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Abstract

'Protagonistic democracy', 'initiative from below', or 'autonomous agency' is presented by critical left supporters of Venezuelan socialism as counter-balancing Chavez's statist top-down tendencies. Why should it only counter-balance and not go beyond Chavismo and any reified state power? This has to do with presenting it, often unwittingly, as an undifferentiated bloc, albeit internally highly democratic and empowering. What therefore needs to be highlighted is internal contradiction and differentiation *within* protagonistic democracy, so that what Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* once called 'a line of march' of the movement as a whole is emphasized – something overlooked by scholars like Michael Lebowitz. Without a 'line of march', the most radical democratic practices can get boxed into a 'bloc' fighting a reified, externalized enemy. 'Class struggle' gets reduced to a populist fight against 'alien elements', 'conspiratorial foreign oligarchs' and so on – is this not the experience of '21st century humanist socialism' so far?

Keywords

Venezuela, socialism, democracy, political subject, autonomous agency, state power, social movements, neoliberalism

Introduction

This is an article critical of Venezuelan socialism even as its achievements are welcomed. My critique is, however, not about the 'weaknesses', implementation problems and such like, nor is it about Chavez's authoritarian, top-down methods. It is also not about the supposed failure to provide initiative to the 'grass-roots', autonomous agency and the problems with a supposedly state-led model of socialism. Indeed I distance myself from the terms of this 'state vs autonomous agency' debate. As we proceed, my attempt will be to propose different terms for this debate.

Holloway (2010) too rejects these terms of the debate 'put forward by critical supporters of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela' that 'we must think of radical change as coming

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simultaneously from above and below' (Holloway, 2010: 207). However, in proposing that any 'push from above' demobilizes the movement from below, apparently crushing 'self-determination', he concedes too much force and power to the push from above, thereby (paradoxically?) underestimating and infantilizing the 'movement from below'.² My critique of Venezuelan socialism is about deciphering and expanding on this 'movement from below', in particular, the most active and radical 'grass-roots' tendencies that provide the line of action, push the entire socialist process forward and sometimes make the impossible possible.

Precious few that they are, reports like this must then be taken seriously: 'Venezuelan *barrio* takes socialism beyond Chavez' (Israel, 2010). This *barrio* (shanty) is called 23 de Enero, otherwise called 'Little Vietnam', with a long history of left-wing radicalism and home to Chavez's 'storm-troopers'. 'The *barrio* and movements it nurtures represent both the laboratory and spearhead of the Bolivarian Revolution ... It is in 23 de Enero that the most radical forces are located, forces which drive the process forward' (Israel, 2010).

The crucial question then is: what is the relationship of the 'radical sectors' to 'Venezuelan socialism' or to Chavez? It is, we are told, a 'tense relationship' and this 'radicalism has often proved a political liability for Venezuela's leader.' 'Chavez depends on the radical sectors for support, but neither side truly trusts one another ... If he were to destroy them, he would be destroying his own base as well' (Israel, 2010).

Here is another report pointing to the 'tense relationship', the fissures and contradictions within 'protagonistic democracy': 'Chavez supporters in the communities, who have been empowered by communal councils and worker-managed workplaces, end up in bitter conflicts with state functionaries who try to implement the top-down directives from their ministers, who get their directives from Chavez' (Wilpert, 2011).

These reports indicate that the practices of Venezuelan socialism cannot be understood only in terms of its target (external) enemies like US-backed neoliberalism and imperialism.³ We must seriously examine the internal contradictions and differentiation occurring within and constitutively determining communal social organizations and 'revolutionary practice' itself. The 'achievements' of the Bolivarian Revolution cannot be treated as simply positively given (allowing only for the 'externalized' enemies of neoliberalism and imperialism, and a reified USA-backed right-wing opposition) but as internally split with an internal dynamic. Overlooking inner contradictions and differentiation within 'revolutionary practice' often goes hand in hand with reifying the 'enemy' into alien elements, individual oligarchs and so on thereby displacing attention from wider capitalist relations.

Inner contradiction and differentiation means popular power or 'protagonistic democracy' cannot merely rally behind the revolutionary party's participation in state power but would challenge the very form of the bourgeois state – the bourgeois state cannot be taken as given, with discussion restricted only to its supposed revolutionary use. We argue that the Marxist emphasis on state power is not directed towards reinforcing the capitalist state, or even its progressive tendency or revolutionary use, but to go beyond its very bourgeois form through popular or proletarian political power. It is not an either/or situation: 'revolutionary use' can of course feed into dislodging the capitalist state and replacing it with proletarian political power. However, certain Marxists emphasize the so-called revolutionary potential of using existing state power in a way which undermines, or is oblivious of, the revolutionary potential of popular power ('autonomous agency') or 'socialism from below' to negate this very state form.

Marxists rightly reject John Holloway's notion of anti-power (Holloway, 2002). However, in the process, certain Marxists quietly and conveniently shun the very idea of proletarian political power outside of and against the existing state power, particularly once a revolutionary party gets

elected or forms a government. Popular power or autonomous agency ends up being an appendage reinforcing the bourgeois state form – a major feature of revolutionary populism. Corresponding to this, the ‘alternative socialist economy’, which is the main theatre of ‘socialism from below’ in Venezuela, also becomes an appendage to the dominant capitalist economy. Such a populism rejects Holloway’s anti-power position only to end up with reformism, caricaturing Marxism in the name of defending it. Hence a question like this is a primary impulse here: does 23 de Enero, or do other practices of political power indicate a new form of political power or do they merely rally behind the revolutionary party?

