

First Anarchist Studies Network conference,
Loughborough University,
4th - 6th September.

Beyond subjective idealism and the negative scream: revolutionary subjectivity in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution

Abstract

This paper critically engages with Michael Lebowitz's endorsement of Venezuela's *Bolivarian Revolution*. The radicalisation of the Bolivarian Revolution has seen the initially moderate project of endogenous development, recast as the means by which to alter, in its essence, the relations of production and exchange in a project termed 'socialism of the XXI century.' It is argued that, Lebowitz has heavily idealised the project through an inversion of the Marxian concept that, *people change themselves through the changing of their circumstances*. This has raised the idea of 'socialism for the XXI century' to the level of ideology, abstracted from the material basis and potentialities for the practical negation of capitalist society. This claim is explored in the context of his call to John Holloway to repudiate his position that the state is the assassin of hope. In doing so, the paper critically draws out the nuances between both positions, proposing that, it is only through a critical materialist understanding of the Venezuelan state, as owner and appropriator of ground rent, that we can grasp the forms of revolutionary subjectivity prevalent in the Bolivarian Revolution. The case is made with brief recourse to primary research, from which the paper comments on the impact and progress of organisational forms, such as cooperatives and social production companies, sponsored by the state as vehicles for radical societal change.

Introduction

Following Chávez' public rejection of capitalism, first in 2004 and then at the World Social Forum in 2005, speaking of the 'necessity to create socialism of the XXI century' (Chávez in Reyes 2006: 92), the Venezuelan government has become increasingly far-reaching in its reforms and radical in its discourse. At its most abstract, a model for the country termed endogenous development, was presented as the means by which to 'revolutionise the country; that is to say, to produce a structural change: to alter, in its essence, the relations of production and exchange' (MPD 2005). This new political and economic orientation has since been formalised as national state policy in the new 'Simón Bolívar First Socialist Plan' (PPS – *Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar, Primer Plan Socialista*). This document explicitly calls for the 'establishment of a socialist productive model with new *forms* for the generation, appropriation and distribution of economic wealth and a new *form* of distribution of the oil rent that reflects the substantial advance in collective values' (MPD 2007: 20 italics mine).

The recent intellectual and political engagement, inspired by Lebowitz' enthusiastic approval of events in Venezuela and his call to Holloway to issue a *mea culpa*,¹ appeared partly in the pages of the journal *Historical Materialism* (Holloway 2005; Lebowitz 2005) and in an extended electronic debate with Holloway and others (Holloway and Lebowitz 2005).² Interpreting processes of structural change and state-sponsored forms of development, from different (Marxist) critical vantage points, presents us with opposed, apparently contradictory conclusions. In one respect the state, along with its new organisational forms, can be seen as an effective political instrument in the struggle for socialism (Lebowitz 2006; Lebowitz [1992]2003). Alternatively, the state can only function as the political expression of the form taken by capital accumulation, which determines its actions as antagonistic to any form of self-determination of the working class (Holloway 2002). Lebowitz goes as far to say that, "to be consistent he [Holloway] had to repudiate his argument that the state is the 'assassin of hope' or attack the Bolivarian Revolution because it was spreading 'the notion that society can be changed through the winning state power' (Lebowitz

¹ Indeed, Lebowitz boldly regards Holloway's ideas as 'erroneous, a very negative political influence and as demonstrably refuted by events in Venezuela' (Holloway and Lebowitz 2005).

² It must be noted that Holloway professes no detailed knowledge of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, and acknowledges that the process is complex and contradictory. In addition his theoretical and practical commitment to struggle not for state power but for human self-determination, does not preclude him from supporting the upsurge of revolutionary activity in Venezuela.

2007a). Framing the problem in this way, as a with-us-or-against-us option, shrouds the substantive questions posed by radical forms of social change.³ As noted by Bonnet the discussion seems to be at an impasse – despite an explicit agreement that communism, i.e. a self-determining society is the goal – as radical political economy and the critique of political economy lead us to starkly contrasting political conclusions over the *form* struggle must take.

However, closer analysis of the wider important contributions by both scholars reveal on one side, the valuable focus upon self-change through doing (Lebowitz), and on the other, the important critical question of what *form* the doing takes (Holloway). Holding these insights in dialectical tension, I think, avoids the idealism inherent in the former and philosophical formalism in the latter, and facilitates an understanding of how to engage critically and politically with a modern day movement that has stated ‘socialism of the XXI century’ to be its goal. It is engaging with these important nuances in empirical context which can hopefully draw out some of the complexities and contradictions and in doing so push forward dialogue and action in Venezuela.

