

Taking Stock of the Bolivarian Revolution: Changing Venezuela by Taking Power

Review of Gregory Wilpert 's book

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Gregory Wilpert has pulled off a triumph on two fronts with his new book on the Bolivarian Revolution, [Changing Venezuela by Taking Power](#) (Verso, 2007). Most obviously, Wilpert's book — in both its scope and (sometimes almost maddening) objectivity — is the most detailed and credible analysis yet published of the Venezuelan revolution, which itself represents, arguably, the single most significant challenge today to the hegemony of global capitalism.

But Wilpert has not just produced a comprehensive look at the social, economic and political transformation that has shaken the foundations of Venezuela over the past decade; he has also delivered a sharp rebuke to one of the trendiest, if dubious, political theories to appear on the academic left in recent years. Wilpert's title is an unsubtle blast at John Holloway's *Changing the World Without Taking Power*, a book that with its theoretical ambition (and pretension) rivals Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* in its attempt to carve out a new radical theoretical manifesto — something that is about the last thing the left needs anyway, but I digress.

Holloway, a British academic who has been amongst the leading chroniclers of the Zapatista movement in the Mexican province of Chiapas — which announced itself dramatically with an armed uprising on January 1, 1994 (the day NAFTA took effect) — makes the case that the left should abandon the field of struggle for state power. In defence of this recommendation, Holloway points to the historic failures of both state socialism(s) and social democratic attempts to transcend or, in the latter's case, even reform capitalism in any meaningful or permanent way. Elevating some of the success of the indigenous resistance in Chiapas to the level of universal prescriptions, Holloway argues that progressive forces should focus only on building autonomous spaces of "anti-power," organizing on the local level and slowly developing alternatives in every aspect of life and work in order to eventually overwhelm the alienating and violent capitalist system.

Against this theory of abstention at the level of the state, enter the radical and inspiring example of the Venezuelan experience since 1998, where the presence of an aggressively left-wing elected government has helped encourage the growth of community organizing and popular participation. Wilpert gives the basic chronology of the process, which has steadily radicalized as it has beaten back right-wing attempts to overthrow it. Wilpert spends very little time poeticizing against Holloway directly. Instead, he rolls out chapter after chapter spelling out the tremendous scope of change that has taken place since Hugo Chavez was first elected. Wilpert, for instance, examines in detail changes in governance policy which aim to implement the inclusive, participatory democracy outlined in the 1999

Bolivarian constitution, which was ratified by referendum and has become the “little blue book” of the revolution — both studied intensely and carried in pocket-sized form by Chavez’s partisans.

Subsequent chapters analyze economic, social and foreign policy. One of the most interesting sections looks at one of the least reported developments in Venezuela: the government’s promotion of the “social economy,” which “encompasses at least five closely interrelated programs: redistribution of wealth (via land reform programs and social policies), promotion of cooperatives, creation of nuclei of endogenous development, industrial co-management, and social production enterprises.”

In fact, between 1998 and 2005, the number of cooperatives in Venezuela ‘went from under 1000 to more than 100,000. Here we have the left, precisely because it has captured state power, able to build alternatives to capitalist hegemony. To provocatively use Holloway’s term against his argument, “anti-power” in Venezuela can better be built from the bottom-up because the left can promote its spread from the top down.

This contribution alone, and especially Wilpert’s attention to detail, would have been enough to recommend *Changing Venezuela By Taking Power*. But Wilpert’s coup de grace is that he also serves up utterly unsentimental criticism where appropriate, and an unromantic assessment of the contradictions, dangers and myriad challenges that the Bolivarian Revolution faces. In this, Wilpert does not let his intimacy and his engagement with his subject colour his analysis.

A couple of passages illustrate, for instance, a key Bolivarian contradiction, and show that Wilpert eschews the simplistic “revolution from below/from above” dichotomy that marks so much of the sectarian literature on Venezuela. On the one hand, Wilpert notes the importance of Chavez’s “ability to bring together a previously very fragmented movement of progressive civilians and military officers.” This charismatic leadership helped galvanize a movement:

“It is thanks to his ability to rally the poor that the poor have broken with their traditional apathy for politics and their pragmatic support for the democratic system of the past ... Their support for democracy is no longer pragmatic, but has become filled with the hope that true democracy can transform the country into a more egalitarian and just one.”

But the leader’s dynamism also poses risks to the ultimate achievement of political and economic transformation. Although Wilpert notes that the government has taken some measures to minimize the cult of personality around Chavez, the problems of “personalism” are substantial. Wilpert argues:

“[As] long as Chavez does not clarify the difference between uncritical obedience and absolute loyalty, where the latter allows for constructive critique and the former does not, he gives the impression of being indispensable and unquestionable. More than that, it is well known in Venezuela that, all too often, die-hard Chavistas will immediately pigeonhole as ‘escualidos’ (squalids, as Chavistas like to call opposition supporters) those who are critical of some aspect of Chavez or his government, even if the critic is otherwise a supporter.”

The strength of Wilpert’s book is precisely this kind of frank, surgical assessment. And while the author clearly thinks his subject is important, he doesn’t generalize from the Bolivarian experience a recipe that others must follow. Holloway, in contrast, makes the mistake of generalizing from the Zapatista experience, of which he is a partisan, sweeping and — in fine post-modern academic form — often semi-indecipherable theoretical conclusions.

Like all people who have organized for radical social change in conservative times, the Venezuelans (along with the Bolivians and others in Latin America) have and will face fierce opposition, both domestically and internationally. The right-wing media outlets in Venezuela itself have been so outrageous — the 2002 coup against Chavez has even been termed the world’s “first media coup” due to the overt participation of the private media giants in the toppling of a democratic government — they have caused their readership and credibility to plummet. The prevalent smear jobs and caricatures of Chavez’s term in office in the international press have, unfortunately, been considerably more effective.

As publisher of venezuelanalysis.com — by far the best aggregator of English-language news and analysis about politics in Venezuela — Wilpert has been steadily working to expose and counter this misinformation campaign. His book compiles much of this material, while organizing and presenting it in an accessible way.

In Venezuela, the past decade has seen the shattering of the myth of “the end of history” and its demoralizing corollary, “there is no alternative.” Today, the alternative(s) to capitalism remains to be found and built, and it is of course up against innumerable obstacles, attacks, false starts and errors. But the Bolivarian Revolution has reminded us all that beyond just being a soothing slogan, it is indeed possible to fight for another, better world. As Wilpert puts it: “Venezuela is recuperating the utopian energies, which became exhausted with the failures of state socialism, of social democracy, and of neo-liberal capitalism, merely by trying a different and as yet relatively unexplored path.”

On that vital but difficult path to a world beyond neoliberalism, I can’t help but wish that there were more public intellectuals like Gregory Wilpert, seriously engaged with processes of social change and serious about communicating in broadly accessible language. *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power* is a valuable addition to the bookshelves of all those who are trying to make sense of, and change for the better, our unequal world.

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