Tsarist police!). Yet beyond Lenin's creativity and daring, which are certainly relevant to a full consideration of his politics, what I most want to emphasize here is his commitment to forming a multi-element, structured hypothesis that guides action. This was a hypothesis that he adapted – and never simply abandoned – under the blows of reality.

## **Chávez's Form of Politics**

My claim is that Hugo Chávez was an heir to Lenin's political legacy. In fact, Chávez's political practice was so rich and varied that it frustrated many observers. The Venezuelan president had an extraordinary, even freewheeling verbal capacity. For example, in *Aló Presidente Teórico*, a six-part television series devoted to political formation, he built his discourse out of references that ranged from baseball to bicycle riding and romance, while including innumerable anecdotes from his own past and from Venezuelan history. Many viewers were taken aback: This was Chávez's idea of teaching political theory? A textbook Marxist in his place would have stuck with a more familiar, barebones lexicon that focused on class, the taking of power, and the destruction of the bourgeois state. Yet Chávez did not feel the urgency that drives many others to turn to Marxist manuals and

their petrified vocabulary. Instead, he seemed to be constantly asking why political discourse should not be as rich as any other language. If Chávez had an implicit message to Left theorists, it would be to assert that political discourse should have profound roots in a culture and also be much wider in scope. Echoing Hamlet's remarks to Horatio, Chávez could be imagined to be saying: "There are many more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy [of praxis]."

Chávez often relied on military language to talk about politics. This is hardly surprising since, military discourse has a significant linguistic register that crosses over with the political realm, with terms such as "feint," "flanking," "sabotage," "mining," "wars of position," etc. However, Chávez's most important political reservoir is to be found in the Venezuelan founding father Simón Bolívar. This is the "forest in the trees" that is simply written off as an eccentricity or mere ornament by so many analysts. Bolívar was a legacy that Chávez continually mined, and he could hardly open his mouth without mentioning this predecessor. It should be evident that by engaging with the figure of Bolívar, Chávez was consciously or unconsciously going against Marx's message in *The 18 Brumaire*. That text claims, as we have explained above, that the socialist revolution needs to leave behind figures of the past; it must "let the dead bury their dead." Marx imagined that there could be a *tabula rasa*, free from contamination of the past, for revolutionary practice. Unfortunately to maintain this thesis – it would prove to be devastating collateral damage – Marx had also to dispel much of the richness of politics, the full repertoire of which can hardly be separated from past examples and historical references.

Chávez, who viewed politics more as a palimpsest than a *tabula rasa*, rejected this message. Through reviving Bolívar, not just as an image and name but as an unfinished project, Chávez invited a spirit of the past to become active in the present. In effect, he allowed Bolívar's rich political legacy to bloom in the desert of the contemporary Left's imagination. Simón Bolívar, who led the struggle of South American independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was nothing if not a persistent inventor of strategic hypotheses. Bolívar's initial hypothesis in the period 1810-14 was that Latin American independence could be achieved in a struggle led by the continent's white creole class, all of them united around the twin project of emancipation from Spain and establishing liberal rights.

After the defeat of Venezuela's Second Republic in 1814, Bolívar modified this hypothesis, specifically by expanding its class basis to include poor whites, people of color, and slaves into a project that had a more wide-reaching social dimension. This remodeled plan also came to include a novel geostrategic dimension involving supply lines passing through the Orinoco basin. Bolívar, who took the latter idea from guerrilla leaders operating in the East of Venezuela, consistently downplayed any claims to genius in favor of his capacity to learn and adapt. To explain his success during a nearly two-decade struggle, he asserted that his main virtue had been tenacity. This idea is corroborated by Bolívar's famously calling himself the "man of difficulties," meaning that he clung to a cause despite adversity and tenaciously reworked his overall strategic vision.

### **Bolívar as a Battle Cry**

Bolívar's example has always been a controversial and charged one, provoking responses that indicate its subversive potential. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* portrays a Paris of 1817 with its sympathies divided between those who wear royalist hats called "*morillos*" (after the Spanish head of operations) and others bearing a broad-brimmed hats called "*Bolívars*." Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno notes that it was with cries of "Bolívar" that Parisian crowds toppled the monarchy in the 1830 revolution. Marx also took sides in the issue, expressing outright scorn for Bolívar in an article that unfairly assimilated the Liberator of the Americas to Louis Bonaparte and Haitian ruler Faustin



Soulouque. This brief text, an encyclopedia entry, has little more than symptomatic importance since Marx was poorly informed about the Latin American context. Nevertheless, the symptom is relevant: it may be taken as yet another proof of how the hypertrophy of politics that occurs in any revolutionary undertaking – its opening an epoch rich in both possibilities and dangers, both revolutionary creativity and deviations – could form an unwelcome phantasm in Marx's imagination.