The paper is structured as follows: **section one** outlines the theoretical contributions of Lebowitz and Holloway. **Section two** explores Lebowitz’ writings on Venezuela and in this respect the apparent heresy of Holloway’s work. Here I also substantiate the argument that Lebowitz’ inverted idealism and Holloway’s philosophical formalism circumscribes their radical intentions. **Section three** sees my own contribution to the debate, in light of some primary research, I attempt to synthesise my criticisms of both potions, based on a materialist reading of alienated productive subjectivity. I argue that, in *chavismo*; we have seen the re-institutionalisation (political-form) of the struggle over the distribution of ground rent (content), expressed in the organisational forms of endogenous development.

[1] Lebowitz & Holloway: Comrades of the NO, adversaries of the YES

The main argument of this paper is that, Lebowitz has heavily idealised the state led project in Venezuela through an idealist inversion of the Marxian concept that, *people change themselves through the changing of their circumstances*. This has raised the idea of ‘socialism for the XXI century’ to the level of ideology. In order to

³ I attribute this to Lebowitz only; Holloway does not denounce the Bolivarian Revolution nor agree with such framing.

substantiate this claim and contextualize the debate, we must first explore the theoretical foundations of both positions.

The central claim made in Lebowitz' main theoretical contribution *Beyond Capital* ([1992]2004)⁴ is that, Marx froze the worker's side of class struggle which led *Capital* away from a focus upon workers as human beings. Therefore, a critical reconstruction carried out, as a means by which to flesh out the category of capitalism as a 'totality', where labour is considered as an active subject struggling against capital. Missing for Lebowitz, is an account of wage-labour struggles pitched within and against the power of capital and its principal of valorisation (M-C-M'). A second internal circuit of wage-labour is proposed as a corrective, where production and reproduction have the goal of human self-development. This addition is necessary for Marxists to ascend above the level of political economy, where capital isn't the result of production but, the means of workers own development, forming a unity in and against the reproduction of capital (ibid: 66).

Concretely, struggles indicative of the political economy of the working class, against capital as a mediator⁵ in society, are located historically in measures such as the Ten hours Bill restricting the length of the working day. And in the first demonstrations of cooperative labour where 'rather than selling their labour-power as isolated owners, the particular co-operating producers combined it... and rather than the products of labour embodying the power of capital, they signified communal relations' and production in a new form (ibid: 88). Cooperation is thus seen as a measure that can obviate competition and reduce separation amongst workers, 'a process of producing the working class as One' [sic] where 'by struggling for its needs against capital it can be become a class for itself' (ibid: 179-80). The bedrock of Lebowitz' reconstruction is the belief that, *'the very process of struggle is one of producing new people, of transforming them into people with a new conception of themselves – as subjects capable of altering their world'* (ibid: 180). This provides a politically affirmative category – wage-labour – and the key to struggling against capital is the reduction of the degree of separation amongst workers.⁶

⁴ The book won the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize 2004, and featured as a symposium in the journal *Historical Materialism*.

⁵ This mediation is presented as two conflicting processes where capital is mediated by wage labour for its expansion and reproduction *K-WL-K* and conversely where labour is mediated by capital *WL-K-WL* for its own human led development.

⁶ Indeed the logic of separation is seen as internal to the global reorganisation of production: 'Capital's drive for surplus value may lead to specific alterations in the mode of production Much of capitalist

This conceptualisation logically influences how the state is integrated theoretically and strategically. Lebowitz cites the slogan ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ from the *Manifesto*, to signify the point at which workers conquer political power and ‘use that political supremacy to realize their own need for self-development’ (ibid: 190). Whether the state ‘will be a mediator for capital or for wage-labour’, is a position only resolved by the respective power of the combatants in which force decides (ibid: 190). This notion of struggle is derived from his reading of ‘barrier and limit’ in the Marx-Hegel homology. Barriers are the things capital negates in its self-movement, whereas the working class are capital’s logical limit – capital has indeed produced its own gravediggers (Lebowitz [1992]2003: 15). Thus, the struggle of workers, in control of the new state, to defeat capital is one of the ‘negation of its negation in order to posit itself’ arriving at a new level of synthesis (Lebowitz [1992]2003). At this level the state becomes a qualitatively new vehicle, in which workers can posit themselves as subjects not objects of power. Congruent with the concerns to provide a strategic practical framework for socialist struggle, analytically the state becomes an instrument politically separable from capital.

It is on the basis of these theoretical-political formulations that Lebowitz, in defence of the revolutionary application of state power in Venezuela, has pursued an impassioned critique of John Holloway. However, before we critically explore the substance of the dispute, it is worthwhile to briefly outline why the work of John Holloway is deemed so controversial, eliciting consternation and acclaim in equal measure.

