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The Bolivarian Process in Venezuela: A Left Forum

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Abstract
The 'Bolivarian Revolution' in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez has reignited debate in Latin America and internationally on the questions of socialism and revolution. This forum brings together six leading intellectuals from different revolutionary traditions and introduces their reflections on class-struggle, the state, imperialism, counter-power, revolutionary parties, community and communes, workplaces, economy, politics, society, culture, race, gender, and the hopes, contradictions, and prospects of 'twenty-first-century socialism' in contemporary Venezuela.

Keywords
Venezuela, twenty-first-century socialism, revolution, Bolivarian, Hugo Chávez

Introduction

Hugo Chávez assumed the presidential office of Venezuela in February 1999 after a decisive victory in the December 1998 elections. Over a decade into the Bolivarian process of social and political change, it is incumbent upon the international Left to step back and reflect on the images and realities of Chavismo, and to move beyond simplistic analyses that turn on the figure of Chávez himself.

There is little doubt that Venezuela's opposition to US-imperialism in Latin America in recent years, and the government's declared commitment to 'twenty-first-century socialism' since 2005, have captured the imagination of many activists around the world. The Bolivarian phenomenon has fuelled debate on what form socialism might take in today's context, not just in Venezuela, but in other parts of the world. Whatever the depth and character

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of the substantive change introduced by the Bolivarian process to the social, political, and economic landscape of the country, few doubt that it has contributed to a renewal of strategic and tactical debate around the significance and possibility of revolution and socialism – words hardly uttered outside small far-left circles in Latin America during the highpoint of the neoliberal epoch in the 1980s and 1990s.

Venezuelan political dynamics have thrown up a range of fundamental questions of import to critical, non-dogmatic Marxism. Which class- and other social forces exercise hegemony within the composition of the Chavista movement and government? In the new terrain of social struggles, have territorially based community-movements outpaced workers' power at the point of production? In socio-cultural terms, to what extent have the ruptures with the old ways of doing politics fostered challenges to longstanding forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia in Venezuela? In the sphere of economics, few would argue that there has been a revolutionary transformation of social-property relations and class-structures in Venezuela, but what might be the transitional moves necessary to lead the process in that direction? Is the multiclass-coalition at the base of the Chavista project sustainable or subject to implosion as its internal contradictions rise to the surface? How have the ongoing mutations of the world-economic crisis had an impact upon the Venezuelan social formation?

This forum brings together six leading intellectuals, representing a variety of revolutionary traditions, with different perspectives on the principal social forces behind the Bolivarian process and its key tensions and synergies. Our conversation focuses on the dynamics of workplace- and community-struggles, the characteristics of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV), the rôle and character of the state, advances and setbacks in the realm of the economy, and the dynamics of imperialism vis-à-vis the Bolivarian process. While it is impossible to present the full spectrum of Marxist debate on such questions, the contributions included here bring to light some of the crucial insights and controversies of classical interpretations of Marx's critique of political economy in the Venezuelan context, autonomist-Marxist perspectives on social and political transformation, Marxist-feminist and anti-racist analyses of the conjuncture, opposing views on the rôle of political leadership, revolutionary subjects, and Marxist conceptualisations of the state, and, finally, diverse understandings of the revolutionary-socialist possibilities in Venezuela today.

Brief political timeline

1989: Increases in fuel-costs related to the neoliberal austerity-programme spark social revolt known as the *Caracazo* in which hundreds, possibly thousands, of civilians are killed by the military and police.

1992: Chávez leads unsuccessful coup-attempt against Carlos Pérez; spends two years in prison.

1998: Chávez wins landslide-victory in December's presidential elections.

1999: Chávez sworn-in as President on the second of February.

1999: On December 15, 72 per cent of voters approve a new constitution establishing the Fifth Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

2002: Massive street-protests in support of Chávez help to restore him to office within 48 hours after a CIA-backed coup on April 11.

2002–3: A nine-week strike from mid-December to end of February called by the opposition labour-federation, the CTV, and business-leaders cripples the oil-industry, the mainstay of the Venezuelan economy; the strike is defeated by community-mobilisations, rank-and-file oil-workers, and soldiers.

2004: Chávez wins a referendum on his rule called by the opposition with the backing of 59 per cent of electorate.

2005: Parties allied to Chávez win all 167 seats in the National Assembly; elections boycotted by the opposition; Chávez declares the Bolivarian process to be socialist at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

2007: First electoral defeat of the Chávez government when a referendum to reform sixty-nine articles of the constitution is rejected narrowly by voters.

2008: The PSUV holds first congress, replacing the Fifth-Republic Movement (Movimiento V [Quinta] República, MVR).

2009: The second constitutional referendum to abolish presidential term-limits passes on February 15 with 54 per cent of the votes.

2010: Congressional elections scheduled for September 26.

1. What are the principal social forces driving the Bolivarian process and its promised transition to a new kind of socialism? More specifically, what is the relative importance of territorially based community-struggles and forms of organisation, as compared with traditional forms of struggle and organisation in the workplaces, at the point of production?

Thomas Purcell (TP): To my mind, the principal social force, and the defining characteristic of the Bolivarian Revolution, are the previously marginalised groups. Their social, political and economic inclusion through communal councils, cooperatives, and the missions is integral to the dynamism of the project. Indeed, the manner in which the Bolivarian Revolution seeks to harness the political and economic power of the state in the interests of excluded and marginalised Venezuelans is integral to the *Chavismo*-phenomenon and the declaration of a so-called twenty-first-century socialism in 2005. However, it must be recognised that a complex web of groups from across the country, rural and urban, constitute this process, and their notions of a new kind of socialism are far from homogenous. In this respect, rather than socialism being a pre-defined destination or plan, it seems to function much more as a malleable concept or political point of departure in recognition of years of neglect and exclusion of the majority of the population.

At the level of agency on the ground, reflecting upon my experiences with Venezuelan cooperatives, one of the most striking features of the Bolivarian process is the central rôle played by women. As I found out, this has a twofold implication. First of all, the government should be lauded for its initiatives to provide skills, education, opportunities and finance through social initiatives such as Misión Vuelvan Caras (literally 'Mission About-Face') and Banco de la Mujer [Women's Development-Bank]. These have given many women the opportunity to work in newly formed cooperatives and develop skills for employment elsewhere. However, this does not account for why many remaining cooperatives, despite equal numbers of men and women at the start of the process, are largely female-dominated. This can be explained, in part, by the way an oil-boom creates internal demand for non-tradables, such as construction which grew 159.4 per cent from 2003 to 2008. This creates a demand for informal labour, drawing young men out of the cooperatives into booming sectors. Wages in cooperatives, especially agricultural ones, are relatively low compared to work that can found, when available, in the private sector.

Regarding the second part of this question, an innovation of the endogenous-development project – Venezuela's contemporary strategy to invest oil-wealth

in marginalised sectors of the economy such as agriculture – has been the territorially demarcated areas known as Zones of Endogenous Development [Núcleos de Desarrollo Endógeno, NDEs]. Described as 'productive spaces that take advantage of the potentialities of each region to promote dynamic local and territorial development', NDEs can be comprised of numerous local cooperatives organised on distinct 'battle-fronts' to raise the quality of life of the local population. The principal idea is that within and through NDEs, cooperatives can integrate activities, adding value through economies of scale, and thereby produce, distribute, and commercialise goods while avoiding the traditional problems of intermediary-commercial or usury-capital. This kind of initiative puts into perspective the applicability of 'traditional' forms of struggle at the point of production, a conceptual category that cannot easily be transposed to social conditions where marginalisation characterises the living-conditions and material reproduction of the majority of the population. Thus new mechanisms and projects have been developed from within [*endógeno*] as a necessity.

George Ciccariello-Maher (GC-M): This is a complex question, one which encompasses the entire character of the Bolivarian process, its constituent elements, and its dynamics. Put differently, it is not enough to merely understand which forces represent which tendencies; we must also understand how they enter into play with one another, and what dynamic alliances or conflicts they generate. To do this, we must first take a step back and ask: what are the most important elements of the Bolivarian process? And we must then ask which of the existing forces either embody these elements or push forward their development and maturation.

The Bolivarian Revolution is not merely about a strictly-economic transition toward socialism. If anything, such a strict 'socialism' could be understood as the 'old' socialism against which this 'new kind' of socialism stands, or what has been called in the Venezuelan context 'Twenty-First-Century Socialism'. What is underway in Venezuela is a far more thoroughgoing process of *decolonisation*, or the construction of a decolonial socialism in the vein of Peruvian communist José Carlos Mariátegui.

Like Mariátegui, we must therefore seek to understand the specific Latin-American and Venezuelan context of the struggle underway. This means recognising, firstly, that global structures of economic dependency have distorted the Venezuelan social structure, giving rise to a massively bloated state (all the more so due to the prevalence of the oil-economy) and the corruption, bureaucracy, and urbanisation that this entails. Secondly, it means recognising that the Venezuelan class-structure is far from what is assumed in

European-Marxist theories: the formal, industrial working class is small, and exists alongside a considerable (but shrinking) peasant-class, as well as a massive (and growing) class of informal labourers.

So, already in this question, the suggestion that 'traditional forms of struggle' are located at the point of production is one that proves an ill fit for the Venezuelan context. Rather, our sights must be adjusted to comprehend both the centrality of the state and the specifics of the Venezuelan class-structure (to which we must add a more substantive understanding of the relationship between race and class). Once we do so, we begin to realise that the Bolivarian process is one which seeks to radically transform the state, and this transformation is at least as important as transformations occurring on an economic register.

