

Challenges for Venezuela's Revolution

An Interview with Michael Lebowitz

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*Michael Lebowitz, professor emeritus of the department of economics at Simon Fraser University, is a director of the Centro Internacional Miranda (CIM) in Caracas, and author of the newly published book *Build it Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century*. He was interviewed by Coral Wynter and Jim McIlroy for the Australian newspaper Green Left Weekly.*

“There is a fascinating process happening here”, Lebowitz explained. “The process began with the [1998] election of [President Hugo] Chavez, but took significant form with the establishment of the [Bolivarian] constitution [in 1999]. There are enormously unique elements in this constitution: in particular, the focus on human development, the focus on the full development of everyone’s personality, and the clear recognition that this can only occur through practice.

“Only through meaningful practice in struggle are people able to develop themselves: these are not just the abstractions of the constitution, but there are concrete references to self-management, self-government, these kinds of institutions.

“The constitution itself, however, was a contradictory document. At the same time as you had these aspects, you also had the elements of support for private interests, private capital, the maintenance of the independence of the central bank and so on. So, it was a snapshot at that point of the stage of consciousness, and of the coalitions that had emerged at that time.

“Which way it would have gone is unclear to me. But, as Marx explained, slaveholder revolts put the sword in the hand of the social revolution, so it moves faster as a result. That’s precisely what happened in Venezuela, with the opposition [from the right wing] to the laws that would put some teeth into the process [of implementing] the constitution.

“Then there was the [April 2002] coup, which was reversed relatively quickly, and even more important was the bosses’ lockout, which went on for months [from December 2002 to February 2003]. The consciousness of people expanded enormously in that period, even more so than at the time of the coup and reversal of the coup, because that happened so fast. That longer period [of the lockout meant] coming together and struggling together, with new groups emerging.

“So the revolution began to move significantly forward at that time, after those developments in 2002 and early 2003. And the kinds of things that Chavez started to talk about then, the social economy, meant that it wasn’t a gigantic leap when he began to talk

about socialism, because he had already been saying those kinds of things about the social economy. But it was important because, when he began to talk about socialism, it was a whole process of beginning to change the consciousness of people. That's the role Chavez plays, as teacher and leader, in terms of developing the consciousness of the masses.

Chavez and Chavistas "One of the problems, of course, is that there is a gap between the promises and the rhetoric and what is actually realized in practice. Partly that gap is the result of the state that Chavez inherited, a state that was filled with people on a clientalistic basis, by the old regime, by the Fourth Republic.

"Another part, though, is that all the supporters of Chavez are not necessarily in agreement with the socialist direction. In the concluding chapter of my new book, one of the things I talk about is that there is significant opposition within the Chavez camp to the advance of the revolutionary process. Some people talk about Chavism without Chavez. Far more significant is the group of people who want Chavez without socialism; who don't want to see self-management and co-management within the enterprises; who don't want to see communities making decisions at the local level; who want to retain the power to make decisions from above, both because of their own economic interests — and corruption is a major problem here, it is part of the tradition — but also because they don't want to lose the power to engage in clientalism.

"The Chavez parties are engaged in this sort of activity — they want credit for everything; they want to engage in these activities, to make the decisions. So, you have this tension, between people in the local communities and the Chavez parties, the functionaries, who want the power and control within the communities — thinking, like so many people on the left, that if we don't have the power, everything will go wrong. And that is precisely contrary to the conceptions in the constitution, which talk about the fact that people develop through their own activity.

"Rosa Luxemburg said the working class demands the right to make its own mistakes and learn in the dialectic of history. If they're going to be prevented from making mistakes, you won't have the continuing advance of the revolutionary process.

"This is a tension right now, which is reflected in the current [presidential] election campaign. If we remember the [2003-04] referendum campaign [an opposition attempt to use the provisions of the new constitution to hold a referendum on whether Chavez's term should end prematurely and a new election be called], Chavez had turned first to the Commando Ayacucho, bringing together the parties and the party leaderships to conduct the campaign against the opposition before the signatures were actually achieved. And the way they functioned was by making grand speeches, macho speeches, and did very little at the grassroots. They were completely lost, they were ineffective.

"The opposition did get the signatures. The response from the parties was, well, it's a fraud, don't go with this. Chavez had better sense. He concluded it was necessary to accept those signatures, take on the referendum campaign, and turn it into a positive thing. He then went around the parties to create Commando Maisanto. The leadership was all picked from civil society, rather than the parties. He went to the people in the neighborhoods, formed local committees. It was a struggle for the parties to figure out, where do we fit into this process."

Organizing the grassroots "In this current election campaign", Lebowitz continued, "one of

the things that has happened is that it has returned to the Commando Ayacucho concept. It's back to the parties at the top making the decisions, organizing everything. That is a concern that I have."

Most opinion polls show that Chavez has a crushing lead over right-wing candidate Manuel Rosales, the governor of the state of Zulia, in the presidential election campaign. Lebowitz said his sense is that it would be very difficult for Rosales to defeat Chavez "but you never know what imperialism has planned".

"I'm sure they have lots of plans", he explained. "One of those may be to have Rosales withdraw to discredit the process. They are probably sitting in back rooms on a daily basis [discussing this].

"One of the options that was written about in Green Left Weekly was building on Rosales's campaign to create a process of separation, separatism [in Zulia]. Chavez is very conscious of that, and will throw a lot of resources into Zulia, to keep those [opposition vote] numbers down. It's certainly seen as a critical place for the electoral struggle. But anything is possible. Vigilance is essential."

Lebowitz described the election as "crucial", adding that "one of the critical questions is what way will the election campaign be carried out". "There needs to be a mandate for the revolution to proceed. Everywhere, you hear people say that 2007 is going to be a qualitative difference, and how it will [signify] the deepening of socialism. If these questions of socialism are raised increasingly in this campaign, then that will create the conditions for a significant advance next year."