[1.2] Holloway: in and against power

The work of Holloway and Picciotto (Holloway and Picciotto 1978), was central to what can be called the class struggle approach to the capitalist state, crucially moving away from the dominant instrumentalist (Miliband 1969) and structural autonomy (Poulantzas 1978) readings of the state. The working groups of the *Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE)*, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, drew upon and pushed forward the conceptual advances made in Germany during the state derivation debate. This particular approach attempted to ‘derive’ the state form from the capital relation, basing their work on the logical and historical derivation of Marx’s categories

globalisation, indeed, may be an attempt to *decentralise*, *disunite* and *disorganise* workers’ (Lebowitz, 2003: 123 italics original).

developed in *Capital* (Clarke 1991a). Holloway and Picciotto (Holloway and Picciotto 1978; Holloway 1991; Holloway and Picciotto 1991) sought to push this work to its radical conclusions and draw out the political implications of a materialist theory of the state. By rejecting the separation of politics and economics as the fetishised form of appearance of bourgeois social relations, the task of theory was to explain these *forms* as the object and result of the class struggle. Thus radical change was conceived as an ‘in and against’ process of struggle, the role of theory was to elaborate the ‘oppositional space’ available between the state as a social relation and as a physical institutional apparatus.

Later, aspects of this approach were expanded further under the title of Open Marxism. By posing the fundamental question, what is the social constitution of capital? Holloway, and others (Bonefeld, Gunn et al. 1992; Bonefeld and Holloway 1995), reinvigorated a heterodox tradition which invited us, to critically consider Marx’s economic categories as inverted forms of essentially practical social relations. Open Marxism focused upon the process of fetishisation – the continual separating of subject and object – as the content of capitalist social forms.

‘Once fetishism is revealed as process of fetishisation, the hardness of all categories dissolves and phenomena which appear as things or established facts (such as commodity, value, money and the state) are revealed as processes. The forms come to life. The categories are opened to reveal that their content is struggle’ (Holloway 2002a: 31).

In broadening the application of Marx’s exposition of the fetish character of the commodity in Volume I, Open Marxism sought to reveal how and why, ‘social co-operation, the unity of society, exists against itself in the form of value’ (Bonefeld 2006b: 86).⁷ The antagonism, use-value in and against value, derived from the commodity form of social wealth – where social relations appear as what they are.... as material relations between persons and social relations between things (Marx 1976: 166) – is a perversion inherent in all of capitalism’s social forms such as money, capital and the state. Importantly ‘the project was not to privilege labour against capital, as it is within traditional Marxism, but to dissolve the capital relation’ (Neary

⁷ In its original sense, value, the mediator and social goal of production, determined the commodity form of alienation. Where use-value functions as its material expression of value which can only be socially validated *post-festum* as exchange value.

1999: 180). The distance that the Holloway of *Change the World Without Taking Power* is from these original formulations, is beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is useful to ground the concept of fetishism that has since been taken further in his penetrating critique of capitalist power and its social forms.⁸

The basis of Holloway's rejection of the state as a tool for radical change and his concept of subjectivity, derived from negativity, is what concerns us here. Key is the distinction between fetishism and fetishisation, the former infers domination and the latter struggle, and it is the latter process that constantly imposes capitalist social forms on human life. Struggle in capitalist society cannot hope to be the source of freedom and human dignity, unless its classifications, such as labour and the state, are themselves abolished. There should be no affirmation of subjectivities i.e. the working class, as this would be tantamount to defeating ourselves by positing our alienated being as objects of capital; rather we should smash through what capital tries to make us in negative immediate struggle, expressing our non-identity with capital in the scream of NO. The temporality of the NO, *doing* in the present, rejects struggle through any third party acting as knowing revolutionary agents, indeed vehicles such as the political party merely seek to discipline the 'the myriad forms of class struggle' (Holloway 2002: 17).

Doing, is Holloway's conceptual expression of revolutionary theory and praxis, the material ground of human negativity. Because revolutionary subjectivity is based on negativity, any person, institution or social relation that separates the doing from the doer leads to power-over, removing power-to as the ability to exert control over the organisation of our own lives. There can be no externality to communist struggle that seeks the reconstitution of the social flow of doing. To focus on doing, is to see the world as struggle and subjectivity as the conscious projection beyond what exists. Indeed, it is anti-power that is the route to emancipation; no answers are given and there is no affirmative moment, instead it the negativity of the question that, expresses our non-identity with capital; that screams against the domination of form over content,

⁸ Holloway himself maintains that his position has not radically changed, rather, there has been a shift in emphasis connected with the changing nature of the state (Holloway [2002] 2005: 262 fn, 46) For critical commentaries along these lines see Mathers and Taylor (2005); Hirsch (2003) and Wainwright (2003).

‘struggle is not just a question of content but of form, not just of what we do but how we do it. It is anti-fetishistic, de-fetishising, the practice of critique *ad hominen*.’ (Holloway 2005: 272).