In postcolonial studies, for example, there is a sense in which once autonomous agency is abstracted from ‘history’, from the overall social relations and balance of forces, and treated in isolation as ‘non-historical’ and ‘anti-historical’, it can be celebrated as something pure, really outside of power. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000: 37) adopts such a ‘subaltern standpoint’ arguing that subaltern agency or its narratives ‘often themselves bespeak an anti-historical consciousness, that is, they entail subject positions and configurations of memory that challenge and undermine the subject that speaks in the name of history’. The Marxist antidote to this is not really an uncritical emphasis on state power but one which also emphasizes political subjectivity and power beyond the form of the bourgeois state and in active confrontation with macro social relations and congealed power.

A postcolonial, post-structuralist approach, however, sometimes finds its home within certain kinds of Marxism. As we will see, practices of communal democracy in Venezuela are often conceived in territorial terms approaching an ahistorical stance, viewed in isolation from the macro level indices that indicate capitalist consolidation, notwithstanding Chavez’s adoption of ‘21st century socialism’ as the goal. Venezuelan grass-roots democracy or protagonistic democracy is here examined not as a self-contained, internal and territorial practice of democracy, but in terms of the larger balance of forces, that is, politically. The balance of forces and overall structural logic are particularly pertinent in the context of the economy, notwithstanding the ‘revolutionary practice’ of socialist communal production. As Toussaint (2010) points out, Venezuela’s overall economic indices indicate that capitalism continues to get stronger after the adoption of socialism by Chavez.⁴

We here engage with Michael Lebowitz’s understanding of revolutionary practice or protagonistic democracy in Venezuela today – for example, the communal councils and social production (Lebowitz, 2006, 2008). It will be shown that Lebowitz works with an overwhelmingly spatial or territorial notion of protagonistic democracy overlooking differentiation and forward movement of active elements. He tends to overlook precisely what the above reports indicate – that these councils do not plainly function as units or blocs of ‘socialist solidarity’ that rally behind the leader or the progressive policies of the state but are themselves marked by internal tension and differentiation.

And again, there is one clear tendency whereby the mobilized popular classes are pushing things to a state of confrontation with the existing state structures led by Chavez, as reports indicate. However, as will be seen, Venezuelan socialism and its direct democracy and protagonistic democracy seem to be frozen in a perpetual complementary relationship with the state and its liberal representative institutions – involving struggle against the latter but never dislodging or replacing them. In this sense, they seem no different from Holloway’s anti-power autonomist position. And here we intend to develop a crucial insight – what makes for a Marxist position is not the emphasis on state power alone but one which at the same time emphasizes popular subjectivity (protagonistic democracy) which would involve dislodging the present structures of the state. Lebowitz’s views however tend towards ultimately treating protagonistic democracy as just some kind of standing

reserve mass of supporters for Chavismo – territorially organized with democratic decision-making internally, but refusing to foreground internal differentiation and contradictions that might point to a way beyond Chavez, beyond the present state power.

Political Subject

Thus we ask: can we understand the Venezuelan *barrios* striving beyond Chavez's socialism in terms of the tendency towards the emergence of a political subject, a political power outside of and perhaps against Chavez's progressive state? To be sure there is no 'proletarian political power' in place in Venezuela today and I might be seen as engaging in an outmoded Leninist idea. And yet the prevalent tensions and contradictions in existing socialist practices mean that the pre-figuration of such a possibility is not totally out of place. This article intends to foreground such a pre-figuration. This means engaging in 'the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of Utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real' (Jameson, 2009: 415–416).⁵ So how do I answer the charge of 'dogmatically imposing' the monolithic Leninist 'model' of vanguard political subject and proletarian state power on the concrete reality of Venezuelan socialism? I have elaborated my position on the vanguard party elsewhere (Giri, 2011). Here let me start by stating that I am engaging in what Jameson, following Hegel, calls 'thinking without positive terms' (Jameson, 2010: 48).

Thinking *with* positive terms is not a great proposition, for these positive terms get turned into given and reified categories, so that actually no *thinking* takes place.⁶ Thus antagonistic democracy, when treated as positively given and without internal contradictions, is then seen as in struggle with reified and externalized 'bad elements' (oligarchs or US imperialists). The notion of struggle between two reified 'unthinking' terms assumes an undialectical relationship of exteriority between them (Ollman, 1977).⁷ My point is to challenge that and allow 'thinking' – this is possible only if we think without positive, reified terms, or rather in spite of them. Both the terms here can be seen as 'thinking' only if you allow for internal contradictions – emergence of a political subject within antagonistic democracy, on the one hand, and foregrounding capitalist relations instead of an externalized enemy, on the other. Which only means that, as Bertell Ollman would insist, the struggle between the two terms (say, antagonistic democracy or popular power, and capitalism or neoliberalism) must be viewed in terms of their internal relation and not in terms of a relationship of exteriority. There is an entire debate on the question of dialectics and dialectical relationship which we are not going into here.

It will be shown below that Lebowitz's territorial notion of antagonistic democracy is mirrored in the very nature of the Bolivarian Constitution which frames popular, communal democracy as complementary to the dominant liberal representative institutions in Venezuela. As we will see, Lebowitz commendably approaches antagonistic democracy from the perspective of 'socialist co-management of goods and services' – however, he gets carried away in trying to address (techno-socialist?) problems of coordination between different sectors of the economy, between state and non-state firms and so on. The specifically political question is then left, unwittingly, to the question of the Constitution, circumscribed by the narrow limits placed by bourgeois legality. This coheres very well with displacing the question of capitalist relations as a whole and instead identifying the 'enemy' as external and reified, as Chavez does. It is only as a bloc, an undifferentiated unity that popular subjectivity is placed in struggle, struggle with a reified enemy. Here one is confronted with a situation where 'class struggle' itself becomes an accomplice and the key modality of revolutionary populism.