On September 9 Chavez called for the creation of a "great party of the Bolivarian revolution" to unite the groups that support the revolutionary process in Venezuela. Lebowitz believes that the proposal for a "unique party" is a good one in principle, "but it depends on its content".

"If its content is just more of the same [an amalgam of the existing parties], it will in fact be a way of reducing democracy from below. If its content is going to be one that strengthens people within the communities for the ability to struggle, and also strengthens the ability of people to organise in the state sectors, where there has been an incredible campaign against co-management, then it [can be positive]. If it doesn't strengthen people from below, the unique party will be a blockage on the way to revolutionary change, to socialism, rather than an advance.

"That is something I discussed about in my book, which talks about the need for a revolutionary party that can unify those people in the communities and the workplaces, to create people power from below."

GLW asked Lebowitz about the role that organisations created as part of the Bolivarian revolution — the social missions, the Communal Councils — have played in the revolutionary process.

"I wouldn't lump them all together", he replied. "The missions command enormous loyalty from the people. But all the missions aren't the same. Health, education, the food mission Mercal, those have been very successful. Mission Vuelvan Caras [a cooperatives- based training and employment mission], though, is another question. It is not clear whether it's

delivering on its promises. There has been some disappointment, and pressure on the government to move faster.

"I look at these kinds of institutions, and say, this is what is unique about the [Venezuelan] process. There is a process whereby people are developing their right to make decisions, and it's not easy to do that in any country. But people have been poor, and apathy has been part of the pattern. So, it is exciting to see the awakening of people, and their sense of 'this is our right, to go and demand this'. That is the future of the revolution. The question is, will it be nurtured, or will it be cut off?

Revolutionary democracy "I gave a talk recently to a meeting in Vancouver. There was an Iranian militant who said that it was like this in the early days of the Iranian revolution. We had these factory committees, he said. We worked closely with the communities, but it didn't last. There were all these processes set in motion, but it was cut off. I said, it was similar in Cuba. In the early days of the revolution, there were these workers' committees in the factories, there was a sense of active workers' power ...

"These things can be part of the fervor of the early days of a revolution. The problem is how do you institutionalize them, how can you create the means by which they can, in fact, not be transitory? Things like the Communal Councils are extremely important, because they institutionalize something here that is not present elsewhere. If they can work, if they can get, for example, the money from those who have it for their own projects, then you can achieve a symbol for revolutions everywhere.

"In Cuba, there is a process where there are neighbourhood committees, there are local councils, but their power is really limited. One of the things I hope that the Venezuelan revolution can succeed in is to stimulate the possibilities in Cuba as well. This is a real dialectic, which is very healthy."

Chavez has declared the Bolivarian revolution's goal to construct a "socialism of the 21st century." Lebowitz explained, "One of the things that Chavez has been very good at in his statements on this is that we are not going to repeat the [previous] process. We don't want to worship machines, the state; we want a humanistic socialism that starts from human beings, and that's what the constitution is saying. I think that those are central characteristics.

Socialism "The link between socialism and democracy is an ideal that is being pursued here. And that means democracy, not just as, every four years you vote, and not as a form, but democracy as practice. Democracy as a process by which people take control over their lives, make collective decisions at every level of their societies. And I think that is a unique conception.

"Compare Yugoslavia [under Josip Broz Tito]. For a whole period, you had the process of self-management in the enterprises, functioning within the market, competing against each other, but no sense of responsibility for a community. Everything was self-interest there [in Yugoslavia].

"That is something Chavez is very sensitive to. I know he's been very interested in this. We talked about the problem of Yugoslavia, and the problem of self-interest there. That is why he has insisted on a focus, not on exchange of commodities, but on a process in which, as Marxists like Istvan Meszaros [author of *Socialism or Barbarism: From the 'American*

Century' to the Crossroads and Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition] talk about, there is exchange of human activity based on communal needs and purposes.

“Chavez talks about the need to create a new socialist morality — socialist consciousness, which is based on solidarity. That’s why he has been focusing on the Empresas de Produccion Social [Enterprises of Social Production], the EPSs. The idea is that these would be enterprises that would be oriented to satisfying people’s needs. That was his conception of it.

“And why not cooperatives? Isn’t that sufficient? Because cooperatives are self-interested — collections of producers who have their own goals. And what Chavez was stressing was the need for these groupings of people to internalize their responsibility to the communities in which they function.

“Now, with the EPSs, again there’s always this gap between the conception and the way in which that conception is realized. The way the EPSs are going right now is horrible. They’re not realizing this conception ... they’re creating institutions that see their responsibility to the community as [providing] 10% of their income. We call that taxes! So, that shows the possibility of the perversion, the distortion of the concept.

“There are a lot of potential problems. And, to quote my book, in describing the situation before the revolution, before the election of Chavez, talking about the corruption, clientalism, and bureaucracy of the state, it stated that Venezuela ‘required an economic revolution, a political revolution and a cultural revolution’. And, as I go on to say later, the economic revolution is underway, but the political revolution has only just begun. [The political revolution] made a leap forward with the constitution, but it requires a real transformation of the state.

“And, furthermore, the cultural revolution, which requires a strong attack on corruption and clientalism, has hardly begun. So, without those other two, the revolution cannot help but be deformed. That is the central question.

“People keep saying, the problem in Venezuela is, how can you talk about socialism there because they still have private capital, private ownership of the media, private banks, etc. That is not the problem of the Venezuelan revolution. The problem of the Venezuelan revolution is from within. It’s whether it will be deformed by people around Chavez.”

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