CHAPTER 17

Media and Power for 21st Century Socialism in Venezuela*

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1 Introduction

Objectively speaking, movements, classes, and media must challenge power to be revolutionary. One cannot govern from below. There can be no grass roots social transformation without replacing existing power. History has shown from Ghandi and Mandela to Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Lula in Brazil, neither the working class nor its charismatic representatives can secure any lasting accommodation with their patriotic capitalists. Negotiating better terms for the exploited while leaving the social relations of capital intact is not revolutionary, nor even defensible as pragmatic today. If freedom, democracy, and social justice are expected, there is no “third way” as Hugo Chavez and Venezuela realised after the media coup of April 2002.

In the 21st Century, it’s either global capitalism, with more human suffering and environmental collapse or it’s socialism with the working class and its allies building a democratic society of international solidarity. Venezuela provides a positive prime instance of this claim. In Venezuela, revolutionaries are changing society by taking power. This chapter attends to the features and contradictions in this historic process, turning to media practices in particular to illustrate the dialectic of state and revolution. This chapter also recognizes the need for revisiting and contextualizing the Marxist theory of the state, the role of the working class, and the relationship between culture and socio-economic relations under capitalist globalization of the 21st century. Marx and Engels wrote almost two centuries ago, while Lenin and Trotsky constructed and implemented Marxist theory in an isolated and underdeveloped, largely pre-capitalist country. Their collective contributions have been debated, defended,

* Much thanks and solidarity to Ana Viloria at MINCI (Ministry of Communication and Information), Wilfredo Vasquez at Catia TV, and Carlos Lugo at Radio Primero Negro for their time, insights, and dedication to democracy and social justice; thanks to Carlos Martinez for logistics and translation during visits with dozens of Venezuelan media workers. Travel grants from Purdue University Calumet made the field research possible.
and redefined in the subsequent decades by reformists and revolutionaries alike – from parliamentary social democrats insisting socialism would organically arise from mass democratic experiences to Maoists, fidelistas, and other focoistas fighting rural guerrilla wars to take power “through the barrel of the gun,” the character of the state and state power has remained crucial to social revolution, both theoretically and practically. This chapter does not attempt to review and evaluate the claims and contentions from past or ongoing debates, rather it offers the Venezuelan phenomena as a concrete opportunity for observing class conflict in action. Without constant reference or elucidation, this chapter accepts the thrust of Antonio Gramsci’s writings on hegemony, which seem to offer considerable clarification to understanding capitalist society since its modern, industrial development, including multiclass political parties, referenda elections, and commercialised mass media and popular culture.

Unless one is active in the solidarity movement or subscribes to radical journals, probably little is known about Venezuela and its inspirational project for social transformation. The US media quickly settled on two themes: democratic elections in Venezuela are suspect; elected Bolivarian officials from local to national are both dangerous and incompetent. Thus, former President Hugo Chavez (who died in 2013) was a caudillo, a populist dictator, hiding behind repeat show elections and bribing the population with social programs funded by oil wealth; the new President, Nicolás Maduro, (a former bus driver) is unqualified to lead but maintains an anti-democratic agenda evidenced by authoritarian attacks on private industry and the media, pushing policies that create inflation, shortages, and corruption. These themes express US disdain for all participatory democracy and (for audiences relying on US and UK commercial media) obscure the actual existing democracy of citizens and workers who overwhelming ratified a constitution with “obligations of solidarity, social responsibility, and humanitarian assistance.” The real problem for US media and US capital is that Venezuela is demonstrating to the world that democracy indeed can work, but not through neo-liberal, market relations. Democracy needs socialism.

2 A Strategy for Revolution: Government Policy and Political Parallelism

The transition to socialism in Venezuela is a dialectical political process synthesizing objective conditions with subjective material possibilities. Initiated