State Power and Autonomous Agency

A supposed Marxist emphasis on state power which refuses to break out of the ‘state power vs autonomous agency’ binary gets cornered into defending itself from precisely the charge of fetishizing state power – Holloway too makes this charge. Such a ‘Marxism’ feels the need to ‘do the balancing act’ by, for example, trying to combine state power with ‘socialism from below’. This indeed is what a contribution in the *Socialist Register* does (Robinson, 2007).

Robinson asserts that ‘popular forces and classes must win state power and utilize it to transform production relations and the larger relations of domination, *yet* they must do so without subordinating their own autonomy and collective agency in that state’ (Robinson, 2007: 154). Here an emphasis on grass-roots agency appears as the revolutionary approach to defend socialism from Chavez’s excessive top-down populism. Robinson first upholds (the need to capture) state power, which is the existing state, the capitalist state albeit with a revolutionary party in charge now, and then as a backdoor defence, he stresses how not to lose autonomous agency in spite of such a state being upheld.

Robinson thus ends up producing such fluffy claims as working for an ‘interface between the popular forces on the one hand and the state structures on the other’, or placing the state under popular control – unable in any case to break with the bourgeois state form (Robinson, 2007: 158). Participation in bourgeois government or the existing state does not seem to be a tactical step for him, but the wherewithal of even the longer term strategy and programme. Discomfort with such a reformist approach to the existing state is expressed by intellectuals close to Chavez: ‘If the state was the instrument used by neo-liberalism to implement its own agenda, should it also be used to free us from neo-liberalism? Can this state put us on the path to socialism or, on the contrary, is it an obstacle to socialism?’⁸ However, the answer they provide is quite inadequate. The problem with Chavismo as also with Lebowitz’s Marxism is therefore the assumption that the class struggle can continue without ever breaking with the bourgeois state form, simply because a revolutionary party is in charge of this state with complementary organs of ‘protagonistic democracy’ (communal councils and social production).

However, there are others who have rightly critiqued Lebowitz for overlooking the question of political subjectivity and the party. Pablo Ghiglani, for example, is not convinced that Lebowitz’s ‘notion of *self-transforming revolutionary practice* will suffice to account for the emergence of revolutionary subjects’ (Ghiglani, 2006: 54). Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2006: 130–131) consider Lebowitz’s major weakness is not to focus on the differentiated character of the working class (with say uneven levels of consciousness) and on the party question. They point out that ‘the absence of any analysis of the ideological, organizational and representational practices of social democracy is matched by a similar absence of any discussion of working-class parties in the Leninist tradition’.

Let us now turn to a consideration of Lebowitz’s ideas. We will do this in the following three sections.

Revolutionary Practice

Invoking Marx on ‘revolutionary practice’, Lebowitz argues for a ‘concept ... of democracy in *practice*, democracy *as practice*, *democracy as protagonism*’ (Hanecker, 2010). ‘Democracy in this sense – protagonistic democracy in the workplace, protagonistic democracy in neighborhoods, communities, communes – is the democracy of people who are transforming themselves into revolutionary subjects’ (Hanecker, 2010).

Is Lebowitz's notion of self-transforming revolutionary practice free from the problems outlined above that hinder the emergence of a revolutionary political subjectivity? Lebowitz explains his idea of revolutionary practice: 'How can people develop their capacities? How do you get that full development of human beings? Marx's answer was always the same – practice, human activity. This is precisely Marx's concept of "revolutionary practice": ... the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change' (Lebowitz, 2008). For Lebowitz (2008), '*participation is the necessary way for your complete development, both individual and collective*'. He points out that, in consonance with this idea, Article 70 of the Bolivarian Constitution stresses 'self-management, co-management, cooperatives in all forms' and Article 102 highlights 'developing the creative potential of every human being' and 'active, conscious and joint participation' (Lebowitz, 2008). It is on this basis that Venezuela under Chavismo seeks to develop a democratic, participatory, and antagonistic society in the economic sphere.

Even though Lebowitz does not relate antagonistic democracy to the larger political question of establishing working class political power, he is of course aware of this 'problem'. The way he attempts to go beyond the territorial and sectoral notion of revolutionary practice is his realization that the communal councils and social production relate to the economy rather than to politics as such – and hence the need to also bring in the political. Thus he points out that 'the economic revolution has begun in Venezuela but the political revolution and the cultural revolution lag well behind' (Lebowitz, 2006: 113).

When he does take up the political question, however, it elides into a 'Constitutional question'. Unlike what would be expected from a Marxist standpoint, the political question does not emerge from within revolutionary practice and the community councils and so on. Instead it appears as 'the struggle for the Constitution' and so does not emanate from the internal dynamic and contradictions in popular subjectivity and antagonistic democracy (Lebowitz, 2006: 115).⁹ At best, antagonistic democracy would only 'struggle for' a better Constitution, a struggle from the outside, from a relationship of exteriority. No wonder, it is only after finishing the main discussion on 'coordinated socialist self-management' that Lebowitz (2006) has to separately touch upon 'the need to struggle for the Constitution' in order to stop the revolution from reverting 'back to the point where it supports capitalism' (Lebowitz, 2006: 115). At other times, he fields the broader political question as the search for a new kind of 'public management'. Thus, corresponding to self-management in the economic sphere, there must be, we are told, 'the participation of the people in forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs' (Lebowitz, 2006: 115). There is clearly a palpable tension in Lebowitz which comes from the inability to foreground the question of the political subject and yet attempting to address the 'larger political question'. Here one is talking then of the gap between the socialism-oriented 'public management of affairs', communal production and so on, and proletarian political subjectivity leading to political power.