To do so requires that we think differently about what such a transformation would *look like*. It is no longer sufficient (if it ever was) for the state to seize heavy industry, since it is that state itself which is the object of revolutionary energies. From an economic question, this becomes a question of *power*, and specifically I like to think of this in terms of Lenin's concept of 'dual power', of generating an alternative power outside the state capable of transforming and, ultimately, abolishing that state (here, the progression is considerably different from Lenin's formulation, but I do not have space to fully delineate these differences).

From this view follows the relationship between territorial and economic forms of dual power. As I have said, the point-of-production is not sufficient in Venezuela (or arguably anywhere, for that matter). What is required is the unification of workplace- and territorial struggles, among others. So far, the territorial has come first, with progress in the communal councils progressing further and faster than in workers' councils.

Sujatha Fernandes (SF): The answer depends on how you define the Bolivarian process, or the '*proceso*', as it is called in Venezuela. I go along with the definition given by the novelist and community-journalist José Roberto Duque, who defines the *proceso* as a parallel and underground movement that defends the Chávez government, but which has its own trajectory independent of directives from the central government. In that case, I would see the principal social forces as the urban and rural community-based organisations, peasant-movement, community-media groups, occupied factories, land-committees and so on who are at the heart of the Bolivarian process, although not always recognised as such. Territorial or place-based struggles, in the *barrio* or parish, in the rural community, have come to play a much more important strategic rôle than traditional trade-unions, which, in many cases, have been

either taken over by the Right or bureaucratised to the point of being ineffective in channelling demands of their members.

Sara Motta (SM): The question suggests a false dichotomy between struggles organised around the point of production and those around social reproduction. This dichotomy has been reproduced in much Marxian critique which understands the capital-relation as a relationship of production, and therefore sees as secondary struggles around social reproduction. If we look at the question from the perspective of overcoming the way capitalism mystifies the internal connections within these two spheres, then we can begin to understand the capital-relation as the construction of alienated social relationships in both spheres which have resulted in a dualism between mind and body, public and private, and gendered binaries which internally divide the proletarian subject from itself. Thus, the principal driver of the development of a new kind of socialism is the popular classes attempting to create forms of self-government which reunite this subject and therefore overcome the alienation of our creative capacities in all the spheres we inhabit; the political, the economic, the social and the subjective. Importantly this involves transcending 'old' forms of politics based on relationships of representation in which people's intellectual and political powers are delegated to a minority in a party or the state, and instead forging processes of mass-intellectuality.

More concretely, both the developmentalist period and the neoliberal period in Venezuela produced uneven development in which a great mass of the popular classes were/are in the periphery of informality as opposed to the formal sectors of the economy. Thus, place-based struggles have been, and are, key-sites of popular-class struggle and political articulation.

Additionally, Venezuela's urban masses have a healthy mistrust of representative forms of politics, formed out of experience, struggle and reflection. For many, the experience of the Punto-Fijo system (1958–99) was one of political, social and economic exclusion. This exclusion occurred within a context of a party-system and a 'democratic'-representative state and régime. It is from such experiences that the mistrust of political parties and representative politics becomes both a rational and logical political response. This political orientation also stems from the popular classes' experiences of struggle, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, for rights to health, housing, and sanitation, in which the rôle of local community-organisation and the influence of liberation-theology and popular education was marked.

These experiences of exclusion and of political struggle have given a participatory dynamic to the current political process. The procedures and practices of this process often develop in ways which place emphasis on direct,

as opposed to representative, democracy, and on territorialised forms of institutionality in which new cultures, logics and grammars of democratic practice and subjectivity are emerging.

Steve Ellner (SE): Community-based struggles and programmes have been a primary component of the Chávez experience during these eleven-and-a-half years. From the outset, Chávez's social base of support consisted of the unorganised sectors of the population, such as those of the informal economy, rural sectors and employees of small non-unionised firms, not so much the organised working class. Chávez, both before and after coming to power, expressed reservations about the vanguard-rôle of the working class.

Chávez achieved greater working-class support after the failed general strike promoted by the opposition in 2002–3. In 2005, Chávez expropriated several medium-sized companies and turned them over to the workers at the same time that the government promoted worker-participation in several big state-run companies, specifically in the aluminium-company ALCASA. These efforts, however, were not sustained and the results were mixed.

Since 2009, the government has made renewed efforts to promote worker-participation in the numerous companies that have been expropriated. At the level of discourse, Chávez for the first time recognises the lead-rôle of the working class in the revolutionary process. This change in emphasis, I believe, is related to the appreciation of the Marxist view of agency, namely that the proletariat, because of its concentration and productive capacity, has a greater consciousness-potential than other non-privileged sectors. The change of emphasis is also related to the fact that the community-based programmes such as the cooperatives and the community-councils have not been a resounding success, though they have represented an important learning-experience and, in the case of the community-councils, many have proved to be viable. Another reason for the greater emphasis on the working class is the need to ensure the well-functioning of state-run companies and to avoid the Soviet experience of a management-worker divide. Some state-companies have suffered from poor management which has become increasingly evident. This has been the case with the electricity-sector and has been partly responsible for serious electricity-shortages in 2009 and 2010, with major political ramifications.

Michael A. Lebowitz (ML): The first thing to recognise is that poverty, mass-exclusion and anger have existed in Venezuela for many years. Similarly, many community- and political organisations attempted to organise people even after the *Caracazo* in 1989, but they did not succeed. The detonator of this

explosive process has been Chávez. His starting point was that a third way was possible, but, in the context of capitalists' attempts to overthrow him, he has moved increasingly to articulate a socialist perspective, which has received an enormous response from the people. In this sense, the relationship between Chávez and the masses is a dialectical one: you can see the electricity flow in both directions when Chávez speaks in public to the poor.

The process does not follow the classic picture of Marxist arguments where the industrial working class rises up and takes the lead, because the working class in the formal sector is very small. The leading economic sector, the oil-industry, is not very labour-intensive. As such, the organised working class largely exists in the public sector and the processing sectors, such as in auto-assembly, which is dependent on imported parts. This reflects the nature of the Venezuelan economy, which exports oil and imports almost everything else. For example, 70 per cent of food is imported. One should also note that the organised working class has very high incomes relative to the mass of the population. One of the major struggles within the organised working class is therefore the struggle against economism. Workers struggling for worker-management, as in the ALCASA-case under the leadership of Carlos Lanz, for example, have had to take on the traditional unions which have been oriented primarily towards gaining increased wages for their members in a context where these workers are already a privileged group relative to the vast majority of the population.

In many ways, the community-struggles have been the most significant part of the process. In Caracas and elsewhere, communities have been established by migrants from the countryside on public lands and have organised themselves, a process that is very well described in the book by Iain Bruce, *The Real Venezuela*. These communities have their own traditions of organisation, but they were stimulated by the proposal to establish land-committees put forward by the Chávez government, largely, I think, thanks to the initiative of Maria Cristina Iglesias, who was one of the real thinkers behind this process (and is long-serving minister of labour). The communities built the health-committees and water-tables alongside these urban land-committees, which later laid the basis for the formation of the communal councils launched in 2005. These community-struggles have been essential to the process because of the large informal sector and the high degree of poverty; unorganised workers are being reached in the communal sector.

Roland Denis (RD): The initial social forces, at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, were basically urban-popular movements of the anti-neoliberal resistance and the student-movement that pushed forward the

Bolivarian process in its first phase. The labour-movement was extremely weak, playing almost no rôle in this period. The peasant-movement played a small part, but was also relatively insignificant.

After the arrival of Chávez in power in 1999, the first nodes of more coherent social organisations began to take shape. Again, the basis was the urban-popular movements, but they began to develop much-more coherent demands. And the rôle played by the labour-, peasant-, fisher-, and indigenous movements began to pick up as well. They began formulating new sets of demands, and struggled for the vindication of their basic rights. This was the second phase of the Bolivarian process which lasted until roughly 2004. The end of this second phase was the climactic point of the process in terms of the capacity of the popular classes for mobilisation and self-organisation, capacity for combat, for the defence of the totality of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Since 2004, there has been a counter-offensive by the state. The government had defeated the reactionary fascist oligarchy, and a space was therefore opened up for the advance of a new bureaucracy, which, with each passing day, began to act ever more in its own interests, rooting itself in the apparatuses of power. This bureaucracy has encircled the figure of Chávez in the presidency, and feeds off the cult of personality. In this third phase, the capacity for self-organisation and mobilisation was diminished.

2. What are the tensions and synergies that emerge in the process in articulating the forces 'from above' and 'from below'? For example, what has been the rôle of the state in creating or closing the space(s) for the exercise of 'popular power' in the community and in the workplace?

ML: Here, we get into the question of what we mean by 'the state'. The Venezuelan state is fundamentally a non-functioning, capitalist state – and a really bad capitalist state at that – that sabotages the projects of the government. One of the fundamental challenges facing the Chávez government has been the fact that the state-sector is largely populated by people who were hired in by the previous governments with ironclad contracts. Due to progression through the ranks, public servants with twenty years of service are getting a good wage that they could not possibly earn anywhere else. Many of these workers are either sabotaging explicitly the projects of the government, or they are simply incompetent because they were hired on the basis of clientelism. So, the state fails to deliver. And the problem is not only the oppositionists: the deep culture of clientelism and corruption infects Chavistas as well. So,

people get enthused about the initiatives that Chávez announces and then are eventually disappointed by a state that does something entirely different from what Chávez is calling for. When this happens, it breeds apathy and cynicism.