Thus to engage in struggle through the alienated social forms of capital, such as the state, is to endorse the domination of form over content, actively defeat yourself as you become embroiled in the very same process of alienation or fetishisation in the struggle for power – which succumbs to power-over and destroys human subjectivity.

Embracing the radical roots he finds, Holloway’s Marx appears as heresy to the orthodoxy. The provocative Adornian philosophy and injunction for heterodox social action, ‘claims to provide the material basis out of which all forms of social antagonism are derived, and the logic for capitalism’s continuing instability’ (Neary and Dinerstein 2002: 18). For the time being Holloway’s work permits us to immanently critique Lebowitz’ writings on Venezuela. Nevertheless the argument I take up below is that Holloway hypostasise’ human life in the realm of philosophy, because the category of ‘doing’ falls short of being a social revolutionary category.

[2] Struggle and social form in the Bolivarian Revolution

According to Michael Lebowitz, Holloway’s position is wrong for two clear reasons. First, he asks ‘could we imagine the changes that are occurring here now [inVenezuela] *without* the power of the state? And second this has been refuted theoretically, as ‘for Marx, it was self evident that workers need the power of the state to create the conditions for a society that could end capitalist exploitation’ (Lebowitz 2006: 61-62). Indeed, Holloway’s position is said to reflect a position of defeat and demoralization, a contradictory series of logical idealisms that could never dissolve the state, no matter how loud or negative is the scream of ‘NO’, a NO which is actually a profound NO to Marx (Lebowitz 2005). Substantially, the points of contention can be found in the distinction between the state and the commune; the relation between the Chávez government and popular struggle; the role of self-determination; the effects of popular revolts being channelled into certain organisational forms; and the role of leadership and revolutionary consciousness.

These issue are explored Lebowitz’ in recent book *Build It Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century* (2006), parts of which can be read as a real life practical extension of his major work in Marxist theory *Beyond Capital* ([1992]2004). Central

to the book *Build it Now*, and many of his commentaries on Venezuela, is the Bolivarian Constitution, regarded as ‘unique’ in its explicit recognition of that overall human development requires the active participation of human subjects. Among the most frequently cited are: article 20 that states ‘everyone has the right to the free development of his or her own personality’, article 102 which focuses upon ‘developing the creative potential of every human being’ and articles 62 and 70 which stress the management of public affairs and economic self-management respectively. These ‘beautiful words and ideas’ are given the chance to attain material reality in vehicles such as, communal councils, where people participate in direct democracy determining the needs of their community; cooperatives which potentially provide a microcosm of an alternative logic to capital; workers management and social production companies (EPS) where labour is geared towards the creation of use-values over exchange-values.

Struggle against capital, and not the abundance of oil wealth *per se*, is what encapsulates the successes and potential of the Revolution. The notion of ‘radical endogenous development’ has been coined by Lebowitz in specific reference to the contemporary political economy of Venezuela (Lebowitz 2007a). Designed to stimulate cooperative production and foster a human-centred model of development, it has emerged in the context of previous failures of state-led industrialisation and from the current government’s plan to diversify the economy, thereby reducing its dependence upon imports, and as a means by which to incorporate the previously excluded reserve army of labour into the economy. In support of the project, Lebowitz claims this is ‘Venezuela’s particular concept of endogenous development ... to do things simultaneously – transform circumstances and transform the capacities of human subjects’ (Lebowitz 2006: 98-101).

Distinguished from the mainstream theory of endogenous development, Venezuela’s state project not only focuses upon activity, skills, and resources from within the community but actively intervenes to provide resources, training, micro-credit and the institutional environment to facilitate structural changes in the Venezuelan economy (Lander and Navarette 2007). The process is deemed ‘radical’ because it explicitly recognises that the root of the problem is not merely a technical question of economic development and human capital formation, but, rather exists within human beings and their social relations of production (Harnecker 2006; Lebowitz 2006).

The strength and dynamism of the Bolivarian Revolution is said to derive from a *dialectic of leader and masses*, who understand that there is an alternative and a revolutionary leadership prepared to move in rather than give in (Lebowitz 2007b). The impulse for a new form of state is noted to come from Chávez' leadership, with rallying cries such as "All power to the communal councils.... The communal councils must become the cell of the new socialist state" (Chávez cited in Lebowitz 2008b). For Lebowitz this is indicative of the way in which 'ideas become a material force when they grasp the minds of masses.' Indeed, the struggle for socialism is 'the battle of ideas.... Its focus is not to reform this or that idea that has developed within capitalism but, rather, to replace ideas from capitalism with conceptions appropriate to socialism' (Lebowitz 2008a: 22).