The question he leaves unanswered is this: is revolutionary practice in the economy and production free of inner contradiction and differentiation, free from the pre-figuration of a political subjectivity? Let us however take an instance where Lebowitz goes beyond the 'struggle for a Constitution' and places political struggle within the realm of the economy, in 'socialist co-management' or 'co-ordinated societal *self-management*'. 'Without co-management, there is no revolution', 'without worker management, there is no socialism' – such a socialism is about the attempt to create 'social production' tied to the needs of the working class as a whole, or of the community, as against 'production for exchange' (Lebowitz, 2006: 116). The social economy, 'this radical reorientation of exchange to one based upon communal needs and communal purposes', is regarded as crucial for socialism, a humanist socialism, socialism for the 21st century (Lebowitz, 2006: 108).

Building socialism here crucially turns on ‘the rejection of the logic of capital and the embrace of the social economy’ (Lebowitz, 2006: 108). The problem which concerns Lebowitz in the determinate conditions of Venezuelan socialism today is of reining in state firms (as against firms of social production) to operate on a socialist basis of solidarity and linking their production with the needs of the community as a whole, as is the case with the companies of social production. This is to ensure that ‘these productive units (state firms) are not independent but form parts of a whole, that this is a subset of the collective worker producing specific products in the interest of society as a whole’ (Lebowitz, 2006: 111).

Lebowitz here presents us with a remarkable socialist vision which gives primacy to human development, where decision-making is socialized and production is taking place for the community as a whole. Yet the problems remain – also thereby providing a way of approaching the larger work of Istvan Meszaros, whose ideas are seminal for Lebowitz. Firstly, the collectives and communes challenging ‘private’ capitalist production are primarily treated as something like an *autonomous and undifferentiated* bloc, without internal contradictions – a spatially bound bloc of ‘revolutionary practice’ rallying behind Chavez, in a relationship of exteriority, in the fight against ‘the power of the oligarchy’. ‘Capitalism’, ‘imperialism’ get externalized and reified into individual capitalist manipulators and the foreign imperialist hand. Popular power or political subjectivity too is reified into a stable bloc forever complementary to the bourgeois state form and capitalist relations. Though based on solidarity and socialist principles, the alternative economy and antagonistic democracy, bereft of differentiation and political subjectivity, end up as merely complementary to capitalist production.¹⁰ ‘Class struggle’ yes, but without dialectical movement and revolutionary dynamism.

Solidarity and Accumulation

No wonder that without any focus on internal contradictions, revolutionary practice ends up emphasizing something like a self-reproducing harmonious socialist community rather than a revolutionary political subject. In this formulation then, differentiation and inner contradiction – the most active elements like 23 de Enero taking the struggle forward – are overlooked and sidelined, giving way to the celebration of a generalized and homogenized socialist solidarity or antagonistic democracy. Lebowitz’s otherwise positive insistence on human solidarity and the rejection of the logic of capital is too well suited to celebrate overly humanistic descriptions of ‘the human family’, ‘communal purpose and needs’ and so on (Lebowitz, 2006: 108, 117). He talks about the need to ‘create new social relations, relations based upon the consciousness of the unity of the people (a unity Marx described as based upon recognition of difference)’ (Lebowitz, 2006: 117). The emphasis on unity, family, communal relations is quite problematic; so is his rather multiculturalist attempt at ‘recognition of difference’.

Far worse is what comes to reinforce this unity and community, the rationale as it were: the emphasis on the ‘growth of the human productive forces’ and the need to collectively develop the social economy as ‘major sources of accumulation and growth’ (Lebowitz, 2006: 101, 112). Detached from the question of a revolutionary subjectivity and popular political power, this emphasis on accumulation and growth is merely the idiom in which the social economy’s complementary relationship with capitalist relations of production gets reinforced. Here Lebowitz’s thrust on socialist solidarity, harmonizing production to social needs, participatory decision-making and so on tends to paradoxically appear ideological, as providing something like an outside oppositional support to the logic of capital. This is of course a variation on the larger theme of how the logic of

capital can operate in and through other localized pre-capitalist or communal logics – the same is often the case with autonomous agency, anti-power or ‘temporary autonomous zones’ and so on.

To the extent that Lebowitz is pointing to the need for an independent social economy to fulfil the needs of the popular classes its importance to any revolutionary process cannot for a moment be doubted. In fact, given the control by big companies and oligarchs over the supply of essential goods and services (including the April 2002 ‘business strikes’ aimed at crippling the Venezuelan socialist process), the struggle must develop ‘alternative’, ‘pro-people’ systems of production and distribution. Thus the success of the Bolivarian Revolution ‘will be determined by the extent to which the social economy and the activities associated with endogenous development in general become an increasingly autonomous process of accumulation, which requires the creation of a self-sustaining process for generating employment and demand for goods and services’ (Lebowitz, 2006: 89). And yet this emphasis on an ‘increasingly autonomous process of accumulation’ tends to reinforce the tendency to treat the mobilized popular classes as a bloc, undifferentiated and self-contained, rather than going out of itself and placing itself in the overall balance of class forces.

Of course, Lebowitz is right when he argues that ‘in Venezuela endogenous development was understood explicitly as human development – true development from within’ (Lebowitz, 2006: 101). Lebowitz rightly proposes this human development, ‘true development from within’, over the top-down model of ‘state subsidies’ and such measures (‘exogenous development’) that restrain and limit the independent initiative and subjectivity of the masses, stifling human development. He is rightly critical of the subsidy model of the paternalistic state, emphasizing instead the activity and independence of the popular classes. However, just as in the case of socialist solidarity, ‘development from within’, what the Bolivarian Constitution calls ‘radical endogenous development’, tends to define a framework geared towards precluding inner contradiction and political subjectivity. And it is here that we must locate the core of Chavez’s populism: class struggle or the struggle for socialism has meant that the popular classes through protagonistic democracy form a politically undifferentiated bloc, contribute to ‘accumulation and growth’, even as they remain bound by the bourgeois state form and wider capitalist relations. Political subjectivity is subsumed within the ‘socialist virtues’ of communal unity and human solidarity. Thus you have ‘class struggle’ fought in the name of the popular classes now constituted into harmonious units of territorial protagonistic democracy and human solidarity, such that capitalist relations as such are obscured from view.

