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**“Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution: A Counterhegemonic
Response to Neoliberalism?”**

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Abstract

At a time of global crisis, challenges to the status quo become more acceptable and the search for alternatives more pressing. The Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela has been at the forefront of resistance to the neoliberal globalised world order since the election of Hugo Chávez to the Presidency in 1998. The Revolution, with its goal of ‘Socialism for the 21st Century,’ defies simple labels, with scholars describing it variously as socialist, populist, even neoliberal, or any mixture of the above. This paper aims to present the Bolivarian Revolution in neo-Gramscian terms; as a fledgling project of counterhegemonic resistance to the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, whose aim is not only the short-term improvement of the living conditions of the popular classes, but also a long-term creation of an alternative to the ‘common sense’ of neoliberal capitalism. This requires a complete overhaul of all spheres of Venezuelan society. Accordingly, the process underway in Venezuela has sought to reformulate the political sphere into a system of radical ‘participatory democracy,’ as well as refashion the economy along socialist lines with the concept of the ‘social economy.’ Likewise, attempts have been made through foreign policy to challenge the hegemony of neoliberal globalisation on the international level. Inherent in these changes is the attempt to create a new ideological project based on the notions of solidarity, the collective and social justice, which can challenge the prevailing worldview of neoliberalism based on individualism, consumerism and materialism.

This current period of global crisis has raised questions about long standing assumptions about the neoliberal world order, as well as questions about possible alternatives to neoliberalism and its global hegemony. This paper asks some of these questions in a particular context; the so called ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. In particular, I want to touch on the challenges to neoliberal orthodoxy in Venezuela in three areas: its political structure and organisation, its economic and its foreign policy. The work concludes by asking another question; is a Gramscian style counterhegemony taking place in Venezuela, a question central to my PhD thesis at the ANU.

Firstly however, some background. Hugo Chávez was elected to the presidency in Venezuela in 1998. In a country that, unlike most of its neighbours, had enjoyed unbroken democratic rule since 1958 this would have been nothing remarkable aside from the fact that he had been the first president to come from outside of the ruling elite who had promised to radically overhaul the entire regime built up since 1958. Moreover, Chávez became the first president elected in Latin America on the explicit promise to bring an end to 'savage neoliberalism.' He moved quickly in his first aim, establishing a new Constitution within a year of taking office which radically changed the political regime, but the reform of the economy did not truly begin until 2001. It was then that he passed a series of laws by decree, some of which had a radical potential to change the economic structure. What followed was a nearly three year period of social conflict, as the old economic, political and social elites resisted the challenges to their power. The country became extremely polarised as the opposition attempted to oust Chávez through any means available: a failed coup in April 2002; a general strike from December 2002 to February 2003; and a recall referendum in August 2004. Each time, Chávez managed to hold on to power thanks to the poor masses who took to the streets, factories and ballot booths to defend him. This radicalised the movement and with the opposition defeated and discredited, Chávez began to define the process of change in Venezuela as 'Socialism for the 21st Century.' This has included the opening up of new spaces for participation in the political process to the masses of Venezuelans previously excluded from the political regime, the application of economic policies which not only challenge the neoliberal orthodoxy of liberalisation, privatisation and the 'free market,' but also seek to challenge the logic of capitalism, and a raft of initiatives at the international level which seek to challenge the hegemony of the neoliberal world order. I will now turn to outline these in more detail.

Political Reforms

The political reforms of the Chávez presidency have from the outset focused on facilitating participation in the political process. This was not only to guard against a bureaucratisation of the Bolivarian Revolution, but also in recognition of the centrality of *praxis*; participatory practice through which individuals develop new consciousnesses about their ability to bring about social change (Burbach and Piñero 2007, 184). Participation has generally been fostered in two ways. On the one hand, the participatory measures, that is, the various ways in which the 1999 Constitution and subsequent laws open the state to direct participation by the population. On the other hand, there has been a concerted effort to create bottom-up 'protagonistic' parallel structures of political power, a 'Sixth Branch' of the state, through which the population can exercise self-determination and participate in the revolutionary process.¹ Both of these approaches seek to overcome the contradiction of the minimal democracy propagated by the neoliberal world order known as 'polyarchy,' which narrows democratic input into electoral participation but does not allow for democratic intervention into the social and economic spheres.

The 'participatory' structures stem mostly from the 1999 Constitution, which sets up numerous innovations to foster citizen participation in the state. For example, Article

¹ The other branches are the three most commonly seen in liberal democracies: the executive, legislative and judicial, the Citizen Power and the Electoral Power, which constitutes the Electoral Commission.