This original form of politics of 'socialism for the XXI century' also extends to the new party, described as, a political instrument which can unite against its enemies, articulate common demands, and represent the interests of the working class as a whole (Lebowitz 2006). Indeed, this is almost axiomatic, 'how else can the inherent contradictions among revolutionaries be resolved.... How else can you prevent contradictions among people from becoming contradictions between the people and the enemy – except by the creation of a party [from below] for the future of the Revolution' (ibid: ??). The party is explained in terms of what it should and should not be, rather than what it is. This accounts for 'the internal struggle within Chavism' where factional groups pose the greatest danger 'to the success of the Bolivarian Revolution' (Lebowitz 2008b). He (2008c: italics mine) notes that, 'what has been happening is a continued search for *forms*', with the lack of success in cooperatives and social production companies the government is now beginning to explore full state ownership of socialist companies.

[2.1] An immanent critique of Lebowitz' idealism

Although present the notion of social *form* is taken at face value. New types of political organisation befitting the current revolutionary process have a self-evident radical content, observable in the new constitutional framework, the revolutionary leader and material capabilities. All that is required is the development of new *forms* suitable to realise an *a priori* content. The relationship between form and content as Marx employed it in *Capital*, that is, a dialectical understanding of what experiments in the organisation of state power and labour actually express is never posed. Rather,

the search in itself, *the self change through doing*, is sufficient for the process to be an original and revolutionary struggle for ‘socialism of the XXI century’.

When Marx summarised his disagreements with Feuerbach (Marx 1845), he sought to clearly outline his materialism as derived from sensuous human activity subjectively developed. In this text he is reacting to the German idealism inherent in Feuerbach, where ‘the active side was developed abstractly’ and as such ‘does not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary’, of practical-critical’, activity (ibid: 171). In light of this Marx famously elucidated in the *German Ideology* and the *Theses* that, the ‘active side’ which develops self-change is determined both by material productivity and the social relations within which production takes place (Smith n/d). Lebowitz acknowledges as much in *Beyond Capital* with his focus upon productive subjectivity, albeit as an ontologically separable logic in that of wage-labour. However, no such dialectical unfolding is considered in his politicist writings on Venezuela.

Lebowitz finds himself unwittingly in a similar position to Marx defending the Paris Commune. Though Marx insists that the materialist doctrine of changing circumstances and men must pass through a *long historical process of struggles* (Marx 1870: 590), he has to resort to equivocation and assume ‘the necessary communist consciousness of the working class as *already given*’ in order to uphold the communist character of the commune (Mészáros 1995: 922). The presupposition of revolutionary consciousness actually derives from Feuerbach’s idealism which Marx clearly separated himself from, despite equivocations in his political writings. He was later to rectify this in the preface to the second edition of the *Communist Manifesto* noting that, the state could not simply be wielded by the working class, instead the whole apparatus needed to be completely reconstructed (Marx 1872: 604-5; McLellan 2000: 571-572).⁹ Importantly, therefore, a consistent materialist critique would not conflate a communal type of organisation, that is, the political form of social emancipation, with the state (Mészáros 1995). Indeed the two are incommensurable types of social organisation, a position defended forcefully by Holloway who believes this to be profoundly dangerous because, ‘it conceals the inevitable conflict between two different and antagonistic forms of social relations’

⁹ A new preface to the second German Edition of the *Communist Manifesto* was hastily written in 1872. In light of the experiences of the Paris Commune, ‘some details of the programme have become antiquated’

(Holloway 2005: 279) indeed, 'a state of the commune-type' is an abomination, an absurdity (Holloway [2002] 2005: 232).¹⁰

Related to this is the problematic argument that, ideas can have a material force when they capture the minds of the masses. Ideas generated by whom, the leader, the party or even intellectuals? Changing your-self by changing circumstances, non-idealistically, must mean ideas can only be determined by struggle wrought by the revolutionary movement of the working classes. Ideas and revolutionary consciousness can have no *a priori* existence as concepts exist in the mind but, originate in actions (Sohn-Rethel 1978). Politically the battle of ideas is of utmost importance, and the normative positions which they can express in the struggle for a better society cannot be overlooked. However, it is quite another matter to make the theoretical leaps from a leader, party or state, appearing as an authority over them (Marx 1851), to society. The danger being, when ideas cease to be derived from a materialist and dialectical understanding of class struggle, giving them an unwarranted relative autonomy, they no longer theoretically express the concrete but a political-ideological battle. In short, the focus upon *self change through doing* when materially expressed is fundamental to any socialism for the XXI century. However, to paraphrase Adorno (cited in Bronner 1991) – it is its pretension to correspond to reality – that is the present observable political relations in Venezuela, which inverts revolutionary materialism to idealism.