Of course, the hypertrophy of politics that Marx sensed in Bolívar, whom he painted as exaggerated, erratic, and deceiving, is simply a necessary accompaniment or "occupational hazard" of revolutionary activity. Marx would like to bury such a figure in the past with all of its contradictions, like a nightmarish memory. Yet can today's Latin American revolutionaries avoid evoking such a politically-charged, even if complex moment? Marx himself, though he tries to limit the reference to bourgeois revolutions, admits in *The 18 Brumaire* that revolutionary "battle cries" come from the past and its figures. Granting much more weight to historical inheritance, Walter Benjamín writes about a revolutionary "constellation" or "dialectical image" that comes from the past and forms part of a collective imaginary. We might think that Benjamin's observation pertains to only a small subset of revolutions. Yet it is not the exceptional case but almost any revolution that needs to "conjure up the dead of world history" and invoke past heroic feats, if it is to guarantee that the individualistic motivations that are so rigorously conditioned in capitalism will be laid aside in favor of a collective undertaking.

Perhaps we can reconcile these two positions by acknowledging that Marx was right that such charged historical references are dangerous, whereas Benjamin was correct that they are necessary. In any case, Chávez did have recourse to unleashing a powerful force from the past. He called upon that figure of the Venezuelan popular imagination named "Bolívar" and made it operative in the present, with all the dangers but also all the opportunities that that decision involved. Yet at the same time as Chávez discharged this powerful force in the present, he also tried to guide the Bolívarian "constellation" through a series of changing hypotheses.

## Destiny and Direction

Chávez became a public figure in 1992 with a televised speech popularly known by the name of *Por ahora*. This two-minute broadcast, coming after his failed military uprising, is remembered mostly for Chávez's indirect message that he would continue the struggle, even though the movement had failed "for now" (*por ahora*). Yet the Bolívarian leader's other, less remembered words in this brief discourse are also worthy of attention. Near the end of the broadcast, Chávez announces: "The country needs to direct itself definitely toward a better destiny" (literally: *El país tiene que enrumbarse definitivamente hacia un destino mejor*). In part this sentence simply repeats the idea of *por ahora*, because it implies there is an outstanding job to be done, but it also contains a cryptic, somewhat ambiguous reference to a "better destiny."

How should we understand this strange use of the concept of "destiny"? Surely there can be better and worse destinies, but a destiny is usually understood as necessary and inexorable rather than directable, as Chávez's use suggests. Be that as it may, the almost oxymoronic idea of "directing destiny" gives a good sense of the Gordian knot of revolutionary politics: the challenging project of conjugating means that are part of the present with ends that, by their very nature, must have a radically different character. Essentially, this is the dilemma embodied in formulating any revolutionary strategy-as-hypothesis: that is, a strategy that proposes to open a new horizon of possibility in the apparently closed-off present.

Given that Chávez faced challenges of this sort, it is fortunate that he was a "man of difficulties" in

his own right. His political career was defined, as we have said, by an array of changing programmatic scenarios. The *de facto* winner of twelve elections, he usually won these contests – which he called “battles” – much more on the basis of program than his famed charisma. This is evident from how the President drew people to his side in the polls to the degree that his program became clearer and more radical. For instance, he defeated the opposition’s presidential candidates Manuel Rosales and Henrique Capriles on solid programmatic points and not simply through mediatic gamesmanship. In the former case, Chávez cinched a three million vote margin through his surprising embrace of socialism in the run up to the balloting in late 2006. The second victory fell into place when the Socialist bloc exposed and actually published Capriles’ neoliberal agenda in the summer of 2012.

When he became president in 1999, Chávez’s initial project was to stabilize the national situation. This project was inspired by Chávez’s study of economist Carlos Matus and multi-disciplinary theorist Oscar Varsovsky. After establishing a platform of relative equilibrium – based on an economic project that was called paying the social debt and a political one embodied in the new Bolivarian constitution – Chávez then began to explore the socialist option, as a way of making precise his at one time very general ideas about emancipating the country from neoliberalism.

### **Chávez’s key hypothesis was based on the commune**

From the start, Chávez’s conception of the path to socialism drew on critical analyses of previous socialist projects, especially Hungarian philosopher István Mészáros’s diagnosis of the failure of real socialism, as presented in his 1994 book *Beyond Capital* and other works. At the center of this latter critique is Mészáros’s argument that it is capital, rather than a hypostatized capitalism, that needs to be eradicated in the transition to socialism. “Capital” is the title that Marx gave to his classic work, and the word refers to a flexible social form that dominates through a metabolic control of society. It Mészáros’s view capital’s logic had continued to operate in the diverse contexts of real socialism. It can only be eliminated by developing extensive popular and democratic controls – what Mészáros calls substantive democracy – over the whole social production process.