For example, in Ciudad Guayana, an industrial centre in Venezuela, workers were brought together from various sectors (e.g. aluminium-processing, the steel-industry, etc.) to talk about the process of creating a socialist plan. Work-tables were established in which workers developed plans that were then presented in a large meeting in May attended by Chávez and several of his ministers. The workers presented their demands for worker-management, including getting rid of the managers opposed to the process and nationalising a lot of the private suppliers, which they understood to be ripping off the state-sectors. Chávez sat there with an absolutely straight face, just taking notes, and then responded that, 'We accept all those demands'. He listed the companies to be nationalised and told the workers to come up with a socialist plan within two months. There were some excellent meetings in ALCASA and also between different companies.

Workers from different companies would talk to each other about how they could rationalise their operations. They came up with solutions about how something in one production-line could be used as an output for another line, etc., possibilities that had never been explored before. Unfortunately, these plans were completely stonewalled by the managers. Workers started to get restless. Chávez called a televised cabinet-meeting in July to talk about that socialist plan. At one point during this meeting, Chávez said, 'We have to proceed on this because what we have is state-capitalism and without workers' control you can't have socialism.' It is a wonderful statement. Now, the old directors are out and the workers selected Elio Sayago, an excellent leader from Marea Socialista, from their own ranks as president of ALCASA. However, he is now under strong attack by Chavista trade-union people, who are linked to the governor, a Chavista general who is rumoured to be connected with the old managers and to the mafias that feed off the state. So, the struggle continues.

SM: During the Punto-Fijo period (1958–98), there were countless communities from the urban and rural majority that organised politically, combining influences from the revolutionary Left, liberation-theology and popular education. Making this history visible enables us to engage with the complexities of popular-class political articulation and how this impacts upon the relationship between the 'revolution from above' emanating from the state and that 'from below' within popular-class communities.

Chavismo as a political force within the state is not the engine of a new type of revolution; rather, this is to be found in communities' histories and experiences of struggle. Nevertheless, Chavismo, emanating from the state, has always contained dynamics which had the potential to both facilitate processes of popular power by encouraging a decentralisation of power and a plurality of experiments with territorial self-government, whilst also controlling these networks through centralising power. However, the balance between the two logics has increasingly shifted towards the latter. Even when Chávez began to systematise a series of social, economic and political programmes to empower the 'poor', they contained a contradictory dynamic which, on the one hand, could work to open spaces of popular politicisation, and, on the other, act to reinforce the political fragmentation and dependency of the popular classes. These latent contradictions were manifested in the different realities of how government-resources, programmes and institutions were developed. Some of the most innovative forms of self-government, educational practices and political cultures developed in communities with histories of autonomous struggle, particularly in relation to education-programmes and the Urban Land Committees [Comités de Tierra Urbana, CTUs]. Health-missions, for example, had a tendency to fragment and depoliticise struggles around health, as their orientation was to provide basic services through the training of past militants as community-nurses/practitioners. In communities with little history of political struggle, the old politics of clientelistic and disempowering relationships was often reproduced.

The growing bureaucratisation of the political elements of Chavismo as they have become embedded within the logic of the capitalist state has acted as a break on the development of organic relationships with the 'people' and often meant that the logic of governability and power dominates their actions, even when many have emerged from these histories of popular struggle. The productive elements of the relationship between 'from above' and 'from below' which were present until 2006 have now stagnated as processes of dependency of communities upon the state, the fragmentation and division of organised communities, and the logic of bureaucratisation of the political sections of Chavismo have become dominant. Whilst there are many communities and individuals who continue to work towards the creation of autonomous spaces of popular power, the state's logic, with exceptions, closes the spaces of possibility for these processes' consolidation and expansion.

GC-M: Tensions and synergies do not *emerge* in the process: the process is nothing more than the ensemble of these creative tensions, central among

which is the tension between the 'from above' and the 'from below' (and, we could add, the dynamic tension and conflict between these two and the anti-Chavista opposition). These three elements constantly interact and generate the process that we know today.

But even the framework of 'from above' and the 'from below' is too simplistic, as is any singular view of the Venezuelan state. What we have seen instead are certain forces operating in a top-down fashion to foster an alliance with those forces working for radical change from the bottom-up. Much of the time, Chávez himself plays this rôle, and this alliance challenges the power of entrenched bureaucrats, whether they are in the central-government bureaucracy, state-governors, or local mayors. Between the 'from above' and the 'from below' stands this threatening and corrupt middle-sector.

SF: Chávez has always had a strong personal connection with the masses, but he has been less successful in creating enduring institutions that could articulate forces from above and from below. The Chávez government attempted to build links between state and society through the MVR, which proved to be bureaucratic, hierarchical, and removed from the lives of ordinary people. Given the failures of the MVR, Chávez tried to promote local units of participation, such as the Bolivarian Circles [Círculos Bolivarianos, CBs], Units of Electoral Battle [Unidades de Batalla Electoral, UBE], Units of Social Battle [Unidades de Batalla Social, UBSs]. But, while these groups originally facilitated popular participation, they were eventually taken over by political parties and institutions, and the transfer of power to the local level that some groups hoped for did not happen.

The state has played a rôle in opening spaces for the exercise of popular power. With Chávez in office, the platform and resources given to social movements has allowed them to expand the scope of their activities and build their mass-membership. But, at the same time, there has been a degree of demobilisation, as people are encouraged to come out in rallies supporting Chávez and his initiatives under the overarching banner of Chavismo, with less emphasis being put on developing movements with 'their own set of references', as one organiser put it.

SE: Mainstream-political analysis of Venezuela consistently played down the importance of the rank and file, particularly in the labour-movement, and instead emphasised the hegemony of political parties throughout the modern period. In doing so, it distorted the past. Under Chávez, the Chavista rank and file has played a key-rôle as independent actors. The rank and file has

been characterised by ongoing mobilisations which have been essential for the political survival of the government, participation in social programmes and critical, independent thinking.

Nevertheless, Venezuela is not Bolivia or Ecuador. The autonomous social movements in those two nations have no equivalent in Venezuela, where Chavista popular organisations have been short-lived. In addition, the state has used oil-derived revenue to jump-start the movement of worker-cooperatives and community-councils taking in hundreds of thousands of underprivileged Venezuelans. So, the process of transformation in Venezuela has had both a bottom-up and top-bottom dynamic.

Ever since the Chávez government defined itself as socialist in 2005, the Venezuelan Left has intensely debated the character of the state and strategies of revolutionary transformation. One (or actually several) currents consider the state-bureaucracy *per se* as 'counterrevolutionary', and invoke Chávez's reference to the need for a 'revolution within the revolution'. Many Chavistas attribute the diverse problems that the movement faces to the 'bureaucracy' and view the dismantlement of the bureaucracy as a panacea. The 'counter-revolutionary' bureaucrats take in most of the ministers, and most, if not all, of the Chavista governors and mayors.

Few who are familiar with Venezuelan politics would deny that the state-bureaucracy has held back the process of change and, in many ways, has contributed to the recent wave of disillusionment among many government-supporters. In the first place, members of the state-bureaucracy have used their resources and privileges within the PSUV to block the rank and file's efforts to put forth critical positions within the Party, thus dampening the spirits of many Chavista activists. In the second place, corruption is widespread, although the government since late 2009 has moved decisively by issuing arrest-orders against corrupt bankers tied to the state-sector and others accused of unethical conduct. In the third place, the Chavistas have also failed to check clientelistic practices which have always been widespread in Venezuela. Given the aggressiveness of the opposition and much of the anti-Chavista middle class, clientelism is an understandable government-response. Loyalty becomes an imperative. But clientelism does much to undermine state-efficiency in that competence often becomes a secondary consideration.

The debate between those who call for 'smashing the bourgeois state' and those who favour a Gramscian-type 'war-of-position' strategy has to take into consideration subjective conditions. If you talk to people on the ground, including the poor who have been involved in the cooperative- and community-council movements, they will tell you that a large number of these formations (especially the cooperatives) failed, and much money was squandered because

people were not prepared in any sense, including politically. They also often say that the state should have created greater controls. These observations go counter to the radical 'bottom-up' line which holds the state-bureaucracy responsible for these failures in that the bureaucrats discourage greater participation.

There is another telling example of the lag in subjective conditions. The PSUV-primaries have provided the rank and file with a golden opportunity to assert itself and check the power of the 'bureaucrats', even with the considerable resources at their disposal. Yet, the slates which the governors and mayors have pushed in these internal elections have generally, though certainly not always, triumphed. The discontented members of the rank and file lack organisational capacity.

I believe that the current state, with all its structural limitations, can achieve a greater degree of efficiency in this transitional stage. If the Chavistas in office perform poorly they can be thrown out in upcoming elections, which seem to be always just months away. This is an important type of accountability, but it is certainly not enough. The institutions need to be restructured and mechanisms for both top-down and bottom-up accountability need to be created.

