

Mészáros and Chávez: The Philosopher and the Llanero

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It is a strange and interesting story how the longstanding and ultimately two-way relationship between revolutionary Venezuelan politician Hugo Chávez and Hungarian intellectual István Mészáros came to exist. It is a tale of elective affinities. On one side, we have a kid who grew up in the Venezuelan llanos in a household too poor to buy tableware. As a boy living with his grandmother, the young Hugo sold candy in the streets but wanted to play baseball, inspired by a namesake pitcher (el Látigo Chávez) on the team Magallanes. He entered the armed forces hoping to become a pelotero, but soon discovered that the army offered him a school for studying politics and history, along with a privileged vantage point from which to observe the injustices and contradictions of Venezuelan society. On the other side of the story, we have Mészáros, a full generation older than the former Venezuelan president. Mészáros grew up poor in Budapest, worked with Georg Lukács, emigrated to Italy following the 1956 uprising, then moved to England, where he spent most of the rest of his life.



What made Mészáros's life so fascinating, and relevant to issues of socialist construction, was that, having seen both sides of the Cold War, he came to perceive both "real socialism" and twentieth-century capitalism as two variants of the same system. He called this the capital system. The basic commonality among most countries of both the East and the West in the twentieth century was the extraction of surplus labour from workers who did not control their own work processes. Living in England in the late 1960s and early '70s, Mészáros witnessed how the shared capital system entered

a profound crisis.¹ On the one hand, the countries of the West implemented neoliberal reforms inspired by the theories of Frances Hayek and Milton Friedman. These newly coined neoliberal policies allowed the West to kick the can down the street, riding out a crisis it could not definitively resolve. On the other hand, in the Eastern Bloc countries, the same structural crisis would be the preamble to the implosion of post-revolutionary systems that, because of their hybrid nature (they continued to extract surplus labour from workers but could not apply the same economic pressures as the strictly speaking capitalist system), found themselves unable to ride out the crisis with even the limited success of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's governments.

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This was still the age of “three worlds,” and from the privileged position of living and working in two of them, Mészáros developed his key ideas. The most important of these was that capital was essentially a metabolic system, dependent on a vertical division of labour over which it has command. Capital's metabolic system could manifest itself as capitalism per se, as it did in the countries of the West, but it could also take on variant forms in post-revolutionary societies. To refer to the latter, Mészáros used the terms the Soviet capital system, post-revolutionary capital system, and sometimes post-capitalist capital system. His claim was that the capital system's hierarchical, antidemocratic metabolism and its extraction of surplus labour—all in a social context where things dominate people—went on existing in what was falsely

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known as “real” or “actually existing” socialism. A corollary to this thesis was that the only way to overcome the whole capital system, not just the outright capitalist form of the capital system, was through a radical reorganisation of society in which workers themselves consciously control production in a profoundly democratic way. Faced with the system's crisis, what was needed

was not less socialism but more! Self-managed production and the existence of substantive democracy at all levels of this alternative society were the key features of what Mészáros called the communal system. He saw it as the only viable, sustainable alternative to the capital system.

The affinities with Chávez's ideas and policies should be clear enough from this brief introduction alone. As is well-known, Chávez had a firm belief in substantive democracy as the centrepiece and mainspring of socialism; he wagered on community councils and other forms of self-organisation to emancipate the Venezuelan people (“Only the people will liberate the people,” Chávez said on numerous occasions); and he opted in the end for a communal system to build socialism (echoing Mészáros's claim that not a “less socialist” but “more socialist” socialism was needed in the twenty-first century). All these features make for a striking isomorphism between the two figures, despite their widely divergent backgrounds and upbringings. As it turned out, Chávez would mobilise his followers and significant resources on a hypothesis that was in great measure based on the Hungarian philosopher's approach to the socialist transition.