272 sets up the 'Fourth Branch' of the state, which is tasked with protecting the interests of the people from the state. This 'Fourth Branch' consists of the Attorney General, National Comptroller and Public Defender, and is to be nominated by civil society organisations and be technically separate from the other branches of government.² Another innovation is the Constitution is the right to recall elected officials through a referendum, an instrument which the opposition used in 2004 to try to push Chávez out of office.³ Citizens also have the right to initiate laws by referendum, as well as perform social audits of any government activity (Wilpert 2007, 61-2).⁴ These innovations aim to include the population in the workings of the state and give it tools to hold elected officials more accountable. In doing so, they go beyond the narrow meaning of democracy adopted by polyarchy, which holds that the legitimacy of elected officials comes from the fact they were elected, rather than the decisions they make (Robinson 1996, 624-6). Of themselves, however, they do not present a radical break with the past, or an instrument to transform the social and economic spheres. Furthermore, the polarisation of Venezuelan society, especially during the three year period 2001-04, meant that the opposition attempted to use these instruments for anti-democratic purposes, while on the other hand their autonomy was compromised by the government as it battled for survival (Ellner 2008, 179). This suggests that the participatory innovations can only work to their full potential in a hegemonic society, which is yet to be achieved.

Of more radical potential are moves to foster 'protagonistic' democracy, which ensures not only the participation in the state but more importantly self-determination, which aims to place the popular masses at the heart of the process of social change. These structures hold the potential to one day supplant the structures of representative democracy, and give agency to the people (Ellner 2008, 176). There have been numerous attempts to construct such structures, with a trial and error approach allowing to discard initiatives that did not work and learn lessons from ones that did. The most recent has been the establishment of Communal Councils in 2006. These Councils, which are made up of about 200 to 400 families in urban areas and 20 families in rural areas, create various committees and working groups which undertake social and structural projects to deal with various issues in their neighbourhoods (Ellner 2008, 128). Proposals for the funding of these projects are then put to various state agencies, which reached \$U.S. 5billion in 2007 (Wilpert 2007, 60). As a condition of reception of the funding, the Council must create a communal bank into which the money is deposited, and administered by the Council. Thus the Council, through the committees, takes an active role in the planning, financing and administering of public works, encouraging a collectivists and solidaritst ethos within communities. Likewise, the Councils are horizontally structured. Its leaders, chosen by the full assembly of the Council, are considered 'spokespersons' rather than representatives, and of equal rank with all other members,

² The Attorney General is tasked with prosecuting citizen's violations of the law, the National Comptroller overlooks corruption and the proper administration of public finances and the Public Defender is supposed to ensure that the state does not trample on the human rights of the citizens.

³ Article 72 of the Constitution states that all elected officials and judges can be revoked in the second half of their term via a popular referendum. The petition to initiate a recall referendum has must be signed by at least 20 per cent of registered voters, and in the referendum the number of votes required to revoke an official must be equal to or greater than what they were elected with in the first place and turn out must be at least 25 per cent of registered voters.

⁴ Such an audit can be initiated by any citizen and can be financial or non-financial accounting of all activities of any public administration. The citizen can then participate in this audit themselves.

further embedding 'protagonistic' notions of democracy. By 2007, there were nearly 20,000 such councils and their funding now represents 50% of all funding for the local and regional governments (Gabriel 2008).

The importance of the Councils is that they allow the population to take an active part in ordering the life of their community through democratic and collective means, in contrast to the previous reliance on representative structures like municipal and local government. The Councils thus became alternative political structures, which challenge the existing representative ones. Their truly radical potential, however, lies in the aspects of the law which have not yet been implemented, which call for the creation of associations of Communal Councils, which would be made up of the spokespersons from each individual Council, and which would deal with large-scale projects that impact on all of its member councils (Wilpert 2007, 60). This blueprint could then be replicated at each level of government, creating a series of structures at the levels of neighbourhood, municipality, state and eventually society, forming a governing structure that directly replaces the existing representative one, thus opening up the possibility of direct, active mass participation in the political process (Albert 2005).