Having embraced socialism as a goal, it was logical that Chávez would try to chart the steps to arrive at this “better destiny.” In the end, his most important strategic hypothesis to this effect was his idea that a popular democracy of the kind established in Venezuela in the twenty-first century could transition to socialism using the commune as a grass-roots organizational unit. The Venezuelan commune was conceived as a profoundly democratic territorial organization. Though local, the commune aspired to be part of a future Communal State. The commune was also to be both political and economic, incorporating means of production under a regimen of social property that were projected to assume an important part of national production.

Chávez’s interest in the commune as a socialist building block surely had to do with the success of the Urban Land Committees and the Communal Councils, which were territorial forms of organization developed earlier in the process. The idea also incorporated some of the elements of the less successful cooperatives campaign he had launched in 2005-2006. The communal hypothesis, as we may call it, was celebrated with the slogan “*Comuna o Nada*.” Importantly, the Venezuelan commune was supposed to supply just those democratic controls over the production process that Mészáros’ theory called for to eradicate the logic of capital: its social metabolism.

In the years that followed, the communal hypothesis ran up against serious obstacles, failing to produce the desired results, despite the more than one thousand communes that have been registered and despite the government’s extensive promotion of the idea. As far as concrete results

are concerned, a handful of flagship communes may have come to form small enclaves of socialism, but the communes have generally proven precarious and even unsustainable in the capitalist context still dominant in Venezuela's economy.

The already adverse situation of the communes became worse when the Great Recession struck Venezuela. This global crisis began in 2008 for most countries, but Venezuela and other oil-producing nations were sustained by nearly a half decade of generally high prices. When oil prices finally fell in 2014, ending this long grace period, it followed hard on the heels of Chávez's death and coincided with the state's inability to incur further foreign debt. This exacerbated the problems facing the already embattled communes and the transition to socialism that was to be based on them, while precipitating the whole country into a serious political crisis.

### **Abandoning the Hypothesis**

History has shown that revolutions can have long afterlives. The 1789 French Revolution and the 1917 Soviet one produced aftershocks that lasted for nearly a century. A revolution's shared imaginary - brought forth from a collective memory of struggles - can outlive its initial purpose. Unmoored from their original context, the powerful impulses that a revolutionary moment releases can later serve class interests that are often the opposite of those that attended its earlier moments. Hence, rather than history "progressing through its bad side," according to Hegel's scheme, the real course of events seems to just as frequently "regress through its good side." As we have indicated, it is this unpredictable element in politics - made possible when a social subject is transformed into the reified appendix of a political symbol - that caused Marx's anxiety about politics and the double-edged sword that it represents. The unsettling autonomy of the political sphere and the quid pro quos that take place there is what Marx so masterfully represents in *The 18 Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Just as in *The 18 Brumaire* Napoleon Bonaparte's heroic campaigns are reborn as his nephew's pathetic victories of sausage distribution, so Chávez's multi-dimensional legacy today risks displacement from its original significance, marking a trajectory that goes from the sublime to the ridiculous and even the retrograde. In this way, the Bolívarian struggle that Chávez initiated in an earlier heroic moment is possibly now deploying its arms, not so much against the originally-targeted oligarchy, but rather against important popular victories! Hints that this dangerous inversion of Chavist politics may be happening today can be glimpsed in the "OLP" security operations that resemble right-wing "social cleansing" and in the state's recent efforts to block the participation of Left parties such as REDES, Tupamaros, and the Venezuelan Communist Party in future elections.

When Nicolás Maduro arrived to the presidency following Chávez's death in early 2013, the mass media focused on the narrowness of the electoral victory, though it was in fact more solid than many "legitimate" ones in the North. Yet far more notable was the total absence of political program in Maduro's campaign. Instead, it was the image of the deceased Chávez, with whom his designated successor claimed to communicate through a bird, that took center stage! Maduro fetishistically mistook the symbol of a social force - the Chávez image - for the force itself.

Though assaulted on all sides over the next four years, Maduro showed himself capable of maintaining power. He skillfully neutralized both internal and external enemies through impressive power plays. Yet though Chávez's image continues to adorn the country and its institutions, his project of a transition to socialism and toward a Communal State seems to have been relegated to rhetoric and spectacle. Between "*Comuna o Nada*," the current Venezuelan government seems to



prefer the “*nada*” of pure survival tactics and exaggerated pragmatism.