How Chávez Got to the Commune

To understand how Chávez could be so open to Mészáros's influence as to turn to the commune as the main strategic element in socialist construction, it is useful to look at the previous trajectory of experimentation during the Bolivarian Process in the area of production (including the vicissitudes of such experiments owing to their mixed results). One of the first attempts to change the overall nature of Venezuela's economy after the revolution was the nationwide drive to

¹ ↩ István Mészáros, [Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition](#) (New York: Monthly Review, 2000), 680–82.

make cooperatives. This initiative, which started around 2003, involved a special legal framework and huge mobilisation of resources, mostly drawn from oil profits during this boom decade. With enthusiastic mass participation that was typical of the Bolivarian process in its heyday, cooperatives began popping up all around Venezuela, proudly displaying a logo consisting of two pine trees standing side by side inside a yellow circle. There were a range of service cooperative projects, including taxi, hotdog, and haircutting cooperatives, as well as productive cooperatives, such as those devoted to agriculture and different forms of manufacturing and light industry.

The gamut of cooperatives that came to exist in Venezuela in these years exhibited varied levels of concreteness. Human beings are products of their contexts, and given the desperate situation of longstanding exclusion that most Venezuelans had experienced, it is not surprising that many people formed cooperatives that existed only on paper, since by

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registering a cooperative, you could get access to state contracts and grants. But there were also registered cooperatives that really existed, operated by workers in flesh and blood using tangible means of production, that still fell short of being true cooperatives. For all intents and purposes, many were just ordinary capitalist businesses, with a whole

structure of bosses and hierarchy hiding behind cooperative laws. Very quickly—most likely relying on advisors and on his reading—Chávez came to understand that cooperatives could be problematic; that, despite collective ownership, they are still private property. Cooperatives are essentially a kind of collective private property, with their own adversarial relationships with other enterprises, including other cooperatives, with which they compete, and with society at large.

Around 2006, in the very years that Chávez proposed that the country pursue socialism as a goal, he started to experiment with various forms of state property, usually in some mixed format. This was the epoch when co-management and the so-called social production enterprises were buzzwords of the day. People with a Marxist background will note that the concept of a social production enterprise is flawed in that all capitalist businesses rely on social production. In capitalism, there is a basic contradiction in that capitalist production is highly social—meaning that a capitalist business employs a plurality of people and might have a web of suppliers reaching around the globe—yet capitalist property is private and “antisocial” (it tends toward ever greater concentration in fewer hands). After becoming aware of this problematic nomenclature, Chávez changed his discourse and began referring instead to social property enterprises (EPSs, for their Spanish-language acronym).

This epoch had its fascinating moments, but it was also quite bumpy. There were some notable successes. For a few years, the cooking oil business Industrias Diana was a flagship state-owned enterprise that operated under the “co-management” modality. Its moment of glory was when the workers themselves ran the business, but then some army officers were brought in to direct the production and things took a turn for the worse. The aluminum factory in Venezuela’s Guyana region, Alcasa, run by the now disappeared Carlos Lanz, was another fascinating experiment. The 2006 film *5 Factories*, made by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini, offers a window into some of these experiments, focusing exclusively on success stories.² Nevertheless, if one looks at the period as a whole, the failures and shortcomings of Venezuela’s state-run enterprises (often due to problems of bureaucratisation, as with the Diana oil factory) are also obvious.

After this trajectory of economic experiments—which in some way represents an accelerated replay of twentieth-century socialist experimentation in microeconomics—Chávez became interested in an alternative model for socialist

² ↪ Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini, *5 Factories: Worker Control in Venezuela* (2006).

production. In just five years, the Bolivarian process had tried first cooperatives and then state property, experiencing the limits of both formats. Now the process attempted to move forward with a new model, something that transcended these

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constraints: the commune. When Chávez finally turned to the commune around 2009 and 2010, he was partly inspired by Chinese communes—and said so, brandishing a small book about the commune of Chilying. He took his lead, however, from the philosopher Mészáros. In fact, Chávez was so inspired by Mészáros that he made his communal

system the center of Venezuela's efforts in socialist construction and mobilised huge resources for a project that was profoundly influenced by the Hungarian thinker's ideas.