In the same vein the dialectic of leader and masses, evoked above, as the strength and impulse of the Bolivarian Revolution, could in fact be seen more as an inter-action or inter-relation, captured more critically in Holloway's power-over. Subjects, to remain as such, cannot give themselves over to something external. Thus, if the way in which the masses *change themselves by changing circumstances* is contingent upon a belief in a revolutionary leader and the ability to get the party's house in order first then as Holloway notes:

If leadership of the masses (however dialectical it may be) against the perceived fetishisms is pursued by intellectuals or certain 'special leaders' the idea of

¹⁰ In short, Lebowitz sees the workers control of the state as a new essence of social organisation freed from capital whereas Holloway maintains that the state in itself is completely antagonistic to the self determination of the working class. My position sees state capture as working class control over total social capital, necessarily within capitalism, but, the movement of which begets capital's self negation in the revolutionary movement of the working class.

revolution as the self-emancipation of the workers then becomes nonsensical' (Holloway 2002a: 30).

When a version of Marxian theory is used to ground and legitimate experience, a space is opened up in which the state, or its representative, can be seen to guide revolutionary consciousness. Thus the relationship between political forms (the vehicles) and economic conditions can be articulated ideologically, concealing the movement of class struggle in the given categories (Müller and Neusüss 1970: 18). Thus the self-development, or doing, of the working class is diametrically opposed to ambiguous leader–masses dialectic and a separate party vehicle.

[2.2] Holloway's still-life scream

Whilst Holloway's rejection of state power, allows us to immanently engage with Lebowitz' problematic endorsement of *chavismo*, the underdeveloped affirmative moment of screaming and doing neglects the material power of the working class to become capital's self-negation. Moreover, despite providing an important 'negative' propaedeutic, tracing the movement of fetishisation in capital's social forms, Holloway's work runs the risk – as Habermas commented on Adorno's negative dialectics – of our negativity becoming pure philosophy (Bronner 1991). Our non-identity with capital is not a necessary source of emancipation; Marx's revolutionary theory was above all social, founded upon the revolutionary movement of the working classes. Simon Clarke has captured the essence of the issue,

'while it is true that we can fight against the fetishisation of social relations, in the sense of their perception as natural, eternal and unchangeable, it is not true that merely to perceive the social forms of capitalist commodity production differently will change them in any way' and what Marx's theory of fetishism of commodities ultimately showed us 'was that the only force that could change the world was the self-organisation of the direct producers who would abolish the production of commodities based on capital and bring social production under conscious control' (Clarke 2002: 55).

It seems, therefore, the claim to have provided 'the 'materiality' of our hope for a non-alienated future is too good to be true' (Stoetzler 2005: 208). This is evident in

the problem of how the 'NO' recognises itself as such – if not a material social 'NO' struggling in and against capital's social forms, then an abstract negative 'NO' allows metaphysics to supplant social theory. Theory cannot run in advance of reality, or in other words, form cannot go beyond content (Neary 1991: 181). This sticking point reveals itself further in the distinction between *doing* and *being*; the latter is the objectification of humans and the former the struggle against being objects for capital. However, because emancipation of *doing* is derived idealistically from 'hope', a negative externality to capital, and not materially through class struggle as Marx intended, the upshot is a formal re-working of Marx's categories into a sophisticated sociological theory of oppression. The actual form of human life – *doing in and against being* – is in fact denied the material possibility to struggle against capital and escape its hypostasis as an object for capital.¹¹

In light of these criticisms, therefore, we can return to the point made above that we must maintain dialectical tension between, self change through *doing* and its alienated *form* expressed in the organisms of the state and capital, in order to avoid the idealism in the former and formalism in the latter. What this comes down to, for a critical materialist understanding of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, is a closer focus upon struggle and the organisation of work sponsored by the state, in order to reverse the historical marginalisation of a national labour. The next section attempts to consolidate these theoretical criticisms in empirical context.

[3] Revolutionary subjectivity in empirical context

The 'basis for any investigation about the transformative powers of human action consists in focusing on the development of the materiality of human productive subjectivity in its historically-specific forms' (Starosta 2008: 195). To this end revolutionary subjectivity or any powers that we may have to radically transform the world, must be a concrete form of the commodity itself (ibid). Indeed, the development of human productive subjectivity is the only historical process which produces consciousness (Carrera 2006). This is the point of departure from which I elaborate empirical research. Interpreting the findings depends upon uniting logical (abstract) and historical (concrete) analysis through empirical investigation. It is only through an analysis of the historical-material processes that constitute the

¹¹ Neary (1999: 181) makes a similar point regarding Open Marxism's categories being radical, yet, still-life.

organisational forms of social life that we can pierce the surface appearances of the Bolivarian Revolution.