We get this unholy combination of class struggle with populism even though, not to forget, Lebowitz started out from strong socialist principles and in search of a new humanistic socialism, a humane Marxism, also seeking to overcome any reliance on a paternalistic state. This is however no paradox since the problem arises from Lebowitz’s un-Marxist attempts to place Marxism within the autonomous agency vs reified state binary set up by much of autonomist thinking. Lander (2008: 82) too speaks from within such a worn out framework when he points to ‘the world of popular social organizations (which) has expanded in an extraordinary way’ in the Bolivarian Revolution. Thus he emphasizes that ‘these social organizations have had a broad and varied range of experiences as regards their autonomy vis-a-vis the state’ (Lander, 2008: 82). While he complains that the existing ‘state is always an inevitable point of reference’ for even the popular social organizations, his framework is again one of state intervention versus initiative from below (Lander, 2008: 82).

Robinson repeats the framework when he points out that ‘some of these (communal) councils are subordinate to state directives and others have become co-opted by corrupt leaders or local bureaucrats’ (Robinson, 2007: 151). Writing in the *Socialist Register* he thus emphasizes something which sounds very post-Marxist: the ‘need to relinquish vanguardism of the party and state and to encourage, respect, and subordinate itself to the autonomous mobilization from below of the popular

classes and subordinate sectors' (Robinson, 2007: 158). The Leninist idea of the vanguard and the party is so unproblematically placed on the side of the top-down hierarchical state. This proposal with all its post-Marxism might seem democratic, pluralistic and hence acceptable, but in failing to conceive of a new political subjectivity it remains trapped within the capitalist state form – it presupposes the latter's continued existence in the guise of upholding subaltern or autonomous agency.

The sops offered by a so-called reformed Marxism involving the abandonment of Leninist vanguardism, trying to make the Marxist emphasis on state power democratic and grass-roots-oriented and so on, ultimately ends up in a reformist cul-de-sac: in fact to the abandonment of (revolutionary) Marxism. These tendencies in Bolivarian practice are exemplified in Lebowitz.

Bourgeois Legality

The same tendencies follow from the constitutional changes introduced by Chavez since 1999 promoting participatory, protagonist democracy based on his critique of the liberal, representative model. According to Lopez Maya, 'the new constitution, sanctioned in a referendum in December 1999, introduced a series of mechanisms aimed at replacing Venezuela's "representative" democracy with a "participative and antagonistic" version' (Lopez Maya, 2007: 162). But in spite of this, 'the new political model did not replace representative democracy, but rather complemented it with various methods of participation' (Lander, 2008: 80). Further, the democratizing provisions of citizen power and electoral power were introduced but 'the separation of powers characteristic of the liberal democratic tradition was preserved' (Lander, 2008: 80).

Now what happens when the frequent assertion of the *barrios* and working class power run into conflict with this liberal representation and the principle of separation of powers? Chavez's contribution in providing legal and constitutional validity to popular social organizations is not in doubt. However, the real question is whether this legal validity helps intensify popular subjectivity or soon appears as so many fetters. Now Chavez, unlike Allende in Chile in an earlier period, does not seem to make a fetish of bourgeois legality. Chavez is willing to break with or subvert formal Constitutional provisions and embrace the fact of the real power struggle, to defend his regime. However, he cannot think of popular social organizations and popular subjectivity breaking with the role assigned to them, which is one of rallying and voting for him as a bloc.

In Lebowitz's framework then the energies that are mobilized to challenge the macro level power relations and class forces never find a new political form in which to consolidate themselves and hence remain forever subservient to and in a dependent relationship with 'those in power', and ultimately subservient to the bourgeois state form and legality. Whether those in power are the revolutionary party or a Bolivarian leader does not necessarily change things. Lebowitz seems, in spite of his deep insights, to slide towards the motto: 'Keep struggling but do not dare win'.

Reifying Capitalist Relations

One must, however, come to terms with the tremendous radical energy and revolutionary potential of the popular social organizations in Venezuela today – surely, my argument here that they are merely complementary to capitalism and bourgeois legality might not appear well grounded and leaves several questions unanswered. Militancy of popular organizations is extremely high: to take just one example, witness the struggle over the radical labour law in November 2010 (Duckworth, 2010). My critique of Lebowitz or Venezuelan socialism is therefore not meant to undermine the tremendous revolutionary significance of the ongoing struggle in Venezuela. As we pointed out, however, the militancy and radical energy is inward looking and territorial. Further, it is also

misdirected since what is actually a systemic problem, the problem of capitalism and imperialism as a wider system and social relations, is presented as the problem of a few bad elements, of individual oligarchs, of US intervention and so on.

Consider the report: 'Chavez says that the bishops and business "oligarchs", media tycoons and foreign "imperialists" who populate his full pantheon of ideological foes are misrepresenting the communes project as a pretext to destabilize his government' (Fletcher, 2010). Another says, 'President Chavez has lashed out against the Federation of Chambers of Industry & Commerce (Fedecamaras) calling it a "nest of vipers" and "enemy of the people"' (O'Donoghue, 2010). 'Enemy of the people', outside alien elements and so on are always counter posed to an undifferentiated 'people' and 'socialism', some ideal people's Venezuela. In April 2010 Chavez declared that 'the U.S., the Venezuelan opposition and some neighbouring countries, including Colombia, are still plotting to destabilize and attack Venezuela' (Janicke, 2010).