The Missing Link

We have mentioned the principal affinities between Chávez's and Mészáros's thought and pointed to some reasons for their intellectual synchronicity. Yet, how did the actual, concrete connection between two people of such disparate backgrounds come about? The link had a name: Jorge Giordani, a Venezuelan university professor who was a friend of both Chávez and Mészáros. As is often the case with historically important friendships, Giordani came to know first Mészáros and later Chávez through a series of fortuitous accidents. A longstanding leftist, Giordani began his university career studying engineering and planning in Caracas but later continued his education in Italy and England, where he got to know Mészáros and his family when they lived in an apartment that overlooked the Wimbledon tennis courts.³

On returning to Venezuela, Giordani continued his academic work in the Center for Development Studies, forming there an informal team that called itself the Dead Planners Society, inspired by the Robin Williams film. This left-leaning group dealt with issues related to planning and development. Giordani had come back to a country in effervescence. The 1989 Caracazo massacre and the neoliberal adjustments that provoked it had made for a crisis that shook even the ivory tower, drawing sympathy from the country's progressive academics. On March 26, 1993, the professors Francisco Mieres and Adina Bastides, who were part of the Dead Planners group, decided to visit Chávez in Yare, where he was imprisoned following the failed 1992 insurrection. There was space for only a few visitors, and the first chance to accompany the pair was given to Héctor Navarro, who demurred, joking that he did not like going to prison "even as a visitor." This gave Giordani an opening, though he was initially denied entry by the guards. Finally, the prison authorities let him in and he found himself among such a large, noisy gathering, that it seemed more like a chaotic party than a prison cell.

When the time came to leave, at around 5 p.m.—just a few minutes before closing—Giordani got up to go. Just then he heard Chávez call out "Professor!" He thought that Chávez was hailing Mieres, but the imprisoned soldier was clear: "No, it's about you." It was then that Chávez told Giordani that he wanted him to be his thesis advisor for a degree in political science he was pursuing while in prison. When Chávez said he had tried to contact the economic planning specialist before the 1992 military uprising, Giordani's first reaction was relief: "Thank God you didn't get in touch with me earlier or I would be in prison here with you." Yet he agreed to be Chávez's thesis tutor. This is how this important friendship began, with Giordani visiting Chávez weekly in prison (until the authorities stopped them), where they talked about Antonio Gramsci, Karl Marx, and, of course, Mészáros.

³ ↪ Jorge Giordani, conversation with the author, Caracas, Venezuela, February 11, 2022. All subsequent references to Giordani's life and his relation with Chávez derive from this interview.

Giordani had been interested in Mészáros's ideas since meeting him in England. Now, back in Venezuela, he became, in his words, a kind of "conveyor belt," transmitting information about what was happening there to the Hungarian philosopher and, more generally, serving as a link between Mészáros and Chávez during the 1990s. One important task

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that Giordani took on was getting Mészáros's huge work from 1995, *Beyond Capital*, translated into Spanish. Initially, the Dead Planners Society attempted a collective translation, with each member taking responsibility for a different section of the

thousand-page volume. It did not go well. Yet, Giordani had a chance encounter with a high school friend called Eduardo Gasca, who agreed to translate the whole text. This is how Venezuela came to have the first translation into Spanish of this major work, published by Vadell Hermanos Press. (As it turned out, Mészáros was very pleased with the translation, finding Gasca's version of Attila József's poems better than the existing translations that had been done some years earlier, directly from the Hungarian!)

Mészáros and the Communal System

Chávez frequently brandished the hefty tome of *Beyond Capital* in official meetings and in television appearances, telling his ministers to read and study it. He also sometimes gave copies to foreign dignitaries (including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was clearly disconcerted to receive a copy translated by Iranian communists). On the website Todo

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Chávez, which has all of Chávez's speeches, one can chart how references to Mészáros first appear in Chávez's reflections in 2003 and later enter the discourse with greater and greater frequency, up until the president's untimely death ten years later.⁴ Chávez typically mentions book titles and a few catch

phrases, such as social metabolism, the challenges of our time, irreversibility, humanly rewarding transition, and constantly encourages study of Mészáros's work. But the references are in fact sparse. So, what exactly were Mészáros's key ideas and how did they influence Chávez?