The Community Councils are not without their problems. As with any structures where funding is involved, there are opportunities for waste, poor management and corruption, especially as many of the members do not have technical knowledge and adopt a trail and error approach to projects. However, these shortcomings can be overcome through practice, and the government has learned from past failures by establishing various oversight and audit structures to ensure that the problem of corruption is minimised (Ellner 2009). Secondly, some of the Councils have taken a political role, campaigning for Chávez during elections. While this has the potential to undermine the autonomy of the Councils, it must be remembered that their aim is not necessarily to create structures with complete autonomy from the state, but rather to empower the people and institutionalise their participation in the revolutionary process. Even if the Councils do agitate for Chávez in electoral contests, this does not prevent them from being critical of the government and their support is not unqualified, as the defeat of the 2007 Constitutional Referendum indicated (Ellner 2009). The biggest problem is the deep-held suspicion and apathy of many community members towards such structures, as well as the perception that they are simply means of accessing state finances to improve their communities (Gabriel 2008). This highlights the difficulties in developing new a new protagonistic consciousness in a setting where the mass of the population has been actively excluded from the political process for centuries, to a point where such exclusion has come to be understood as 'common sense.' This however, does not disqualify these structures in themselves, but rather suggest the continued need to challenge such perceptions and facilitate participation in order to shape new ways of thinking.

Economic Reforms

The government's economic policies reflect the belief that political and social change within the superstructure must precede any significant change of the structure (Chávez 2005, 107). This has meant that more attention and effort has been put into creating new political and social structures which foster the development of consciousness, rather than structural reforms of the economy. Realising that in the age of neoliberal globalisation it would be impossible to decouple Venezuela from the global economy,

the government's macroeconomic strategy instead focused on state intervention to alleviate poverty and recovery of control over the oil industry. While such policies were contrary to the neoliberal orthodoxy, they were hardly radical or revolutionary. More radical experiments to create a 'social economy' only began to be canvassed once control over the oil industry was re-established in 2003 and the opposition was defeated in 2004. Even then they were cautious and gradual, confined to small pockets of the economy while the main macroeconomic strategy still resembled social democratic and Keynesian solutions. This was primarily a reflection of scepticism of untried worker-led economic models, and a deeper reluctance to prioritise the working class in the Revolution in recognition of the fallacy of class determinism, even as Chávez began calling it 'socialist' (Ellner 2008, 128). It also reflected the Venezuelan reality, where the traditional working class was small and by and large opposed to the Revolution, while the majority of the population were employed in the 'informal' economy, and thus not traditionally class conscious. Nevertheless, experiments in the social economy show promise of elucidating alternatives to the capitalist mode of production, and allow the possibility of challenging capitalist discourse through the development of new consciousnesses. Likewise, even the non-radical macroeconomic policies fly in the face of the neoliberal consensus, undermining its central premise that there was no alternative.

Chávez's macroeconomic policies have focused on the reassertion of the state's sovereignty vis-à-vis the global economy. In Venezuela's case, this has meant taking control of the state oil company, PDVSA, as well as applying heterodox policies in the economy. As Mommer (2003) has argued, since the 1980s PDVSA had increasingly morphed into a transnational company, becoming a 'state within a state' with its own neoliberal agenda, at odds with Chávez's plans. With 80% of state revenues coming from the oil industry, re-establishing control over the company was essential, and intertwined with the opposition attempts to oust Chávez; the 2002-03 general strike was led by PDVSA executives, and it was only once Chávez fired 19,000 workers and executives in its aftermath that control over the company was established. The benefit of full oil revenues meant that the government was able to reassert its economic sovereignty and redistribute wealth to a population battered by neoliberal austerity. Accordingly, government spending on social programs to alleviate poverty increased by over threefold during the period 1998-2006 (Weisbrot, Ray and Sandoval 2009, 3).⁵ These included wide-ranging measures like the various 'missions' which provided free healthcare, education, subsidised food and other benefits, rural and urban land reform, wage increases and currency and price controls and the development of a social security safety net. These policies were a direct contravention of IMF dictates of neoliberal orthodoxy but the results spoke for themselves; between 1998 and 2007 poverty declined from 55.4% to 33.6 per of the

⁵ As with any issue surrounding Venezuela, the statistics around government social spending and poverty reduction are contested by those opposed to the Revolution, who often come from the ranks of the previous Punto Fijo regime, or organic intellectuals of the neoliberal world order. Their analyses have often been found to be intentionally misleading and selective, with a normative intention to discredit the process rather than present an objective analysis of it. For a good critique of their position, coupled with a point-by-point statistical and empirical refutation of their claims, see the work of Mark Weisbrot, available on the website of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (<http://www.cepr.net/index.php/venezuela/>), especially Mark Weisbrot, "An Empty Research Agenda: The Creation of Myths About Contemporary Venezuela," (Washington D.C.: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2008). and Mark Weisbrot, "How Not to Attack an Economist (and an Economy): Getting the Numbers Right," (Washington D.C.: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2008).

population, extreme poverty experienced a sharp drop from 24.66% to 9.6% and income inequality declined, according to the Gini index, from 48.65 to 42.11 (Weisbrot, Ray and Sandoval 2009, 10). Undoubtedly, such impressive results were in large part thanks to Venezuela's oil income; nevertheless, they presented a powerful example that anti-neoliberal policies could reduce poverty and inequality.