RD: In response to this dynamic, I have used the metaphor of 'three republics' vying for hegemony in the Bolivarian process. The context of class-struggle here in Venezuela is not simply a conflict between labour and capital. Rather, around this central axis of class-struggle, there is also a struggle of republican models, which are societal and even civilisational in nature. This wider conflict has taken on a particular form over the last ten years of the Bolivarian Revolution.

The first of the republics at play in this period is what I call the bureaucratic-corporatist republic. This is the model that has defined much of the methodology, the politics, and vision of the government as such. It is a paradigmatic-corporatist dynamic of the state, where the body of the state sees itself as having to decide and to lead what is, in fact, a much more complex popular movement than it understands. The state exploits the political strength of the popular processes and sustains itself through them. The state maintains a radical discourse, while allowing for deep continuity in Venezuelan social structures.

Counterposed to this bureaucratic-corporatist state, of course, is the old liberal-oligarchic republic. This old republic, which metaphorically can be reduced to the anti-Chavista opposition, is not actually reducible to the domestic right wing. It is related to a worldview, a model of society, a republican model, which is very much connected to the global ideology of

neoliberalism. In Venezuela, this type of neoliberal right wing traditionally never really existed. All the traditional parties, like the Democratic Action [Acción Democrática, AD] and the Social-Christian Party of Venezuela [Partido Social Cristiano de Venezuela, COPEI], were populist parties, living off oil-rent, with mild programmes for redistribution and social recognition, and incorporation of the peasantry, the labour-movement, the middle classes, and the bourgeoisie. The right wing of today, the liberal-oligarchic republic, no longer recognises the existence of social classes, or, in any case, the only class that it recognises as a social subject is the business-class. The rest of the population, from this perspective, is a hybrid mix of 'civil society.'

Finally, the revolutionary process has developed a third body. It is much weaker, obviously, than the other two, and is much less conscious of its own existence. It has fewer instruments with which to articulate and synthesise its power. But it, nonetheless, is a body in development, a self-governing, socialist body which is breaking from the other two forms of power. This third republic has an entirely different logic, based in self-government of land, social spaces, and spaces of production. The third republic takes on very particular characteristics within the indigenous, labour-, and peasant-movements. It encompasses radical conceptualisations of democracy, and transcends the parochial view of the Venezuelan nation, looking instead towards what we call *Nuestra América*, or 'Our America'. It moves beyond the conservative nationalism that the bureaucratic-corporatist state has tried to reintroduce into the process, a phenomenon Chávez himself has recognised.

Chávez has developed an entire meta-discourse on the communal councils, the communes, and so on. This is a very radical, revolutionary discourse, which incorporates, for example, the notion of workers' councils. But this discourse has been used, in fact, to manage the popular movement. At the same time, however, there are also emergent subjects, subjects in struggle against and in rejection of this bureaucratic control of the state from above. They are becoming in themselves new forms of resistance, challenging the bureaucratic institutions and trying to transcend the situation they find themselves in. They continue deepening their capacities, their resources, with the idea of developing this third, self-governing republic.

TP: The notion of a dialectic between Chávez's revolutionary presidency and the movement of the masses, which mutually reinforce each other and provide the dynamism of the process, has become a popular conceptual framework for precisely thinking through 'above-' and 'below-'relations. However, this, I believe, tells us little about how the relationship actually plays out on the ground, particularly in the course of state-supported development and interaction with communities.

The prospect of changing society through the winning of state-power is certainly something that the Venezuelan example has put back on the agenda. There is no doubt that capturing the power of the state has been a fundamental and necessary component of the Bolivarian-Revolutionary process. As important, in this respect, has been the wresting of control of Venezuela's state-holding company PDVSA from the previous executives, nicknamed *Generación de Shell* (the 'Shell Generation' referring to the petroleum-company). Greater control of production-strategies and an emphasis on the social obligations of PDVSA has made available important financial resources for social and development-spending. It is the distribution of this revenue to the rest of society which gives the state a particularly interventionist character. The historical development of this feature of Venezuelan society has been termed 'rentier-capitalism' – the basis of which is ground-rent generated by monopoly-ownership of a non-reproducible natural resource. In this respect, the new spaces opened up by the Chávez government for the exercise of 'popular power', primarily through the transfer of ground-rent, can be seen in terms of a rentier-socialism. However, the Venezuelan state is still a capitalist institution (understood as social relations of capital), wracked with the historical legacy of rent-seeking, career-bureaucrats, and inefficiencies. This dynamic refers, not only to those within the state who oppose and seek to stall the process, but also to the behaviour of Chavistas and certain institutions charged with developmental rôles.

Whilst certainly creating new spaces for alternative forms of economic and political organisation, this process has also brought new forms of conflict. One example in this regard is the rôle and organisation of a Social-Production Enterprise [Empresas Productivas Sociales, EPS] in Barlovento. In this arrangement the state, represented by the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation [Corporación Venezolana Agraria, CVA], has a 51 per cent share. The direct producers represented by Federation of Multiple Production of the Miranda State' [Federación de Cooperativas de Producción Múltiple de Estado Miranda, Fecoopromulmi]) made up of 28 cooperatives have 49 per cent. The key government-mechanism exercised through the plant is the above-market *precio justo* [just price] of 10.3 Bsf/kg to purchase the cacao of surrounding cooperatives. Through institutions such as the Ministry of Popular Power for Agriculture and Land [Ministerio de Poder Popular Agricultura y Tierras, MMPAT] and the Fund for the Development of Socialist Agriculture [Fondo para el Desarrollo Agrario Socialista, FONDA], the state periodically finances the plant's ability to purchase cacao at the subsidised rate. The formal structure of 'socialist' production, however, belied a process that has been marked by struggles. The autonomist-socialist vision (one of *autogestión*, or self-government)

of workers from Fecoopromulmi and local-communal council-leaders clashed with what was perceived as the imposition of capitalist-state management with a co-management [*cogestión*] socialist façade. The state-managers were more interested in processing cacao and establishing national sales and international exports of derivate-products, rather than clarifying social objectives. Following an occupation of the plant by a collective of Fecoopromulmi-cooperatives and communal-council leaders, some restructuring was achieved in line with the community's socialist vision. The upshot of which has been to integrate the local network of cacao-cooperatives, cacao-producing families, and the communal councils into the plant's organisational structure. This, however, was a compromise, as the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation [Corporación Venezuelana Agrario, CVA] threatened to withdraw state-subsidies, and managed to keep a prominent position on the board of directors.

3. What has been the rôle of the PSUV in articulating or disarticulating the most radical sectors of the process? How cohesive is the Party? How democratic are its internal structures? Should we think of the PSUV as a revolutionary party?

GC-M: Despite its many conflicting elements, the PSUV's cohesion derives from the same source as does Chavista identity more broadly: opposition to the *escualidos* (the corrupt purveyors of the old system). This is not to simplify the opposition into a single homogenous bloc, but rather to recognise how its perception as such contributes to Chavista unity, just as the perception of a homogeneous whole that is 'the Chavistas' contributes to opposition-identity (although the latter have a series of conflicting interests which repeatedly drive them apart).

Internally, the PSUV is a battleground, a microcosm of the process as a whole. In other words, the fight needs to be brought to the PSUV, or it will become simply another corrupt patronage-machine. From the beginning, there have been popular victories and popular defeats within the PSUV, but it is too early to tell whether the battle is one that can be won. But by abandoning the battlefield altogether, it will certainly be lost.

SM: The formation of the PSUV was a catalytic moment for many movements. It opened up tensions that had remained implicit over the nature and direction of the Bolivarian Revolution. The fault-lines that arose over the formation of the PSUV were in relation to the rôle of political parties in the development of a new type of socialism and whether or not these were an element of the 'old politics' that needed to be avoided, the question of whether the

creation of a new type of revolution could come from a state-leadership or needed to be constructed and articulated by organised communities, and how far loyalty to Chávez meant loyalty to all of his decisions. Thus, debates were articulated around the axis of whether the revolution should be embedded in representational politics or whether it should attempt to transcend this form of political articulation.

For some movements, these discussions led to their dissolution as sections entered the Party and others to an initial upsurge in interest amongst militants and community-members. This interest and energy has waned due to Chávez's control over the appointments of key-figures in the Party – figures associated with corruption, cronyism and 'old politics' – and an overlapping of the state and the Party which augments the logic of centralisation within this political manifestation of state-Chavismo. This logic of centralisation and 'power-over' is reproducing alienated political relationships which reinforce a division of labour in which there are thinkers and doers, leaders and followers, mirroring the practices of power characteristic of capitalist social relations. This undercuts and blocks an open and plural process of popular-collective construction and experimentation based on participatory processes of politicisation that seek to overcome such divisions of labour and foster a re-invention of popular politics.

The overall political rôle of the PSUV has therefore been to disrupt the organic development and consolidation of popular-class autonomy, creativity and power and instead is paradigmatic of the marked concentration, bureaucratisation and alienation of political power that is sapping the energies of popular politics.

SE: The PSUV's one key-advance in favour of internal democracy is the implementation of the system of primaries. In holding primaries, the PSUV is complying with the 1999 Constitution which obliges parties to hold internal elections to choose authorities and candidates, but which the parties of the opposition have all but ignored. The PSUV was founded in 2007 and the following year it held primaries for the selection of gubernatorial and mayoral candidates. In 2009, primaries chose delegates for the Party's congress and, in the following year, chose party-candidates for the elections to the National Assembly.