Mészáros's main discovery was that the "capital system" is not equivalent to capitalism. To underpin his focus on capital as the decisive Marxist category rather than capitalism, the philosopher could point to the very title of Marx's most important work (it is called *Capital*, not *Capitalism*, after all) and the first volume's often mistranslated subtitle (*The Process of Production of Capital, not, as Frederick Engels rendered it, A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*). Mészáros's claim was that Marx's main object of study, capital, embodies a diffuse, all-pervasive metabolism. This cannot be reduced to a scenario in which greedy capitalists exploit workers through the extraction of surplus value, but rather consists of a whole range of more fundamental ("second order") mediations that are imposed by capital's logic on human beings' ("first order") relations to nature and other humans. By way of these mediations, capital generates and constantly reproduces an integral system involving, on the one hand, alienated means of production, producers divorced from control over the production process, and a command of labour that works through externally imposed production goals; on the other hand, the capital system also shapes family relations, imposes money and its mystifying forms on an expanding range of social interactions, and generates alienated state forms of administration and control.⁵

Mészáros's discovery about the all-embracing, organic capital system was not purely theoretical. In fact, his thesis had practical consequences that are observable in history—namely, that you can overcome the capitalist system and still

⁴ ↪ Todo Chávez, accessed March 10, 2022, todochavez.gob.ve.

⁵ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 108–9.

reproduce what he called the “logic” or “metabolism” of capital. Mészáros made this clear when he wrote that, “without

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capital, the capitalist is nothing [but the] relation obviously does not hold the other way around.”⁶ This is exactly what happened in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. These were indeed post-capitalist societies—not “state capitalist societies” as some critics have argued—but

they continued to reproduce the key elements of the capital system, including labourers with no control over the production process (a hierarchical command over labour), production goals that were undemocratically imposed from above, alienated means of production, extraction of surplus labour, and state forms that corresponded to the alien objectification of labour.⁷ The Soviet system was a capital system, even if not a capitalist one, because it shared these essential features. The narrowly capitalist features it lacked, most especially the economic pressure that capitalism puts on workers (who must work or starve), would at some point constitute a hindrance that impeded its ability to compete with the West’s productivity. Thus, having maintained a top-down control of enterprises, Soviet leaders soon wanted to have its “twin brothers” in the form of free markets and full capitalist restoration.

Yet, Mészáros did not just use his discovery to criticise the really existing socialism of the Eastern Bloc, under which he had lived. He also employed it as the basis for an alternative strategic proposal. In contrast to the failed attempts to overcome capital that were, on the one hand, real socialism and, on the other, evolutionist social democracy—Mészáros believed that they had a great deal in common—the Hungarian philosopher took it upon himself to write about the

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transition to what could represent a true, socialist alternative to the whole capital system. Building this viable alternative would be a huge challenge, and he never disguised its difficulties. (It was more difficult than going to Mars, Chávez said, summarising Mészáros’s

claim).⁸ This task would require generating an integral, organic system that, just like the capital system, could reproduce itself and whose different elements mutually supported each other. It made no sense to overcome just one part of the capital system—say, the alienated means of production—without aiming at the whole, because the various components of the capital system all interpenetrated each other and could successfully resist any partial attempt to overcome them. What was needed was a holistic, comprehensive strategy, aimed at implementing a new organic system, the components of which were themselves mutually reinforcing.

Commune or Nothing!

The Mészáros saw this alternative system—the authentic socialist system—as essentially a communal one. He called it

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the self-constituting communal system. The Hungarian philosopher scoured the archives of both Marx’s published work and his manuscripts to show that communal production had been what Marx had more or less consistently seen as the alternative to the capital system and its post-festum social production (a fact that was concealed by the usual statist reading of

⁶ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 615.

⁷ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 108–9.

⁸ ↪ Hugo Chávez, *Aló Presidente Teórico 1*, Todo Chávez, June 6, 2009.

Marx but is evident to any careful reader).⁹ This amounted to an interpretive, textual claim. Beyond this hermeneutic register, Mészáros worked to show that the only way to restore control of production to direct producers, to overcome the market, to sideline the fetishistic forms of commodities and money, and allow for sustainable growth with rationally established goals, in a way that is organic in the sense that each part reinforces the rest, was through a communal system. The obvious upshot was that the commune was the only viable historical alternative to capital's increasingly destructive organic system. The communal system alone offers "a framework of social metabolic exchange...usable by the individuals for securing their own ends."¹⁰

Mészáros reiterated this claim on various occasions. For example, in an essay published in 2008 in *Monthly Review* that elaborated on some key themes from *Beyond Capital*, we find him claiming that the necessary alternative to capital's

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"ubiquitously destructive system" was the communal mode of societal reproduction, because "only the communally organized system is capable of providing the overall framework for the continuing development of the multifaceted and substantively equitable constitutive parts of the socialist mode of integration of all creative individual

and collective forces into a coherent whole as a historically viable organic system of metabolic reproduction."¹¹ This passage is indeed labyrinthine, and is unfortunately typical of Mészáros's theoretical exposition. However, its basic idea is that, if the aim is to develop "rich social individuals," this kind of self-realisation could only be obtained through the "freely associated" producers that Marx talked about in *Capital* consciously determining the nature, aims, and methods of their own work.