However, there was no large-scale takeover of the means of production; the government stated that foreign and local capital was welcome to invest in Venezuela, as long as it complied with national goals (Figueroa 2006, 200). Indeed, while the government nationalised key 'strategic' sectors of the economy like steel, cement, telecommunications, electricity and finance, the previous owners were fully compensated in line with market values. Moreover, the companies in these industries largely continued to be run as state-owned enterprises, and moves to turn full control over to the workers did not materialise. Thus, overall, Chávez's macroeconomic policies, while stepping outside the neoliberal mould, essentially boiled down to state intervention in the capitalist economy, rather than any fundamental challenge to capitalist relations of production (Wilpert 2007, 101). While they had a profound impact on poverty and income inequality, they did not amount to structural change. It was the government's attempts to create a 'social economy' that provided a possibility of such change, through the development of a socialist consciousness.

The social economy refers to attempts to foster economic activities that are organised on the basis of solidarity and the common good, rather than individual self-interest (Wilpert 2007, 77). Its aim is not only to democratise wealth and increase equality but also to shape a new, socialist culture amongst its participants (Wilpert 2007, 83). The social economy revolves around two major areas: small cooperatives in the context of endogenous development zones, and more traditional strategies of expropriating enterprises and co-management. As with other experiments, the social economy developed on a trial and error basis. The overall strategy seems to be to incrementally develop alternative structures which foster and consolidate socialist values, and one day replace capitalist structures (Burbach and Piñero 2007, 197). The success of such a strategy is contingent on high oil incomes, which are needed to fund the experiments until they attain a sufficient degree of hegemony. This is a serious contradiction but it is not insurmountable if the social economy does develop into a credible alternative. The specific attempts to develop a social economy thus deserve some attention.

Cooperatives existed in Venezuela before Chávez's time, but they were marginal to the economy. Much more emphasis has been placed on their development once Chávez came to power, with the government providing training programs, logistical support and credit to cooperatives, as well as prioritising them in the purchase of goods by the state (Wilpert 2007, 77-8). As a result, by the end of 2006, the number of cooperatives had mushroomed to 141,000 (Ellner 2008, 123). These were incorporated into the logic of endogenous development, which emphasises development through integration of the cultural, social and political resources within the community into autonomous local networks of production and consumption (Ullrich 2009). This involved the creation of Nuclei of Endogenous Sustainable Development (NUDES); zones which integrate the resources of the communities they are located in, including cooperatives and the various social missions, in order to develop it from within. NUDES are prioritised in the key areas of economy that require development: agriculture, tourism, industrial production, infrastructure and

services, and receive not only financial but also educational support through *Misión Vuelvan Caras I & II*. These missions provide skills training and logistical help to unemployed Venezuelans in starting and continuing cooperatives in the context of NUDES, seeking to instil a new socialist values through stressing work as the development of human capacity and developing relations of production based on cooperation, solidarity, protagonism and collective property (Lebowitz 2006, 101).

Consequently, the aim of the cooperatives and endogenous development is to transform people and communities involved in them. In obliging cooperatives to integrate into and benefit their communities, and its members to share profits amongst themselves, the government is encouraging the development of new attitudes and habits based on solidarity and cooperation, rather than individualism and competition (Ellner 2008, 131). However, the problems with the cooperatives reveal that this is a difficult process. Out of the 141,000 registered cooperatives, it is estimated that up to half of them do not actually exist or are not functioning properly (Wilpert 2007, 78). Many have failed due to corruption, misuse of funds or lack of experience, and many are only kept afloat by the state. These issues represent not only the reluctance of the government to prosecute people who have mispent public money, but also, and more importantly, the difficulty of developing a new consciousness based on the ideals of solidarity and cooperation (Ellner 2008, 130). Moreover, without a deeper embedding of these notions in the consciousness, cooperatives are also in danger of surrendering to capitalist logics of self-interests and individualism (Lebowitz 2006, 105). This does not demean the attempts to create a social economy through cooperatives, rather it is a poignant reminder of the centrality of developing consciousness, and the necessity of educational measures like *Misión Vuelvan Caras*. The cooperatives that do succeed, however, are a powerful example of alternative logics that can transform society.