In spite of all his strident attacks, Chavez proceeds to declare that he does not actually want to do away with the 'nest of vipers': 'we have no plan to eliminate the oligarchy, Venezuela's bourgeoisie. We have demonstrated this sufficiently in over eight years' (Wilpert, 2007). All that is being asked of the oligarchy, we are told, is to make peace with 'the revolutionary majority' and be patriotic and not serve foreign imperialist masters: 'But, if the oligarchy does not understand this, if it does not accept the call to peace, to live with us, that the great revolutionary majority is making, if the Venezuelan bourgeoisie continues to desperately assault, using the refuges it has remaining, well then the Venezuelan bourgeoisie will continue to lose, one by one, the refuges it has remaining' (Wilpert, 2007).

This is the problem of the reification of capitalist relations to individual oligarchs. Reifying here involves refusal to acknowledge the full extent of the spread, interconnections and pervasiveness of such relations – so that one can overlook the fact that antagonistic democracy or social economy might be, for instance, part of the determinations of capital. Naomi Klein (2007) in her well known work *The Shock Doctrine* similarly reifies neoliberalism – notwithstanding her brilliant expose of the many nexuses, deals and collusion underlying neoliberalism, she still treats it as a self-enclosed doctrine emanating from the heads of people like Milton Friedman and violently imposing, almost seamlessly unfolding itself in several countries. I have expanded on this treatment elsewhere (Giri, 2010). The spread of global capitalist relations, and the many differentiations involving the local and the national, is overlooked as she tries to identify neoliberalism in this doctrine coming from the Chicago economics department – for example, the agency of the national ruling classes, of even the social democratic left in ushering in neoliberalism or the role of NGOs is so overlooked that they all appear as innocents who were merely shocked into accepting neoliberalism.

Similarly for Chavez capitalist relations beyond the individual oligarchs do not seem visible, nor can he see the internal differentiation within the popular classes and in antagonistic democracy itself. This is of a piece with seeking particular and piecemeal solutions to attacks by the oligarchs. Oil money therefore has come to be instrumental to keep the revolution in place. Even when the bourgeoisie struck hard through the national business strike in April 2002, the 'intensification of the class struggle' never brought things to a head with the bourgeoisie since problems could be resolved through an exogenous factor, namely, oil money: the way out was getting oil reserves to stave off the crippling effects of a national business strike, particularly through emergency imports of food and fuel (Lander, 2008). Even open attacks by the bourgeoisie as a class can therefore fail to foreground differentiation and inner contradiction in 'revolutionary practice' since the 'exogenous factor' of oil money can 'solve the problem'. It is as if oil money funds the attachment to bourgeois legality and keeps the social economy well greased to never feel the pinch of its subsidiary, complementary relationship with capitalist relations.

Argentinean *piqueteros*

To place matters in context, it must be pointed out that the above problems are not restricted only to Venezuela or the Bolivarian socialist practice or to Lebowitz's Marxism. Not surprisingly, Argentinean *piqueteros* display similar problems as we can see from an interesting study by Wolff (2007). Wolff, however, tends to critique the localized character of the movements in such a way that the only option suggested seems to be to follow the path of state power as something abstractly given by fetishized capitalist relations – what is missing from his analysis is precisely the point I am belabouring: that there is a way from the so-called local to 'state power' if only this state is conceptualized as the one which emerges from popular power fundamentally breaking with the bourgeois state form.

The *piqueteros* and definitely some of their branches are often conceived in terms of a horizontal and decentred network of people from the popular classes – quite a contrast from the Venezuelan popular social organizations that are very close to state and socialism. Ana C Dinerstein (2008: 237) for example highlights the Movement of the Unemployed (MTD) as a 'source of counter-power and dignity ... their work develops on territorial local bases and intends to create solidarity networks in each local environment, i.e. the neighborhood'. And yet our argument here makes us realize that Venezuelan revolutionary practice does approach certain of these features of local, territorial mobilization, being complementary to capitalist relations and the bourgeois state form – features that are perhaps more pronounced in the case of the *piqueteros*.

Similar to the complementary character of protagonistic democracy and the social economy is the reactive character of the *piqueteros*: '*piqueteros* and indigenous movements would act much less as proactive protagonists of change than as social forces primarily reacting to the dynamics of macro-political change and continuity' (Wolff, 2007: 23). Social movements and their massive mobilization have given way to 'their vulnerability to division and clientelist integration' (Wolff, 2007: 10). This 'integration' reinforces their complementary character vis-a-vis capitalist relations and the state.

Wolff outlines four criteria through which the reactive character of the *piqueteros* get highlighted. He points out that the exercise of direct democracy and radical mobilization turn out to be more territorial than political. First is the substance of claims and political character of the movement. It lacks a 'positive' proposal in terms of formulating political alternatives at the national level. Thus 'their significance as political actors is largely confined to a prohibitive (veto) power, on the one hand, and to an enforcing power regarding their concrete (material) demands, on the other' (Wolff, 2007: 13). The local level 'positive', pragmatist claims made on the existing state meant their lack of a positive proposal at the macro level chimed well with their clientelist attachment to the state. This feature severely limits the emergence of a specifically political subjectivity.

Second, the prominence of the territory and the local community: 'while the unemployed movement certainly drew on the experiences of the (functionally defined) Argentine labour movement, the concrete mobilization processes emerged from the poor and marginalized (sub-)urban spaces – the *barríos* and *asentamientos*' (Wolff, 2007: 14). Most notable are local solidarities based on 'collective occupation of land to build housing, self-administration of certain public services, organization of nurseries, soup kitchens and communal health centres, etc.' (Wolff, 2007: 14). This local community-centred activity means 'the *piqueteros*' prime interest has remained the call for state-funded social assistance and employment programmes along with concrete community projects' (Wolff, 2007: 15).