The most striking aspect of the alternative forms of labour organisation in Venezuela is that, the entire cycle of production and commercialisation within the social economy depends on the state. Indeed Elias Jaua, then the Minister of the Popular Economy, stated in 2005 that

‘here we count primarily on the state and without any doubt in this country it is the main market in relation to food, manufactured products and uniforms. The state represents in the first phase the guarantee for the feasibility of all these productive units (MINCI cited in Azzellini 2008: 15)

The initial tool heavily employed by the Chávez government, as the ‘spearhead’ of development, was **cooperativism** (*cooperativismo*). In the new Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, there is the direct endorsement of workers associations and small to medium size businesses, ‘especially those relating to the cooperative..... the state shall promote and protect these associations destined to improve the popular economic alternative’ (MINCI 1999: article 118). Despite a boom and bust in the formation of cooperatives between 2001 and 2008, 250,000 falling to around 30,000 (12%) (Müller 2007) or even 20,000 (8%) (Delgado 2008), the government maintains it was a valuable process constituting a building block within other more state controlled initiatives.

Given the problems with establishing and monitoring actually existing cooperatives, now widely regarded as collective forms of private property and non-revolutionary (CIM 2008), social production companies (EPS) have been identified as the new – albeit at the time of my research – germ of socialist development. Indeed, some have been re-named socialist production companies (Empresas de Producción Socialista). Ideologically they have been held up as the movement towards the creation of use values, where labour is organised collectively outside of the relations of exploitation and alienation (Troudi and Monedero 2006). It is argued that, in Venezuela’s model of socialism, EPS’ possess a qualitatively different dynamic than that of capitalism, the assumption is that not only do they not submit to the logic of the market, the goal of production being use-values, they can also achieve productiveness and efficiency (ibid 2006: 78). The following refers to primary

research undertaken across Venezuela from March to May 2008; however, most attention is devoted to Barlovento, Venezuela, a region which provides a window into the movement from cooperatives to EPS’.

[3.1] The social economy and cooperative production

Barlovento provides an example of the attempt to stimulate a vertically integrated productive network, known as the *Ruta de cacao* (chocolate path), structured by cooperatives and supported by a central EPS. The principal activity in the region is the production of Cacao. Plantations take up around 45% of the surface area, with 22,000 hectares of Cacao in the hands of small and medium sized producers. It is estimated that 16,000 hectares belong to approximately 4,500 producers (Barlovento et al.). The cultivation of Cacao is linked with African descendents, who make up 80% of the population of Barlovento. Historically, many families were induced to sign contracts to work on the land, in the form of small holdings of no more than a hectare called “*conucos*”. This along with a history of agricultural neglect in Venezuela has warded against the industrialisation of production illustrating the underdeveloped form taken by agricultural land relations. Thus, the historical development of small producers selling to “*coyotes*” (private middle men), has meant a dearth of experimentation in other areas of cacao production. This is also linked with the general poor state of maintenance of the plantations, the low price realised for harvests, the lack of appeal for new generations and heavy migration of labour.

The *Federacion de Cooperativas de Produccion Multiple de Estado Miranda* (Federation of Cooperative Production, Miranda State), made up of 28 cooperatives, was formed in 2005 following a period of struggle against local and state groups exercising unchecked control over local production. This federation has received 2.8 billion Bolivars (\$1.4 million US dollars) allowing the construction of ‘ODERI’ an EPS processing plant. This EPS functions in the form of ‘indirect property’ where the state has a 51% share and the cooperatives 49%. The plant’s activities have been integrated into the local network of cacao cooperatives, cacao producing families and the communal councils. Each communal council has an elected ‘vocero’, a kind of spokesperson, who takes part in the assemblies that take decisions for the plant once or twice monthly. The body 120 communal councils in Barlovento, is the biggest that exists for cacao producers in the whole of Venezuela, with over 2,000 small family

and cooperative producers exercising a direct form of participation through this network.

At the moment the plant was reported to functioning below its productive capacity, workers required further training and a period of adjustment. As such, the plant can only absorb 20% of the cacao produced in Barlovento, which could move up to around 30-40% when productive capacity was increased. As such the favourable price (*precio justo*) offered by the plant, of 10,3 BsF (above the 9BsF market rate) can only reach a small proportion of the producers, those remaining then continue to sell to private firms for the market rate, or normally to “*coyotes*” for 7BsF or less. The plant is heavily dependent upon state subsidies and runs at a considerable deficit. At the current cost of production it cannot turn a profit at the point of sale, or in other words reproduce the initial capital invested under new ‘socialist’ production relations. As a result the industry, despite these new ‘revolutionary’ conditions does not attract new generations of young workers, the average age being well over 50 for a cacao producer.