Along more traditional lines, there have also been experiments with expropriating companies and worker control. During the general strike, some of the abandoned or bankrupted companies were taken over by workers. The government expropriate some of these, like the paper company INVEPAL, the valve company CNV and the tube company SIDEROCA, along with other companies which had shut down, were deemed strategic to the minerals industry or which violated laws, especially in food production.⁶ Worker co-management has been established in some of these, which has meant worker election of company managers, and in the case of aluminium company ALCASA, allowing workers and community members to draw up the company budget and implement a new, non-Taylorist production system (Ellner 2008, 123). However, moves in this direction have also been cautious and gradual, and often promises have not been followed through. Moreover, despite Chávez's calls to turn over more and more enterprises to worker control, the actual progress in this regard has been slow and in all instances includes co-management with the state rather than self-management. This is because worker-managed enterprises that continue operating in market economies are often in danger to surrendering to market logics, and thus not serving the rest of society (Wilpert 2007, 79). Once again, the issue comes down to the need to develop a new consciousness which values solidarity and cooperation. Chávez is himself well aware of this, calling (Albrecht 2009) for 'Worker's Schools'

⁶ Some examples included the Cargill Rice Plant which evaded price controls; various service providers to the oil industry which were deemed to be of strategic character; the steel plant SIDOR following a 16 month collective contract dispute; and the airline Aeropostal whose owners had been implicated in drug trafficking cases.

to be created in factories, saying 'every factory should be a school, in order...to create not only briquettes and sheets and steel and aluminium, but also, above all, new men and women, a new society, a socialist society.' As with the rest of the Revolution, this is still very much a process in development.

Foreign Policy

At the international level the significance of the Bolivarian Revolution lies in its challenge to the dominant discourse of world order which posits that there is no alternative to the Western-dominated world of economic liberalisation, free trade, privatisation, individualism and intense capitalist competition. Its defiance of the neoliberal agenda and its institutions is a reassertion of sovereignty in an era where neoliberal organic intellectuals extol the demise of the state and the ascendancy of transnational capital. The success of the Revolution produces a powerful demonstration effect that this neoliberal dictates can be challenged, and that viable alternatives can be established (Ellner 2006, 96). Furthermore, Chávez not only challenges the neoliberal discourse at home but also on the international level; opposing and derailing the U.S. proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas and other U.S. initiatives in Latin America; championing the collective renegotiation of Latin American foreign debt; and challenging the WTO intellectual property regime by not upholding the patent rights of transnational companies (Ellner 2006, 97). Likewise, Venezuela's propagation of multipolarism challenges the hierarchical nature of the current world order and seeks to open spaces for voices previously left out, specifically from the periphery. This defiance of 'American imperialism' strikes a chord with many in the region who have borne its brunt and puts Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution in the thick of the struggle in global civil society against the hegemony of neoliberalism.

This is perhaps most apparent in Venezuela's move to construct alternative structures of Latin American integration, based on the values of solidarity and the collective and focusing on social development rather than economic liberalisation (Ellner 2008, 205). In a region where the hegemony of neoliberalism was never fully accepted beyond the narrow circles of transnational elites, these structures seek to challenge the 'common sense' that equates progress and modernity with neoliberal globalisation. The project of Latin American integration taps into the pan-American vision of Bolívar, who foresaw the threat to Latin America's independence and sovereignty that would come from the U.S., and its idea of integration as based on an unequal economic relationship.⁷ Instead, he proposed a different type of integration, in which Latin Americans would band together for the common good, rather than accept the hegemony of the 'empire' to the North (Castro-Klarén 2003, 43). Accordingly, Chávez has resisted U.S. designs for Latin American integration, and instead proposed designs which reject neoliberalism and promote autonomy from the U.S.