Communes provide a sustainable alternative precisely because they are based on cooperation. The role of cooperation in promoting sustainability can be explained by considering the opposite scenario. The capital system has conflict built into it, not only the antagonism between different capitals competing with each other, but also the structural conflict between

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capital and labour. In the socialist alternative system, direct producers would take on decision-making themselves, assuming responsibility for their self-determined objectives. But they cannot do this if they always find themselves with other social actors constantly pulling in the opposite direction, with opposing aims. Hence, the socialist alternative requires a comprehensively

cohesive social consciousness that is amenable to workers' personal involvement in the control process and in decision-making about objectives.¹² Otherwise, adversarial relations and conflict between individuals and the collective will generate uncontrollable centrifugal forces that wreak havoc on society's coherence. This is the basis of Mészáros's claim that adversarial relations—built into the logic of the capital system (antagonism both among capitals and between capital and labour)—can only be overcome through a communal system, based on cooperation.

⁹ ↪ A high point is Marx's 1857 manuscript of the *Grundrisse* (*Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*), which contains ample reflections on communal production, consumption, and property.

¹⁰ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 131.

¹¹ ↪ István Mészáros, "The Communal System and the Principle of Self-Critique," *Monthly Review* 59, no. 10 (March 2008): 33–56.

¹² ↪ István Mészáros, "The Communal System and the Principle of Self-Critique." Marx himself writes about "communist mass"

The essence of this new kind of society, in the words of Ricardo Antunes, is that “its vital functions—those that control its system of social metabolism—are effectively exercised autonomously by the freely-associated producers and not by an external, extraneous body in control of those functions.”¹³ What else but a commune, an organ of both production and internal democracy, can exercise this self-governed control of production? In fact, the ideas of Mészáros, whose point of departure is a thorough command of both Marxism and philosophy and whose presentation is often quite complex, not to say convoluted, could be summed up with Chávez’s slogan: Commune or Nothing! The main claim of Mészáros’s huge thousand-page codex is that only a communal system can replace the destructive, alienating, and dangerous capital system. In *Beyond Capital*, this claim pervades the whole work, but it is laid out most explicitly in chapter 19, “The Communal System and the Law of Value.”

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The State Must Also Go

In the recent Marvel film *Black Widow* (2021), there appears the curious figure of the Red Guardian—a Soviet “super-soldier” turned pariah by the name of Alexei Shostakov. Interestingly, he represents a kind of Soviet dissident without being an anticommunist defector or right-wing dissident. The Red Guardian’s sin, by his own admission, is that he still believes in the “withering away of the state.” Leaving aside Marvel’s bizarre post-Cold War politics (which seem equally unable to leave behind the Cold War as to revive it), the presence of a leftist Soviet dissenter in a mainstream movie is curious. How should we understand it? One reading would be that today communism is so weak that any reference to it seems simply quaint or nostalgic—mere entertainment! However, more optimistically, the space given to the Red Guardian’s “ultraleftism” on the big screen could be taken as a symptom of the growing awareness among screenwriters and the public that some alternative is needed both to the capitalist system and the failed Soviet one.

In a world where social democrats and old Stalinists alike cling to the state form for dear life, Mészáros could be seen as the Red Guardian’s kindred spirit, keenly interested in the problem of the state and postulating its overcoming as the non-negotiable core of Marxist political theory. Though opposed to the state and committed to its ultimate abolition,

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Mészáros was always careful to avoid any voluntarism in this respect. The state could not be abolished by decree but only transcended through the long-term activity of the proletariat in a “permanent” social revolution. Doing so, he wrote, required the proletariat’s “active involvement in the revolutionary process itself on a painfully long time-scale.”¹⁴ Only the proletariat’s activity in generating a new metabolism and normalising “the spontaneous action of the laws of [a socialist] social economy” could lead to the state’s final withering away.