That is on the plus side. On the negative side, the PSUV has failed to establish a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the government. Several of the Party's vice-presidents are ministers, and the governors and mayors promote their own slates in internal elections, even though the practice has been rejected by Chávez. The Party is thus unable to serve as a check on the abuses committed by those in power or in cases of bureaucratic inefficiency. Finally, party-cells

[*patrullas*] are isolated from one another and even vertically. Perhaps this deficiency is by design in order to avoid rank-and-file confrontation with the leadership.

In spite of the PSUV's limitations, there is an ongoing deepening of the process of change in Venezuela. Where does the momentum come from? Unless you believe – which I do not – that one individual, namely Chávez, is making possible radical transformation, the obvious answer is that pressure from below accounts for the ongoing radicalisation. Recent radical moves include the jailing of bankers, the expropriation of their companies, and the expropriation of numerous other companies in order to check the practice of outsourcing, and as part of the fight to combat price-speculation. The PSUV, to its credit, defends these policies in the National Assembly. Certainly party-'bureaucrats' who support a government that is promoting continuous transformations cannot be placed in the same category as Soviet bureaucrats in the context of stagnation and in the absence of revolutionary fervour.

The PSUV's dependent relationship with the government is a major shortcoming, because the Party is very much needed to serve as a check on the state. In the current situation of extreme political polarisation, structures that can be taken over by the opposition and used to launch an offensive against the Chávez government are not an acceptable source of accountability. That is why the 1999 Constitution's creation of 'Citizen's Power', consisting of independent structures, has not become a reality. Thus it is up to the Party to monitor and exert pressure in cases of mismanagement and corruption.

Diana Raby argues that there is a dialectical relationship between Chávez and the general populace in which Chávez formulates positions and then reformulates them on the basis of expressions from below. Although this cannot be a substitute for ongoing mechanisms for direct-popular input in decision-making, what Raby says captures some of what has been taking place in Venezuela. For example, most of the delegates at the PSUV Extraordinary Congress in early 2010 favoured the selection of the Party's candidates for the September 2010 elections from above, but Chávez, after some hesitation, announced that candidates would be chosen by the rank and file in the form of primaries. Chávez has also taken into account the aspirations of the rank and file by calling on governors and mayors to distance themselves from party-control, but his words have not been heeded. In any case, PSUV internal democracy and its semi-autonomous status vis-à-vis the state have to be institutionalised, rather than dependent on Chávez.

RD: The creation of the PSUV has been the starkest expression of the general impoverishment of popular capacities that began in 2005. The PSUV has been

a strike against the Bolivarian process in its entirety. The Party is an apparatus with neither logic nor political efficiency. It is totally lacking in ideological, organisational, and mobilisational coherence. The Party does not have the capacity to do anything. It is simply an electoral machine, in which there are internal battles for access to power within the bureaucratic-corporatist state.

Chávez, of course, has engaged in steady propaganda about the Party. As a consequence, the Party has absorbed much of the earlier accumulation of social forces. A whole variety of formerly-autonomous social spaces, at the levels of workers, the peasantry, and so on, have become subsumed within the Party. Between 2004 and today, the consolidation of this bureaucratic-corporatist state has advanced forcefully, in no small part as a consequence of the PSUV.

ML: I am more optimistic than I have been in the past about what is happening in terms of the state, workers' management, and the encouragement of the movement of the communal councils into *comunas*. What I am least optimistic about is the Party. The Party is a real problem. What do we mean by the Party? There is a real struggle between the base and the directors of the Party, the leadership of the Party, who, with some exceptions, are very much oriented towards top-down decision-making. In many respects, the Party reproduces the vertical structure of the state. Chávez plays a mixed rôle here. On the one hand, he has effectively selected the leadership of the Party. Many of them are ministers or past ministers who want to achieve specific goals quickly, much of them electoral. And on the other hand, you have the base, which Chávez encourages, and is oriented towards movements from below. So you get this tension, and sometimes Chávez comes in very clearly on the side of the base. One of the best examples was the recent, so-called Extraordinary Congress of the Party. It started last year in November, and was originally supposed to be a week long. The top came down with a whole set of proposals of what the Party would be, how it would be structured, etc. There was disgruntlement from below. People complained, 'How can we make any decisions? Everything's being packaged to us. Are we just supposed to raise our hands and approve what has been selected for us?' Right at the very beginning of the congress, Chávez announced: 'Why do we have to have such a short congress? We can go on until April and meet every weekend!' That opened up the opportunity for people from below to connect with each other, to begin to build and have an input. The party-leadership was probably taken completely by surprise by Chávez making one of his many instant decisions, which are good, gut-level decisions. This is class-struggle, and it is difficult to know what is going to

happen; it is going to depend on organisation from below and the important rôle that Chávez plays in it.

4. Those committed to socialist transformation in Venezuelan society usually emphasise the necessity of expanding workers' control dramatically throughout the economy, including in the so-called 'strategic sectors', as well as transforming the communes into a type of counter-power oriented toward building new forms of democratic participation that challenge the limits and, ultimately, replace the institutions of the capitalist state. What are your views on the centrality of workers' control and communal power from below to socialist transformation in Venezuela? How far have these aims advanced and what obstacles remain in their path?

GC-M: As I said above, what is needed is an alliance between both forms which constitutes a substantive 'dual power' capable of de-structuring and radically transforming the Venezuelan state. Given Venezuelan realities, it should come as no surprise that communal power has advanced further and quicker than workers' power. But there are other, more political reasons for this, one of which is the very real conflict between certain visions of autonomous worker-control and the needs of Venezuela and the Bolivarian process as a whole. If workers control their factory and its products autonomously, what relation do they have to their community? To the barrios that surround their factory? Who has a say in what is produced and how it is distributed? This is a struggle that has begun and remains underway in Venezuela, and whose resolution is not yet clear.

RD: Let me speak regarding the question of community-based struggles. The communal councils are a new expression of old forms of popular organisation which did not go by that name. These popular forms of organising were really born in the struggles of the late 1980s and early 1990s, above all in the barrios of Caracas. They were called barrio-assemblies. It was out of these barrio-assemblies that the principle of popular power emerged. This was not an idea that had really been a part of the Venezuelan Left in the past, which had been focused above all on national liberation. The programmes of the Left had been, fundamentally, programmes for national liberation and had taken the form of vanguards which confronted the state, either through reformist or insurgent strategies. The barrio-assemblies changed this panorama completely. They began to focus on the construction of another power, against the dynamics of the existing bourgeois state.

The barrio-assemblies were small instances of popular power that were rapidly transformed into Chávez's base when he assumed power. Initially, this was a moment of constituent-popular power, that is to say a process through which the people began to construct another power, outside of the bourgeois state, without confronting that state openly. It was a very tense, antagonistic dialectic, but without open confrontation with the state. There was more-or-less a pact with Chávez, which took the name of 'protagonistic democracy'.

Beginning in 2004, the state began promoting communal councils: they were legalised, and problems emerged. The two republics – the bureaucratic-corporatist and self-governing – began to confront each other within the new spaces of the communal councils. There are now some communal councils that are merely channels of power created by mayors or governors, councils which are often extremely corrupt. On the other hand, there are other communal councils, and even federations of communal councils, that are very interesting.

TP: As I mentioned in the first question, social marginalisation refers to the living-conditions and material reproduction of the majority of the population. In this respect, notions of 'expanding workers' control' will be hollow epithets unless united with capacities and conditions on the ground. For their longevity and potential transformative impact, new forms of workers' control, whether in cooperatives or *cogestión*-initiatives in factories, must be united with communal power from below. It strikes me as a peculiarity of the communal-council movement, a movement financed by the state as a quasi-local government-network organised by principles of participatory democracy and political accountability, that there are no mechanisms to participate more readily in issues of self-management of local production and development.

It must be recognised that new development-bodies responsible for expanding workers' control in the economy, such as the FONDEN, are institutions of a capitalist state and are not organs of communal power controlled from below. Seen from the perspective of the political economy of expanding workers' control, this has, at times, been a levelling down of labour-standards (as has occurred in some cooperatives contracted by state-institutions for basic services) and mechanisms to contract cheap labour in the name of the revolution.

Interestingly, the new strategy of Superintendence of Cooperatives [Superintendencia Nacional de Cooperativas, SUNACOOP] to revive Venezuelan cooperatives has followed this principle of uniting workers' control with communal power. This has emerged in the form of state-cooperative councils [Consejos Cooperativas Estatales]. Initial problems with the

proliferation of independent cooperatives saw many squander resources without starting production, neglect their social rôle, and suffer from commercial isolation. The idea is that each regional state, through communal councils, will plan and manage the needs of cooperatives to stimulate production-networks, boost activity in special development-zones (NDE), and address their financial and administrative needs. Reproduction and expansion, outside of state-credits and contracts, will be immediate obstacles facing such initiatives.

SM: Workers' control and communal power which creates institutions to replace the centralised capitalist state and market-economy are the bedrock of any socialist transformation from below in Venezuela. However, the fragmented history of popular politics in Venezuela combined with the increasing bureaucratisation of state-Chavismo and concurrent formation of a political leadership have helped to stall the potential for popular power that was palpable in the 2002–6 period. Some of this is the result of the paradoxical dynamic of state-Chavismo, which, through decentralised localism, fostered spaces for innovative discussions and experiments in popular power whilst also often reproducing the fragmentation of popular-class communities around demands for particular services.