These have been grouped under the initiative called the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), which brings the various agreements to integrate Latin America together under the banner of solidarity and cooperation. ALBA is not only a model of political, economic and social integration but also a mechanism to promote solidarity amongst its members, along Bolívar's line of thinking (Ellner 2008, 205). ALBA,

⁷ Bolívar famously said that 'The United States of North America seems destined by providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty,' a remark not lost on Chávez.

which to date includes nine members (Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Dominica, Saint Vincent and Antigua) rejects globalisation's unquestioning commitment to free trade and points out that the asymmetries of power between Latin America and the U.S. mean that free trade is disastrous for countries of the periphery (Ellner 2008, 205). This is a major refutation of the neoliberal narrative which presents free trade as universally beneficial. Conversely, the political, economic and social agreements signed under ALBA seek to foster the endogenous development of their economies based on social development rather than economic liberalisation (Gibbs 2006, 275). Thus, for example ALBA includes the PetroSur and PetroCaribe agreements between Venezuela and various Latin American nations which provide heavily discounted oil in return for agricultural products; the original agreement between Venezuela and Cuba which led to Cuba providing doctors to staff the Venezuelan health missions in return for discounted oil; a regional bank with \$U.S. 1 billion deposits which lends money for infrastructure, health, educational and cultural projects without conditionalities; various agreements to foster food security and protect the agricultural sector; various agreements on joint hydrocarbon ventures; and most recently, a common currency, the Sucre, to be used in transactions between member states (Fox 2009; Hattingh 2008). These agreements are based on the values of solidarity and reciprocity, rather than the intense competition that characterises globalisation. Together with other integration initiatives like MERCOSUR and UNASUR, ALBA aims to build Latin America as a united bloc, based on the ideals of solidarity and the collective, which can resist the hegemony of the U.S. and pursue its own developmental logic.

Conclusion: a Gramscian Counterhegemony?

As this short outline has indicated, at the very least, there are radical and important changes underway in Venezuela. The question of what they mean in theoretical and analytical terms is still wide open. A number of scholars have attributed Gramscian explanations to the Bolivarian Revolution. As a way of conclusion, I would like to make a brief comment on the Gramscian analysis of the situation in Venezuela.

On the one hand, many of the developments in Venezuela can be viewed through a Gramscian lens. The strategy of the Bolivarian Revolution can be seen to reflect Gramsci's insight that the only way to overthrow the hegemony of dominant classes is through a sustained counterhegemonic 'war of position' in civil society which challenges the 'common sense' ideology propagated by the dominant classes that fosters consent and thus hegemony for their political project. This requires a struggle within the superstructure to construct an alternative ideological project which can then challenge the dominant discourse and hope to become hegemonic itself. Such a focus on superstructural factors is clearly evident in Venezuela; Chávez has repeatedly stated that there needs to be a shift in the consciousness of society before structural change of the economy can occur. Thus, political reforms like the instigation of participatory and protagonistic democracy seek to instil in the population an ethos of agency which can drive social change. Likewise, the attempts to create a social economy seek to facilitate new ways of thinking and living, which are based on solidarity and the collective, and which challenge the capitalist notions of the self-interested individual. Taken together, these reforms attempt to challenge the prevailing 'common sense' of a capitalist society, which holds the current world order as immutable and the values of individualism, liberalism and competition as natural and neutral, and instead develop a new ideological project which would facilitate

consent for the Bolivarian Revolution. Similarly, on the international stage, Venezuela's policies have sought to challenge the neoliberal ethos that there is no alternative to the current globalised world order of free trade, liberalisation and privatisation and to set up alternative structures based on more equitable values. This 'demonstration effect' should not be underestimated, as it has inspired similar 'revolutions' throughout the continent, most notably in Bolivia and Ecuador.

On the other hand however, despite the fact that the Bolivarian project holds state power, it is by no means hegemonic. In fact, many of the old elites are still control many of the institutions of the state and civil society, and work actively to undermine the revolutionary project. Consequently, the ideological battle continues, and Venezuela remains a polarised country as both the Bolivarians and the old elites struggle over the shape of the new society. Moreover, there are numerous internal contradictions within the Bolivarian movement, including its authoritarian tendencies, divisions between reformists and radicals and the continuing scourge of an oil state; tutelage, waste, corruption and inefficiency, which threaten to undermine the revolutionary project. These factors suggest that the transformation of consciousness is a difficult and fraught process, and that the Bolivarian Revolution faces a continuing threat both from within and without, not to mention from the neoliberal world order, felt most acutely through the U.S.'s efforts to support the opposition and undermine the revolutionary project. Therefore, it seems that a good way to understand the current situation in Venezuela is through the prism of Gramsci's concept of an 'organic crisis,' where the old is dying and the new is not yet born. In this vacuum, various social forces, of which the Bolivarian Revolution is the most coherent but by no means the ascendant one, struggle to create a new hegemonic project. How this struggle will play out is anyone's guess, especially given Latin America's history of failed revolutionary attempts in the past, but this makes it even more important to try to understand the process and its possibilities.

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