Though taking state power is an important step in any revolution, especially at first, there remains the task of restructuring the social metabolism: the totality of social practice. In the effort to generate this new social metabolism, there could be some help in the form of guarantees from a new political form (a workers’ state or popular government), which should provide a framework that promotes new, non-adversarial modes of control. However, the real focus of transformative work must operate at a grassroots level and be carried out by labour itself, on a material terrain that is quite different from normal politics, all of it aiming to turn labour’s new mode of activity into a kind of spontaneous

¹³ ↪ Ricardo Antunes, introduction to István Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review, 2010), 21.

¹⁴ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 470.

Since the rule of capital is essentially “economic not political in character,” it “cannot be broken at the political level.” After the first step of intervening in or overthrowing the actual, immediate state formation, there lies the strategic project of suppressing the rule of capital itself and eventually all possible state forms.

“second nature.” This is where the commune comes in. Since the rule of capital is essentially “economic not political in character,” it “cannot be broken at the political level.”¹⁵ After the first step of intervening in or overthrowing the actual, immediate state formation, there lies the strategic project of suppressing the rule of capital itself and eventually all possible state forms.¹⁶ Only implementing this new logic on the grassroots level—in communes and other self-governed spaces

—in a way that extends throughout all of society could, in turn, render all state forms unnecessary.

The whole process is extremely complex. For this reason, Mészáros likens the transition to socialism to a complicated project of house remodelling. He tells the story of how Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s father rebuilt the family house from the inside, since building codes in eighteenth-century Frankfurt prevented new houses from overhanging the street. To maintain the breadth of the spaces where his family had resided, Goethe’s father worked floor by floor, “rebuilding the inherited edifice in its entirety.”¹⁷ For Mészáros, this tricky process serves as a kind of model for the socialist

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transition. Many Marxists have fallen into the trap of presenting the transition as a brief and relatively simple process of kicking out the capitalists and destroying “their” state. Having witnessed the dilemmas and challenges of various post-revolutionary projects, Mészáros felt that even Marx himself, caught up in polemics with his contemporaries and focusing on the broadest outlines of the socialist project, had failed to address the complexity of the transition.¹⁸ In

reality, capital, labour, and the state were integral parts of the complex capital system, which would have to be dismantled from within, without any one element capable of completely disappearing through fiat decisions, however well-intentioned.

V. I. Lenin, who is famous for saying that in any revolution the key question is state power, was in fact right to point to the state’s centrality in maintaining the organic capital system in which labour and capital were the other main pillars.¹⁹ Mészáros expressed this idea by saying that the state was the system’s “mediation par excellence...combining around a political focus the totality of internal relations.”²⁰ However, since all three components (state, wage labour, and capital) are profoundly intertwined, you cannot simply “smash the bourgeois state” leaving labour’s dependence on capital fundamentally unaltered. Labour’s dependence on capital is the material basis of the state and is in a profound sense what calls it into being. Such dependence can only be changed through a “radical restructuring of the totality of social reproductive processes,” like the progressive rebuilding of an inherited house from the inside.²¹ Given this interdependence, the withering away of the state after taking power depends on the challenging, drawn-out process of making both capital and dependent labour wither away: “The vicious circle of labour being locked into its structural

¹⁵ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 472.

¹⁶ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 495.

¹⁷ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 493.

¹⁸ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 676–77.

¹⁹ ↪ I. Lenin, “One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution,” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 370–77.

²⁰ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 491.

²¹ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 494.

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dependency [on] capital, on the one hand, and into a subordinate position at the level of political decision-making by an alien state power on the other, can only be broken if the producers progressively cease to reproduce the material supremacy of capital. This they can only do by radically challenging the hierarchical structural division of labour.”²²

In this restructuring project, Mészáros envisioned a long-term social process in which labour would have the protagonist role. The imposed division of labour would be replaced by a consciously self-determined organisation of labour by the workers themselves.²³ The process required was “possible only if all controlling functions of the social metabolism...are progressively appropriated and positively exercised by the associated producers.”²⁴

Consider, now, these features: the appropriation of production by workers, all controlling functions exercised by associated producers, and the reintegration of administrative functions into the community. What is the basic social form

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indicated here? These features point to a particular social form: the commune, or at least this is how Chávez understood it, who was fond of Mészáros’s description of the Goethe family house and referenced it in his Aló Presidente programs. Admirably, Mészáros had laid out the way forward for socialist

construction, never denying its complexity. No wonder, then, that Chávez praised Mészáros as the “Pathfinder of Socialism,” highlighting his work in developing a theory of the socialist transition, for which Marx had not left a detailed theoretical account!