Third, 'the reliance on participatory, 'horizontal' mechanisms of debate and decision-making (at least, at the grass-roots level)' (Wolff, 2007: 17). Since, however, such horizontal practices are so invested in the 'community' they are not generalizable to the country as a whole even though

they can be replicated elsewhere in the same form: no new political form emerges which can challenge the structures and processes of the existing state. Instead, local community and grass-roots organizations display 'a reliance on (charismatic) political leaders, patterns of personalized/populist rule and clientelist practices that are well-known from 'traditional' political parties and social organizations' (Wolff, 2007: 17).

And fourth, the form of protest that is again local, like the technique of blocking highways and roads (Wolff, 2007: 17). In itself this form of protest can lead to deeper crisis for the regime as a whole and yet given that the concerns are limited to the local community, this becomes a means to pressurize the government to fulfil concrete local demands. Once the demand is met, such a protest is withdrawn – it can repeat itself but again with the same limitations. Dinerstein (2008: 234) on the other hand has a far more positive account of the road blocks 'not only as a battlefield against the military police but also the place for expressions of solidarity, connections, organization, decision making, communication, negotiation and recomposition of identities'.

The points above take us back even further to the question of worker's power in the Latin American context. More crucially for our analysis here is the question whether such new forms of workers' power (*piqueteros*, protagonistic democracy) can potentially break with the political form of the bourgeois state and bring the working class as an independent political actor. Writes Gonzalez (1987: 61): in Chile in the 1970s, 'the struggle to defeat the bosses' strike had brought the Chilean working class on to the political stage as an independent actor'. Even though

sadly this did not mean that the working class was preparing for the seizure of power under revolutionary leadership, the workers' *cordones* in Chile during the 1970s were exemplary; no less significant are the *piqueteros* in Argentina and the communal councils in Venezuela. (Gonzalez, 1987: 61)

Exemplary yes, but where did it end up? Thus in Chile, 'the Coordinating Committee [of the *cordones*] which could so easily have been an embryonic form of working class power became instead a political faction inside the Socialist Party' (Gonzalez, 1987: 68). Thus such working class self-activity often remains either an isolated practice unable to challenge the system and withdraw from state power (autonomist), or gets mobilized by progressive state factions or a revolutionary party to ultimately reinforce the capitalist state, albeit with some radical reforms here and there (Chavismo?). Such have been the problems with the worker cooperatives in Argentina in the 1990s and worker's power in Chile in 1970s.¹¹ Venezuela today seems close to this Chilean experience even though Chavez's willingness to use state power to defend the revolutionary process and Allende's historic unwillingness to do so structures the two very differently.¹² One wonders which way things will go for the *barrios* attempting 'to take socialism beyond Chavez' and whether they are learning something from the experience of the workers *cordones* in Chile.

Conclusion: Workers' Self-Activity and State Power

As we saw, Lebowitz's conception of revolutionary practice and indeed the practice of protagonistic democracy involves social production directed towards the needs of the community and based on relations of solidarity, as against capitalist exchange. This is no doubt a very rich notion of politics as it includes the actual concrete functioning of (a socialist) society and economy, the organization of consumption and production, also including what Marx and Engels knew as the 'administration of things'.¹³ Such an 'embedded' or 'grounded' notion of politics challenges the notion of revolutionary subjectivity proposed by left theorists like Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière who emphasize politics (pure politics, pure subjectivity) as distinct from the administration of things. Their positions come out sharply in Zizek's critique: 'We should thus ultimately also abandon the

distinction, proposed by Rancière, between politics proper (the rise to universality of the singular “part of no-part”) and police (the administration of social affairs), or Badiou’s homologous distinction between politics as fidelity to an Event and policing as “servicing the goods” of a society...’ (Zizek, 2010: 199–200). In other words, while upholding a radical subjectivity whose radicalism cannot be blunted by referring to the actual conditions, or the practical situation, the two theorists tend to slide into the realm of pure politics and abstract subjectivity.

Lebowitz’s self-transforming revolutionary practice and social economy can be seen as a corrective to such pure political subjectivity. He, however, has the opposite problem. In upholding activity, production of goods and services and the fulfilment of human needs supposedly outside of the relations of capitalist exchange he is, as we saw, unable to carry forward the socialist principle in the specifically political realm, to the question of political subjectivity. This is partly reflected in his observation above that an economic revolution has occurred but a political revolution is lagging behind in Venezuela – in other words, the communal councils and social production do not, for all their socialist solidarity, emerge as the organs of working class political power. They tend to ‘democratize decision making’ in the immediacy of the factory floor or the neighbourhood council but this process is not generalized to organize against unequal power and class relations at the macro level for the country as a whole – in short, the moment of politics proper never arrives.

We of course saw that the political problem is displaced into the problem of coordinated production, of making sure that firms without social production do not go against the needs of the community. But this is nothing less than attempting a technocratic fix (albeit a progressive one with protagonistic democracy and so on) to a problem which is essentially a political question, related to capitalist relations of production and whose highest and general interests are served by the state as an institution. Further the emphasis on ‘revolutionary democracy’, on the fact that decision-making is socialized, means that there is tremendous pressure upon ‘ordinary people’ to put in a bit too much to make up for what are actually macro level imbalances and problems that no amount of protagonist democracy can solve.