On the programmatic level, the government’s almost exclusive interest seems to be the new food distribution system called CLAP, which to the degree that it fails to take on political clothing – as is often the case – amounts to no more than a monthly or bimonthly food bag. That is to say, the strategic hypothesis that Chávez carefully formulated, consisting in the wager that a popular democracy could advance to socialism using the commune as a building block, seems to have been abandoned. Because the project ran up against hard knocks – including resistance from the capitalist sector, internal problems, and the challenges of the global crisis – it has been simply cast aside or converted into a mere spectacle.

Yet rather than abandoning this strategic hypothesis (which certainly deserves criticism), the Chavist direction should have evaluated and modified it. This is most likely what Chávez would have done, if alive, and it is what Lenin did when the failure of the Western European revolutions and the unanticipated behavior of the Russian peasant brought his hypothesis under question. The Venezuelan communes’ difficulty in staying afloat in the sea of capitalism was not a reason to abandon the project and merely plunge headlong into liberalizing the economy, as Maduro seems to have done.

### **A Proposed Modification**

It is a commonplace of the Marxist tradition that one must develop a “concrete analysis of the concrete situation” not only before a revolution but also during its course. If this analysis is undertaken in the current Venezuelan conjuncture, the most salient “concrete element” that comes into view is the unfavorable balance of forces in the national situation. This points to a central oversight involved in the original “communal hypothesis.” In effect, Chávez and Mészáros’s emphasis on the socialist alternative’s grassroots character caused them to shortchange the crucial question of the balance of forces in the national scenario. Their thesis that capital’s metabolism was capable of social permeation and thus surviving on a capillary level was right (more right than they imagined!). In fact, the Venezuelan capitalist context was so powerful and vibrant that it has systematically mined and swallowed the majority of these well-meaning socialist experiments.

At the root of their error is the fallacy, perhaps associated with the erroneous concept of a “*Revolution Bonita*,” which consists in thinking that the metabolic nature of capital negates the importance of a decisive state apparatus in the transition to socialism. In criticizing historical socialism, Chávez was correct to maintain that new social relations based on a democratic control of the production process could not simply be imposed. State violence can never be used to collectivize “socialistically.” If socialism is synonymous with democratic control of the production process, it follows that the new, superior social relations must be entered into voluntarily, and the role of the state or party here is at most one of persuasion and example. Lenin, too, was aware of this principle, which however does not imply that state or party power cannot be deployed to create a favorable environment for the socialist experiments. In this sense – and this is the modification to Chavez’s communal hypothesis that I propose – there needs to be a dialectical synthesis of, on the one hand, the traditional Marxist concept of a state power that makes a forceful rupture with the existing order of things and the grassroots communal projects that Chávez promoted, on the other. The remade state power would be charged with fostering the socialist enclaves, stacking the deck in their favor.

Unfortunately, rather than breaking with the existing order of things, Chavist governments have tended to do just the opposite during their nearly two decades in power. Instead of fomenting an adverse environment for the capitalist sector of the economy and a favorable one for the grassroots

experiments, Chávez and Maduro both seemed to favor the former! That is, the government consistently offered juicy and unsupervised subsidies to importers at the same time as it verbally encouraged socialist production in the communes! In this sense, while the Chavist direction called for socialism and preached the commune, it maintained an easy normality for the bulk of civic society. The government also undermined its own capacity to inspire and persuade, leading to a significant loss of credibility under Chávez that grew exponentially under Maduro. In effect, both presidents' claims about the socialist road were undercut by the functionaries' lifestyles they tolerated. If socialist relations are to be promoted by persuasion, then the example speaks more strongly than the word.

Another dimension to this failure – that merits further investigation – concerns the absence of an effective political party in the Bolivarian process. Even in capitalist organizations, which are favored by the global context, adequate direction is not produced spontaneously. Socialist organizations, on the other hand, must struggle against the current, and they are charged with the especially difficult task of mediating between popular desire and future projection and managing the complex temporalities of the socialist project. It follows that the absence of an effective party cannot fail to have an effect. Hence, the formation of a party adequate to the challenges of the communal path to socialism, as Chávez projected, could be key to reformulating his hypothesis, after its apparent involution in the winds of the economic crisis.

Perhaps, as I have suggested above, the key modification of Chávez's hypothesis should consist of using a strong state and party apparatus – in the form of an exceptional regime – to create a more favorable environment for the communes and thus tip the scales in favor of socialism during the period of transition. The price of the current government's abandoning the communal project seems to be a national scenario that is dominated more by shadow-boxing and mimicry than any plausible steps toward socialism. Clearly, the Chávez hypothesis should have been criticized and modified, rather than cast aside. This is because forging a path to socialism without a strategic hypothesis is inconceivable.

**Chris Gilbert**

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\* "The Chávez Hypothesis: Vicissitudes of a Strategic Project" :

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2017/05/19/the-chavez-hypothesis-vicissitudes-of-a-strategic-project/>

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