Venezuelan Communes as Cells of a New Socialist System

Venezuelan communes embody a new social metabolism of a qualitatively different type, with their self-determined control of production, achieved through assemblies and other grassroots organizational forms. At the same time, these communes foreshadow in a concrete way the democratic decision-making processes that can substitute for the state, ultimately abolishing its separate legality and administration.

Some of the characteristics of the emergent social system can be seen—and one can look at their different degrees of

Chávez quoted Mészáros saying that the measure of socialist progress is the existence of substantive democracy at all levels of society)... Overall, with Mészáros and Chávez, one can appreciate a radical departure from most socialist prescriptions, both those that have existed in the past and many of those still operating in the present.

expression in the communes spread across Venezuela’s extended territory—by simply putting a negation sign in front of what Mészáros identified as the key features of the capital system. If the capital system alienates the means of production from workers, the commune makes those means belong to the community. If capital’s hierarchical division of labour requires that workers are controlled by command structures from above, the commune makes all

production methods and goals the result of democratic decision-making, with capital’s externally imposed production goals replaced by internally self-determined ones. (In what was essentially his last testament, the famous “Golpe de Timón” speech, Chávez quoted Mészáros saying that the measure of socialist progress is the existence of substantive

²² ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 495.

²³ ↪ Mészáros contrasts the imposed “division of labour” to the consciously planned “organization of labour.” In the latter, workers themselves allot time to different productive tasks according to self-determined criteria. Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 757.

²⁴ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 495.

democracy at all levels of society).²⁵ Finally, if there is a separate legal and administrative structure in the state formations of all capital systems, the commune integrates such structures and administrative practices into itself, restoring the power of decision-making to the social body.

Overall, with Mészáros and Chávez, one can appreciate a radical departure from most socialist prescriptions, both those that have existed in the past and many of those still operating in the present. In the past, socialists generally underestimated the complexity of the transition and failed to perceive the central importance of creating a new grassroots social metabolism. The result was the persistence of the capital system in a hybrid modality, with the state and its functionaries taking over from individual capitalists the role of extracting surplus labour from workers. Today, many socialist projects continue to operate under the assumption that they can proceed by simply obtaining political power and offering a “better package” to workers and other sectors of society without much focus on worker’s self-activity in reshaping the structure of society and themselves in the process. At best, workers’ self-activity and self-realisation are considered merely accessory to the revolutionary process or assumed to be relevant only at a later stage.

Yet these are dangerous ideas. If a socialist party takes power, where are the new human beings with socialist consciousness who will defend it, when push comes to shove with consolidated capitalist interests, as happened with Syriza in Greece? What force can cause state power under the new regime to begin to gradually disappear, instead of consolidating itself as a retrograde power that ultimately leads to capitalist restoration? If the self-determined activity of labour, made concrete in some kind of community-based institution like the commune, is not present from the beginning of the transformation process, then these questions remain essentially unanswered.

As we have tried to show in the foregoing, the hypothesis pursued by Chávez, under the influence of, on the one hand, lived revolutionary experience in Venezuela and, on the other, Mészáros’s innovative thinking, is radically different from

The commune, unlike most other frameworks for socialist construction, has not been defeated, though it has also only begun to be tested.

most of what has been tried in the socialist playbook. This hypothesis maintains that workers’ self-activity and self-determined labour should be central and express itself from the beginning of the revolutionary process, while also offering a novel political and economic institution for that activity to take place: the commune. Unlike most other frameworks for

socialist construction, this one has not been defeated, though it has also only begun to be tested. The various communes that exist scattered throughout Venezuela, in highly embattled situations, are bold outposts for this project, deeply informed by an unflinching critique of past failures, while looking toward creating a better, humanly satisfying and sustainable future.

²⁵ ↪ Hugo Chávez, “Strike at the Helm,” MR Online, April 1, 2015.

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