Additionally, the rapid intensification in the quantity of state-programmes of popular participation was marked by a speed which fostered the reproduction of a political culture based on the immediate and the present. This did not foster the space and time for collective reflection and the construction of new forms of revolutionary subjectivity and praxis. The process of constructing such subjectivities and praxis works at a different tempo – it is much slower and involves a re-thinking of the space and time of politics through a construction of different political and intellectual relationships. Thus the rapidity of the process, which gave so much dynamic to popular politics and possibilities, has become a block to the consolidation of power from below. This is both cause and consequence of the continued fragmentation of popular-class politicisation and the increasing co-optation of sectors into the state-bureaucracy and its logic of centralising and ossifying power.

5. How have social and cultural changes associated with the Bolivarian process helped to engender new social subjectivities in Venezuela which challenge racism, sexism, and homophobia? How far has formal- and informal-political and social change advanced on these fronts?

ML: Well, Venezuela is the leading world-capital of breast enhancement… It is a society that has all of these horrible traditions. There is a struggle against

these forms of oppression, and certainly Chávez is very good at articulating this. But it is probably the most difficult and longest struggle of all. There is more and more space for these struggles to be articulated. For example, for many years everybody said that there is no racism in Venezuela. People now understand that there is racism and a struggle against it.

SM: Many place-based struggles which aim to collectivise social reproduction in health, education and housing and create a solidarity-economy are marked by a feminisation of resistance. Women, often experiencing the most intense forms of exploitation and alienation, are involved in developing some of the most complex and nuanced forms of resistance. They attempt to politicise everyday social relationships and not merely view power as something external to subjectivity and self. Noticeable in this process is that the methodologies of collective knowledge-creation and of the formation of collective spaces of decision-making attempt to re-think *public* social and political relationships. This moves away from individualised and privatised forms of social reproduction and production towards collective and common forms. However, the private sphere is often left de-politicised, resulting in intense contradictions between the public and political lives of women and their private lives. A key-challenge in the construction of popular power is to take these experiences, methodologies and pedagogies into the private sphere – into the heart of the embodied experiences of the revolutionary subject.

GC-M: These changes are slow, but are happening. What we must understand, however, in line with what I have said above, is that such transformations are not given, but must instead be taken. By this, I mean that the advances made *within* the Chavista movement – advances for women, for Afro-Venezuelans, for indigenous peoples – have occurred in the same way as the victories the Chavistas have won over the collective enemy: through struggle.

In the case of sectors within the Chavista coalition, movements are forced to walk a tight line: remaining within the coalition while pushing as hard as possible for radical recognition through autonomous struggle. For example, women have not made gains by meekly requesting them: they have fought for them while fighting for general demands alongside men (this goes back to the guerrilla-struggle of the past, to which women contributed in fundamental and often-unrecognised ways). Afro-Venezuelans continue to confront entrenched racism both within their movement and in the opposition, but fight autonomously to make the Bolivarian process *their* process. Homophobia is, arguably, even more deeply rooted and will take much longer to deal with, but several vocal Chavista leaders are openly gay and pushing for necessary protections and a shift in consciousness within the movement.

SF: The struggle over racism, sexism and homophobia is a tough one. The opposition uses extremely racist, sexist and homophobic language and imagery in its publications, but so do the Chavistas at times. I remember seeing caricatures of former US-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the pro-Chávez dailies ridiculing her African features. During the recall referendum-campaign in 2004, the pro-Chávez side would use highly sexualised portraits of women in bikinis to promote their cause. There was even one picture of a very overweight woman in a g-string that represented the opposition, as compared to a petite woman as Chavista. These sexualised and racialised images are part of a broader culture in Venezuela where homophobia, racism and sexism are strong. But there is also a challenge to these structures, coming particularly from the largely female-dominated missions. These women, and the men working with them, are starting to rethink gender-structures and inequalities, and discuss them in their assemblies. They face quite an uphill battle, but they come from a strong legacy of women-centred activism in the barrios.

RD: Struggles against homophobia, the women's movement, and the struggle against racism, are movements typical of the Global North. In Venezuela, the women's movement does not exist. Tendencies exist, an important feminist current, for example, with journals and magazines that make important theoretical interventions. However, there is nothing that constitutes a movement, that recognises itself as such, and that is conscious of the historic oppression of women. There is nothing approaching a popular women's movement.

An expression of this fact occurred when I was in the National Assembly in the early 2000s. There was an attempt made to introduce a law legalising abortion, and it was struck down. Among those striking it down were the vast majority of the women in the assembly. It is impossible to pass such a law in the contemporary Venezuelan context. What does exist, though, is an intense participation of women in the Bolivarian process, playing a fundamental leadership-rôle at the level of the barrios.

Homophobia in Venezuela is extreme. This is a very homophobic culture. Yet violent aggression against homosexuals has decreased. Open violence against transgendered people, however, continues unabated.

It is rare to speak of racism in Venezuela. We tend not to recognise it as such, because the country is above all a country of *mestizos*. It is obvious that the ruling class is a white class. And when you look, for example, at the mass-mobilisations against the coup in April 2002, it was black people in the streets against the white ruling class. But this was not a consequence of racism. It has its roots in class. The rich are white and the poor are dark-skinned.

While there has not really been a struggle against racism as such, what has occurred is the emergence of new social subjectivities, social spaces for the expression of black and indigenous ethnicities. This is very interesting, and more accurately reflects what is happening in Venezuela than framing it as a discussion of racism and anti-racism.

6. Nationalisations and the spread of cooperatives are real dynamics of the Bolivarian process, but beyond their own internal contradictions it is also evident that the overwhelming bulk of economic power remains in the hands of the bourgeoisie. They have been dispossessed of much of their political leverage within the state, at least for the moment, but revolutionary transformations of social-property relations and class-structures had hardly been achieved. What are the immediate and medium-term transitional moves necessary to dislodge this economic power of the bourgeoisie and to upset more fundamentally capitalist social-property and class-relations?

GC-M: One point is necessary from the outset, repeating a bit what I have said above: political power *is* power in Venezuela (Gregory Wilpert has recognised this well). Here we must break from some elements of our traditional Marxism, which might suggest that economic power in production is the 'true' power, to understand local conditions. It is this fact more than any other that explains the swift reaction of the former ruling class when Chávez came to power. When he was still a moderate in substantive terms, he nevertheless came under attack from the Right for displacing them from the seat of political power, from which much economic power flows. This was what Marta Harnecker has termed a 'counter-revolution without a revolution'.

As to the question of which way forward, you rightly identify a tension between, for example, nationalisations and workers' cooperatives, a tension loosely captured by the opposition between the 'from above' and the 'from below'. What is key is to allow the two sides to enter into a dialectical relationship without fully subsuming one to the other, or, in other words, without accepting either as an end-in-itself. Nationalisation is not an end-in-itself because we are looking for something more than state-capitalism or even state-socialism, and cooperatives are not ends-in-themselves because they must be integrated both socially (into the needs of the broader community) and politically (into the broader dynamics of the transformative process). This is little more than insisting on what is already the case: that nationalisation often

comes in response to pressure 'from below', and that cooperative upsurges are often facilitated by strategic intervention 'from above'.

SF: We must recognise that during the 1990s, the processes of privatisation, free trade, and reduction in social spending known as neoliberalism already brought profound changes to the structure of the dominant classes in Venezuela, such that the older bourgeoisie has given way to new, often-transnational élites. In some cases the older élites who had developed under processes of Import-Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) simply morphed into the transnational ruling classes of today, but, in other cases, we are talking about different social forces. This reality of globalisation has important implications for how we think of the economic power of the bourgeoisie today. I don't think it is the case that global capital has been dispossessed of its political leverage within the state. In my book, *Who Can Stop the Drums?*, I characterise the Venezuelan state under Chávez as a hybrid-state that has pursued an anti-neoliberal policy, but continues to work with sectors of transnational finance, particularly in crucial areas of communications, mining, and industry. Dislodging this power requires more than top-down policies coming from the state; it requires the participation of grassroots-movements in reshaping the economy, state-institutions, and the structures of exclusion that have dominated in Venezuelan society over many years.

SE: At this point, the main strategy behind many of the expropriations is not to displace the private sector, but to create a mixed economy for the purpose of limiting the options of the large economic groups. Throughout the last hundred years, counter-revolutionaries have always used their economic power to limit investments, to hoard goods in order to create shortages, and to drive prices upward. The Chavista government has carried out expropriations and centralised-economic control in order to be able to confront the enemy on the economic front. The executive control of the Central Bank must also be seen in this light. A major target of government-action is the food-sector under the slogan of achieving 'food-sovereignty'. Expropriations, in such areas as dairy-products, coffee, sardine-processing and food-distribution, have been designed to combat shortages and price-hikes.

ML: I challenge the premise that the overwhelming bulk of the economic power remains in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Because what does the bourgeoisie have? It has real power in the processing sector and the media, and some power in the banks. But since when were these defined as the commanding

heights of the economy? The commanding heights of the economy are the oil-sector and basic industry. These sectors command enormous resources that will only be developed in this process through the state-sector. Even in the sectors where capital still has a significant rôle, there are growing movements to take it over. In distribution, for example, there is a growing movement against the largest distribution-group, Polar. There are more and more media-outlets in the state-sector, which are challenging the private sector. And, in terms of banking, I always tell people not to overestimate the rôle of the banks in Venezuela because the rôle that is traditionally played by a banking sector internally is played by PDVSA. The state has also created new banks that are expanding, such as the Bank of Venezuela. So, I would argue that the commanding heights of the economy are actually in the hands of the state.