From semi-structured interviews with groups and individuals within Barlovento and other similar rural forms of cooperative production in Merida, Sucre, Chuao and Barquisimeto, some trends emerged regarding their perceptions and reality of problems faced in these new forms of production. Objectively many were missing their promised funding and support; none could turn any profit to re-invest in new equipment or re-pay loans incurred; and further state intervention to act as source of demand and provide a distribution network for goods was necessary. Subjectively, it was expressed that many people do not have the necessary ‘consciousness’ to make the revolution and its organisational forms a success;¹² that the tradition of individualism is a strong influence working against the political and organisational significance of cooperatives. The issue of consciousness became the major explanatory factor for the failure of many cooperatives and even an experiment of workers co-management in the aluminium factory Alcasa. Equally, it was noted how many are motivated by the improved prices or wages they can obtain, whereas a smaller portion recognise the significance of building something new through these ‘socialist’ organisational forms. However, evident in each instance was a clear

¹² Indeed recruiting new members to cooperatives and maintaining original member, was nigh impossible for many.

separation of (the often messianic) Chávez from the failings of the state and institutions.¹³

[3.2] Form determined limits

It is not that revolutionary subjectivity is absent in Venezuela, far from it, rather the important point is that, the radical political forms of democratic organisation cannot provide the basis for an equally revolutionary productive content. The state is able, as Lebowitz notes, to continually search for new *forms* given its huge financial resources and dedicated centres for revolutionary organisation and policy formation.¹⁴ Yet, a materialist critique of the state-form draws attention to how popular pressures exerted by people, aspiring to improve their material conditions of life, are channelled through alienated forms of democratic participation and, ultimately, ‘political pressure on the state to increase the rate of accumulation’ which is given in its form determined purpose (Clarke 1991: 199). Therefore, social labour power that was hitherto rendered superfluous (the informal economy comprises some 60% of the Venezuelan labour force), can now be set in motion within the burgeoning cooperative and worker run factory network, below prevailing prices in the private and public sector. This is not to say the state policy is to directly extract surplus-value under a new mode of exploitation. Rather, it expresses the limited manner in which the oil financed revolution can stimulate internal market activity; provide much needed foodstuffs and other basic goods; and promote a developmental framework conducive to its political form of legitimation.

Work in a collective or cooperative does not necessarily denote resistance and stand in opposition to the mode of social life under capitalism. Rather, ‘it is the opposition of two one-sided determinations of the relationship of individual to society which, together, constitute yet another antinomy of the capitalist social formation’ (Postone 1993: 32). This relation is expressed in an alienated form, owing to the ‘historical constitution of subjects as part of the formation of an objectified world of social institutions’ – the most powerful and important being the state (Coronil 1997: 6). Cooperatives or other workers organisations that are independent of the state,

¹³ A widely perceived major problem is that many in the Chávez government, now in positions of power within the state, “wear the red shirt but are not revolutionaries”.

¹⁴ Take for example the *Centro Internacional Miranda* (International Miranda Centre – CIM), where Lebowitz himself works.

linked to an active militant labour movement, are substantively different to cooperatives called into being by the state. Indeed, the state's involvement is in fact deemed a retrograde step from the standpoint of a class movement (Egan 1990: 74). This point of view can allow for a re-evaluation of the state's role in the social economy, which as the main source of demand can sustain a certain level of activity within the internal market, in doing so adding previously excluded social groups into the circuits of ground rent.

Nevertheless, the mediating term – class struggle – which connects the abstract analysis of capitalist reproduction and the concept of the state is important for an open ended revolutionary approach to such analysis. As Clarke (1991a: 195) points out, 'the state is a moment of the class struggle and the limits of the state are themselves an object of that struggle', struggle that goes beyond the boundaries set by capital point to the material breakdown of the state and the capitalist mode of production. Thus for the time-being at least, popular revolt in Venezuela has seen the re-institutionalisation (political form) of the struggle over the distribution of ground rent (content), expressed in the organisational forms of endogenous development.

Conclusion

In sum, keeping the idea of, *self change through doing* and sensitivity to the *form* doing takes, in dialectical tension has permitted a critical materialist analysis of revolutionary subjectivity in Venezuela. The working class cannot obtain any historically specific revolutionary powers other than those it gets from its general social relation, that is, the nationally processed but globally determined production of surplus-value. Thus, the question must be a concrete what does the power of the state represent and in whose interests. Not an external abstract 'against power' (Holloway 2002), or an idealist will-full application of objective powers (Lebowitz 2006), but a concrete 'for whose power' (Carrera 2006: 211). This position leads neither the state's glorification nor its rejection as an instrument of revolutionary change; rather by taking capital as subject, as the basis of labours alienated productive subjectivity, this framework maintains that the real capture (and not radical left wing populism) of the state by the working classes can actually express the self-negation of capital by the revolutionary action of the working classes.

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