Democratizing decision-making, the community collectively deciding on its needs, is not a problem at all and in fact is something which revolutionary movements must develop – the art of the administration of things. However, the point is to see that the decisions that the community takes are not separate from the wider socio-economic and political relations. Over-emphasis on democratizing decisions within the community can mean that we are unable to see how radical elements like the 23 de Enero *barrio* despite being in a minority can push the entire movement forward against the inequalities and the congealed state forms. And this often happens without consensus, without democratically putting the radical proposals to majority vote and yet the results can be acceptable to the wide majority of the people – only showing that so-called minority radical positions emerge through a far more embedded process of inner contradiction and class struggle so that its acceptability is not dependent on formal democratic decision-making, voting and the like. In fact, putting a proposal to the test of formal democratic voting or consensus can be, but of course is not always, the mark of an abstract proposal or blueprint – something which has not emerged through a general movement of the people, political struggle, inner contradiction and differentiation.

Thus a revolutionary subjectivity challenging the macro level social matrix (the very logic of capital) need not necessarily be some Kantian abstract subjectivity. Revolutionary subjectivity need not necessarily be abstracted from the interstices of power and social relations. From our standpoint here, Butler (Butler et al., 2000: 25) therefore gets it wrong when she opposes such a subjectivity as succumbing to Kantian formalism. Rather it is merely emphasizing local struggle and territorial and community democracy which is a Kantian approach, since this abstracts from the wider matrix of social relations in which these struggles are embedded and constitutively

formed – a point which Žižek makes in the same volume.¹⁴ Is Lebowitz therefore a Kantian in this sense of overlooking how, at a macro level, capitalist relations and the form of the bourgeois state reduce protagonistic democracy and the social economy to being merely complementary and subsidiary?

Hence the struggle must be understood and placed not in local or regional terms but, as Marx and Engels (2003 [1848]: 9–10) put it in the *Communist Manifesto*, keeping in mind ‘the interests of the movement as a whole’ and ‘clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement’.

Notes

- 1 The title refers to a statement made by Javier Biardeau (2009).
- 2 Paul d’Amato (2003) sharply makes this point about the powerlessness of Holloway’s anti-power. However, D’Amato’s reliance on the revolutionary potential of using the existing state power seems reformist and not really Marxist. One reason for this is that he does not tell us if there is a different way of approaching ‘anti-power’, the ‘movement from below’, which takes us to popular, proletarian subjectivity and political power not just outside of (for this can merely mean complementary) but in active confrontation with the bourgeois state form – precisely that which then stops Marxism’s emphasis on state power from fetishizing state power, or for that matter slipping into reformism.
- 3 This practice of abstracting neoliberalism away from class relations and locating it in an externalized reified source comes close to another such dominant practice of locating it in say some group of greedy and bad-intentioned individuals. Thus for Naomi Klein (2007), neoliberalism is to be sourced to the ‘market fundamentalist’ ‘Chicago Boys’ and their greed and violence. There is a refusal to place neoliberalism in the context of capitalist relations. As Joshua Sperber (2007) points out, ‘Her focus on [Milton] Friedman, John Williamson, Jeffrey Sachs, and other economists, described as the self-serving ideologues they undoubtedly are, attributes the triumph of neo-liberalism to little more than the force of will of certain individuals—an incongruously conservative theory of historical transformation by an apparent radical.’
- 4 Toussaint (2010) writes, ‘the capitalist sector has increased faster than the public sector and is still predominant in Venezuela’s economy despite the nationalizations’. Further, ‘the capitalist sector continues siphoning most of the money spent by the state to help the poor or middle-income sectors of the population’.
- 5 Jameson (2009: 216) adds further, ‘alongside our conscious praxis and our strategies for producing change, we may also take a more receptive and interpretive stance in which, with the proper instruments and registering apparatus, we may detect the allegorical stirrings of a different state of things, the imperceptible and even immemorial ripenings of the seeds of time, the subliminal and subcutaneous eruptions of whole new forms of life and social relations’.
- 6 Real thinking does not think ‘positive terms’. Badiou puts it thus, ‘philosophy thinks thought alone’. Badiou is, however, far from upholding the Leninist approach on political subjectivity (Badiou, 2005: 53).
- 7 The relationship of exteriority is better understood vis-a-vis internal relations. For the ‘philosophy of internal relations’ see the writings of Bertell Ollman.
- 8 This is an intervention from the Miranda International Centre, funded by and close to Chavez (Toussaint, 2010).
- 9 There is another counterpart to this displacement of the political question, trying to get a progressive left or ultimately populist-technocratic fix for the revolution. Thus in Lander (2008: 89) the question becomes one of sustaining endogenous development, ‘the extent to which the social economy and the activities associated with endogenous development in general become an increasingly autonomous process of accumulation’.
- 10 Holloway too critiques the alternative solidarity economy as being merely complementary to capitalist production. However, his problem with this economy is not that it does not involve the dynamic of political subjectivity and political power but that it ‘imposes a definition on the organization of activities’, impairing self-determination from below and so on (Holloway, 2010: 69–70).

- 11 Worker's cooperatives in Argentina received wide attention. See for example the film, *The Take* (Lewis, 2006).
- 12 James Petras (2008) points out that the willingness to use state power in order to defend 'popular democratic rule' is what sharply distinguishes Chavez the 'political realist' from Allende the constitutionalist.
- 13 Alberto Toscano (undated) draws attention to this aspect of organizing and providing for community needs, from garbage collection to provision for food and water and so on. 'The rethinking and exercise of dual power' must recognize that 'the separation of an autonomous political capacity and the generation of new types of power (whether revolutionary, conservative or reactionary) cannot bypass the dimension of the production and reproduction of social life – in short, the question of survival'.
- 14 Asserting that it is not he but 'Butler and Laclau who are secret Kantians', Zizek writes, 'they both propose an abstract a priori model (of hegemony, of gender performativity ...) which allows, for the full contingency (no guarantee of what the outcome of the fight for hegemony will be, no last reference to the sexual constitution ...); they both involve a logic of "spurious infinity": no final resolution, just the endless process of complex partial displacements' (Butler et al., 2000: 111).

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