The fact that the bourgeoisie has less-and-less power daily is not reflected in some of the national-income figures. It comes as no surprise that the statistics demonstrate that the public sector has not expanded relative to the private sector, because people's incomes are rising and their spending-power is also increasing as more goods are available subsidised or free. They consume the imports that are largely controlled by the outside, by private capital. To the extent to which the state moves into the distribution-sector, those statistical observations will in fact less-and-less misrepresent the strength of private capital. There is a problem with measurement of the strength of these sectors. GDP is a particularly useless measure since the more free goods are distributed, the less it shows up in the GDP. This being said, Chávez was a bit over-the-top when the GDP showed a decline and he said, 'Aha! Capitalism is declining', since a lot of people were losing their jobs.

In my book, *The Socialist Alternative*, I list a series of proposals, including the need for transparency. We must open the books of the companies and the state-sectors. The commons must also be expanded by removing more-and-more goods from the process of exchange-relations and allocating them for distribution within communities, which would strengthen the rôle of the communal councils. Also, if you attack capital directly, capital goes on strike. In this scenario, you have to be prepared to move in rather than give in, and run these companies better than the private sector, which, unfortunately, has not always been the case to date.

SM: To dislodge the power of the bourgeoisie and disrupt capitalist social relations involves the consolidation and socialisation of forms of autonomous popular-class articulation in relations of production, social reproduction and the subjective. Part of this involves the systematisation and sharing of

processes of collective knowledge-production, methodologies of democratic participation, and cultures of radical education.

There are many ways in which this can be done, but, again, creating 'our' own space and time, in which we move to a different tempo from the demands of power, is essential. This could involve creating spaces in which movements/groups/individuals that are developing such practices can exchange and share experiences. It could also be fostered by the creation of schools for training in radical and popular education-methodologies, creating resources, libraries, documentaries and booklets.

The building blocks of this are forging movement/community-reflection upon their practices and political experiences which systematise these knowledges in written/oral/visual form. There are some fascinating experiments in developing methodologies that facilitate processes of collective and participatory decision-making in communities, that build on political and everyday experience to forge strategic and theoretical analysis and which engage with power on a multiplicity of levels. However, they often remain under-systematised and in the hands and memories of a few individuals.

Neoliberal capitalism attempts to wipe away our histories and collective memory to naturalise the present. Systematisation of these experiences and this knowledge would help create the conditions for the construction of 'other' spaces and times and the re-capturing of history as a tool in the construction of a different present and future. These are some of the building-blocks upon which can flourish anticapitalist practices of self-government and community/self-actualisation that suck the life-blood from the capitalist state and market.

TP: I would hesitate to frame issues of societal transformation as one of simply dislodging the economic power of bourgeoisie, thereby rendering it a sociological issue. It is only from a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of wealth-appropriation and creation (largely through influence of the oil-economy and ground-rent) that we should approach this issue. Part of any changes to the social relations of production in Venezuela is the problem of the heavily overvalued Bolívar which inhibits manufacturing – private, public, or cooperative – by making exports particularly expensive, and encouraging cheap imports. Indeed, due to the heavily overvalued Bolívar, the control of imports is lucrative. Between 2004 and 2008, imports grew by 190 per cent, whilst in 2009 non-petroleum exports fell by 44 per cent. The corollary of this is the restricted scale of the internal market and diminished capacity to pursue alternatives, whether at the expense of the bourgeoisie or not.

It is clear that Venezuela is still wracked with gross inequality. In 2008, per capita income reached US$12,785 from a low in 2003 of US$1,700. As with most quantitative-economic measures, however, these absolute figures of wealth increasingly belie an unequal picture of relative distribution. The Venezuelan bourgeoisie dominates the internal market, particularly the area where economic growth is concentrated – the service-sector. As a result, they still command a strong position in the process of national social reproduction. Up until 2008, the private sector's share of the national economy had grown faster than the public sector, and according to the Venezuelan Central Bank, in the same period, the domestic private sector controlled 90 per cent of all imports and 95 per cent of all domestic manufacturing and was the locus of the majority of job-growth.

Before I address the main part of this question, it is, first, worthwhile to question whether anything has actually been nationalised in the full sense of the term, that is, expropriated as the collective property of the Venezuelan people. Rather, to my knowledge, there have been a series of transfers of private capitals, at full market-value, into the hands of the state. This, in the first instance, is only made possible by a net transfer of oil-rents to acquire new public assets, which, in time, and depending upon performance in public hands, will generate income for the state. Thus, as well as targeted encroachments into the private sector, new public companies such as SIDOR, and existing ones such as ALCASA, need heavy investment to consolidate both their social and productive rôle.

The most pressing issue facing transformations to social-property relations is the form in which ground-rent can be transferred into capital able to actively participate in the transformation and development of society's productive forces – by acting as a normal productive capital. This would require its concentration on a scale necessary to compete in the world-market: a transformation that could only take the concrete political form of the progressive abolition of the private ownership of capital, as the working class becomes the collective owner of this capital under the political form of state-capital. Given the immediate difficulty of competing in world-market terms, the other alternative available, perhaps through the ALBA-initiative, is to integrate the political action of the Venezuelan working class with that of other countries', in order to expand domestic space for capital-accumulation within which the expanded investment of ground-rent could fit. Understanding the specific forms under which capital accumulates in Venezuela, and indeed, Latin America at large, is not a scholastic problem, rather, it is necessary for any transformative political action.

7. An imperial and right-wing counter-offensive against the Left throughout Latin America seems to be intensifying. We see, for example, the new US-bases in Colombia, the Honduran coup, attempted destabilisation in Bolivia and Ecuador, and the consolidation of right-wing electoral régimes in Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Chile. How would you characterise the imperialist threat to Venezuela under Obama, and in what ways is it similar and different from the threat under Bush?

GC-M: Well, the biggest difference is that people still to this day see Obama as fundamentally different from Bush, both within the US and internationally. The function of this misconception – one which the Obama-administration obviously facilitates in its strategic use of the language of change – is to conceal very real imperial continuities. Thus the iron fist is concealed in a velvet glove.

The Honduran coup was the first example of such continuities, as despite a softened rhetoric, in the end, the Obama administration effectively supported the removal of a popularly and democratically elected leader from power through a military coup. With this imperialist continuity in mind, the new US-bases in Colombia – the spearhead of imperialism in the region – become even more ominously significant.

SE: The strengthening of US-military presence in Latin America forces the Chávez government to divert resources from social and economic programmes. This is an old imperialist strategy used against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The recent US-military initiatives in Latin America, including the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet, which had been dismantled over fifty years ago, allegedly to combat 'terrorism', and the seven military bases in Colombia, put considerable pressure on the Chávez government. Although Lula of Brazil has objected to the US sabre-rattling, Washington is mainly targeting Venezuela which is on the front line. The Venezuelan opposition's dependence on the US is shown by the fact that it refuses to criticise Washington or Bogotá for threatening Venezuelan security.

With regard to the differences between Bush and Obama: many US-progressives point to the friendly, well-publicised encounter at the outset of the Obama administration between Chávez and Obama in Trinidad. This allegedly demonstrated Obama's good intentions which were soon subordinated to pressure from the Right. I do not agree, because the Democrats always begin on the left to establish their progressive credentials and then move to the centre. The pattern is too frequent not to draw the conclusion that it is premeditated. Of course, what is going on in Obama's head is irrelevant. The facts – such as the legitimising of the Honduran coup and the close relations

with Uribe, and now Santos, in Colombia – speak for themselves. The difference between the Obama and Bush administrations on Latin-American relations is one of style, not substance.

8. How has the world-economic slump impacted upon the process in Venezuela?

SE: High oil-prices enabled the government to inject large sums of money into social programmes as well as company-expropriations for diverse reasons, ranging from combating price-speculation and hoarding of goods to checking the practice of outsourcing. But windfall-income is a double-edged sword. Abundant resources encourage waste, clientelism and corruption. This is an old problem in Venezuela, even more so than in other Latin-American countries, going back to the outset of democracy in 1958. It is my opinion that, even though the state under Chávez is not a 'revolutionary state' and much of the bureaucracy is inherited from the old régime, more can be expected of it in terms of efficiency and creating mechanisms of accountability at all levels.

Declining income as a result of lower oil-prices has hardly reached rock-bottom levels. The inefficiency and resultant discontent in Venezuela is, in my opinion, as much the result of a lack of institutional controls as it is the world-economic downturn.

GC-M: I won't speak directly to the domestic economic situation, as others can do so much better than I could. Suffice it to say that Venezuela has weathered this economic storm far better than most countries, and that this fact results at least in part from the stabilisation-measures taken by the Chávez administration.

What interest me more, however, are the political dynamics that have been or could be unleashed by this crisis. As in all situations, tendencies play against counter-tendencies, making prediction difficult. Thus the crisis could mean that the US-government and public are less interested in costly adventures overseas and more interested in their wallets, but, on the other hand, promises of cheap gasoline could trump ethics in the public arena. Domestically, within Venezuela, crisis-conditions could force the Chávez government to move more quickly toward socialist transformation, as has been the case in Bolivia, but, on the other hand, Venezuela's more stable position relative to other countries allows for more breathing room. Finally, the economic crisis will have a direct impact on the most important and potentially destabilising test the Venezuelan

government will face in coming years: the 2012 re-election campaign, in which Chávez will likely face a young and energetic opposition-opponent.

RD: The impact has been tremendous. Beginning last year, Venezuela entered into a period of stagflation – that is, a combination of stagnation and inflation. This has to do with a totally irrational political-economic strategy adopted by the Chávez government going back to 2003, which is the subsidisation of an importing bourgeoisie. This is a bourgeoisie that produces nothing; it simply imports, and engages in speculation.

This so-called 'boli-bourgeoisie' is the former petty bourgeoisie that has risen up within the state-apparatus and partially replaced the traditional bourgeoisie. An entire industry of importing has emerged from within the government, much of it operating clandestinely. This is one of the central forms of corruption in contemporary Venezuela.

When the global crisis struck, the price of oil fell. World-demand in general fell. And it has generated a tremendous crisis for the state, because the state cannot cover its costs. The speculation of the boli-bourgeoisie hasn't stopped, and the social conditions of the population are deteriorating. There is rampant unemployment, consumption is going down, and growth has slowed. So, the government is faced with a big problem. There is no productive economy and there is no clear debate on how to build one.

ML: The fall of the oil-prices created serious budgetary problems for the state-sectors, which led to budget-cuts that impacted upon the central state-institutions, but also the governors. Without question, there has been a growth in unemployment. (One of the ironies is that Chavistas were the first to be laid off because many have come in on contract at salaries higher than the minimum wage-entry levels.) In addition, cutbacks in oil-production were agreed to at OPEC in order to try to stem the absolute decline in oil-prices. These problems were not resolved until devaluation. Some of us have been arguing for devaluation for a while, not only because of the budgetary problem in the state-sector, but also because the overvalued Bolivar encourages imports and discourages exports and local-productive activity, including agricultural activity. When they finally devalued this year, it meant that every dollar of oil-revenue now translated into twice as many Bolivars. This meant the state-budget now suddenly doubled, which has resolved a lot of the unemployment-problems. To some extent, the cost of devaluation is inflation, although these figures need to be questioned, since a single price-index means something only when you have a relatively homogeneous population. But it means less-and-less when you have 20 per cent of the population importing

cars, etc., and 80 per cent getting subsidised food through the Mercal. In such a situation, I have argued that there needs to be at least two price-indices. In any case, devaluation resolved to a very significant extent the problem of the budgetary crunch in Venezuela. Although they are still suffering, it is not as much as in the period when state-services were really being cut back.

TP: Venezuela is not Greece, Mark Weisbrot recently remarked. I think this kind of comparison is useful, in that it throws light upon how Venezuela is equipped to deal with the post-financial-crisis economic slump. Venezuela's debt to GDP ratio is 20 per cent, whereas in Greece this stands at 115 per cent. With oil-prices buoyant at around US$80, Venezuela has a current-account surplus and healthy foreign reserves. Yet Venezuela has the highest rate of inflation (around 30 per cent) in the whole of Latin America, the economy shrank by 3.3 per cent in 2009 and again by 5.8 per cent in the first quarter of 2010. This, so the wisdom goes, was a problem of a too-drastic level of spending cuts dragging the economy into recession. Whilst such an analysis is useful, it also runs the risk of reducing the issue to one of simple policy-choices – fiscal stimulus from ample foreign reserves, by a state that can access foreign loans and is fully in control of its own monetary, fiscal, and exchange-rate policy will lead Venezuela out of recession.

This overlooks the limits of the form under which capital accumulates in Venezuela and the structural basis of the present challenge. The crisis has certainly exacerbated, but by no means created, present problems. The most recent response to the crisis has been the new devaluation of the Bolívar. As I have mentioned in some of the preceding questions, Venezuela's fixed currency (2.15 per dollar) was heavily overvalued, a problem that had been made worse year-on-year by rising inflation – as demand grew (especially during the 2003–8 oil-boom) goods got more expensive and the real exchange-rate appreciated further. Thus, Venezuela has been hindered, not only by how expensive its exports are, but also by falling global demand. The new multi-tiered devaluation, 2.6 for essential and 4.3 for non-essential goods, will potentially make exports cheaper and more competitive and reduce the level of cheap imported goods.

Also, and perhaps most significantly for the capacity of the state, the devaluation of the Bolívar, even the most expensive 2.6-rate, will increase the value of dollars generated through oil-rents by a considerable magnitude. Thus, government foreign reserves, and that of PDVSA, will increase automatically, freeing up much more room in the budget for social/development-spending. It remains to be seen, however, whether new resources will be used to target larger-scale strategic sectors, thereby centralising more ground-rent under

workers' control in productive activities. Or if there will be a further expansion of social spending and small-scale development-experiments – with likely inflationary consequences. The benefit of the former strategy, however, would not be seen immediately and would diminish the state's broader redistributive capacity during a politically contentious time with a September election looming.

9. From the beginning, the Bolivarian process has been based on a multiclass-coalition. More than a decade into the Chávez government is it still tenable to sustain the contradictory class-interests of different components of the coalition, or are fractures starting to emerge? More specifically, who has the momentum inside Chavismo today: (a) those attempting to push toward much deeper, anticapitalist transformation of social, economic and political structures, or, (b) those conservative and bureaucratic layers who wish to consolidate their own interests in the current structures of power and prevent any authentic transitional moves toward socialism.

GC-M: There are several questions here. First, the question of the multiclass-coalition is one whose terrain is constantly shifting. Chávez was initially elected largely on the basis of an urban, middle-class vote, in part due to the collapse of the old political parties. However, in a few short years, this had shifted, with the wealthier of the middle class moving toward the opposition and the Chavista coalition garnering an ever-larger portion of the poor vote (sectors 'D' and 'E', in Venezuelan parlance). Two questions emerge from this, and they are tightly inter-related: first, is such a cross-class alliance still *tenable*? And, secondly, is such a cross-class alliance still *necessary* or *desirable*? In other words, does Chávez still need to rely on the middle classes to win elections?

Some in his inner-circle clearly think so, and we could point to the strategic manoeuvres in the run-up to the 2006 election as proof of this, as Chávez moderated his rhetoric tactically on several occasions. We see this, too, in everyday issues of governance, in which strategies are chosen and who they benefit, in short, to whom the government caters. But, as the process moves forward and radicalises, and as the poorest members of Venezuelan society become a more dependable voting bloc, there will be the temptation to abandon the constraints of the middle and push forward forcefully toward socialism.

Turning to the question of which sector holds sway within the Chavista coalition, (a) or (b), I would add a third, or rather a complication of the

second: there are two sectors that I would deem conservative within the Chavista coalition. The first essentially seeks to maintain the status quo, a continuation of the corrupt and bureaucratic Fourth Republic. This is an essentially *capitalistic* element. But there is also, secondly, a sector which seeks radical transformation, but not necessarily in the direction we would choose: toward a more bureaucratic socialism in which they themselves (or the Party) constitute a new ruling élite.

If the question were who holds *power* in the Chavista coalition today, there would be little doubt that conservative elements hold power as traditionally understood in terms of money, weapons, access to media, etc. But the question of *momentum* is a more complex one altogether, and as the doctrine of guerrilla-warfare teaches us, power is not reducible to its concrete and material aspects. The radically popular and directly democratic sectors of society, arguably, have more momentum, more energy, and a more irrepressible spirit of radical transformation, one that, if mobilised and directed, is far more powerful than any weapon wielded by the conservative sectors. The task is to unleash it.

ML: I would say that, at this moment, the momentum lies in the transformation of the workplace with worker-councils. One of the important bits of legislation in the national assembly, and, hopefully, it will move through there, is the whole question of a new law of labour which would institute workers' councils throughout the country. The law would also reduce the workday from eight hours to six hours. The momentum is going against the conservative-bureaucratic layers within Chavismo that wish to consolidate their own interests. These sectors are still strong and they still have significant places within the process. These are people that basically want to get off the bus now. They have gone far enough, are happy, and are resisting change. But, at the moment, they do not have the momentum. Only class-struggle will decide what is going to happen. On all this, my perspective remains 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. We know that there are major obstacles against the Venezuelan process, starting with imperialism, with the remaining inroads of domestic capital, but also those obstacles internal to the Chávez process, and there has to be a struggle against them. There are the elements of struggle, but so much depends upon the dialectic between Chávez and the base that I cannot predict the result.

SM: The tensions of embedding the revolutionary process within a capitalist state are manifesting themselves in the current conjuncture as the logic of governing over the populace, maintaining economic stability within the capitalist market, and maintaining institutional power have overtaken a logic

of creating spaces in which the popular classes can construct a revolution from below that is able to challenge alienated social relationships in the economic, political, social and subjective realms. This has resulted in a situation of the continued reproduction of fragmented popular politicisation and a certain stagnation in many of the more experimental and innovate forms of collective self-government. However, there remains much energy, creativity, hope and collective construction, which continues at a slower, less-visible pace. Those sectors working towards the construction of socialism(s) from below that radically disrupts capitalist power will face a tough set of decisions over the next couple of years, particularly over whether, when and how to break with 'state'-Chavismo.