

Venezuela: Human Development and Practice

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The Bolivarian Constitution, in my view, is unique in its explicit recognition (in [Article 299](#)) that the goal of a human society must be that of 'ensuring overall human development.' In the declaration of [Article 20](#) that 'everyone has the right to the free development of his or her own personality' and the focus of [Article 102](#) upon 'developing the creative potential of every human being and the full exercise of his or her personality in a democratic society' – this theme of human development pervades the Constitution.

Underlying this focus is a theory. It is a theory which stresses the gap between what is and what *ought* to be. Implicit is the recognition that the full development of our creative potential is not occurring but that it is *possible*. In other words, what we observe now in the capacities of human beings is not *all* that is possible, what we observe now is a fraction of what we can be. It is a clear recognition that human development is not fixed and that we do not know its boundaries. It is a political statement – because it implies that there is an alternative.

There is another very important characteristic of the Bolivarian Constitution; and, that is its focus upon precisely *how* people develop their capacities and capabilities – i.e., how overall human development occurs. [Article 62](#) of the Constitution declares that participation by people in 'forming, carrying out and controlling the management of public affairs is the necessary way of achieving the involvement to ensure their complete development, both individual and collective.' And, the same focus upon a democratic, participatory and protagonistic society is present in the economic sphere, which is why Article 70 stresses 'self-management, co-management, cooperatives in all forms' and why Article 102's goal of 'developing the creative potential of every human being' emphasizes 'active, conscious and joint participation.'

Here, again, the Constitution embodies a theory. It is a theory that I immediately recognized when I read the Constitution – whether it was conscious or not on the part of the drafters of the Constitution; that theory is Karl Marx's concept of 'revolutionary practice.' Revolutionary practice, he stressed, is '[the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change](#).' Marx developed this idea that we develop our capacities and capabilities through our activity in one of his earliest writings. But, it is a theme which runs throughout his work. He talked, for example, of how people develop through their struggles – how this is the only way the working class can '[succeed in ridding itself of the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew](#).' And he told workers that they would have to go through as much as 50 years of struggles 'not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power.' And, again, after the Paris Commune in 1871, over a quarter of a century after he first began to explore this theme, he commented that workers know that 'they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historical processes, transforming circumstances and

men.'

Always the same point – we change ourselves through our activity. This idea of the simultaneous change in circumstances and self-change, however, was not limited to class struggle itself. It was present in all activities of people. Marx talked quite a bit about the process of production. Not everyone recognizes, though, that he stressed that people transform themselves in the process of production. The worker, Marx noted, 'acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way, he simultaneously changes his own nature.' Similarly, he talked about how in production 'the producers change, too, in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, ... new needs and new language.' In all this, there is the clear conception of the self-development of people through their activity – e.g., Marx commented that 'when the worker cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species.' This idea about developing the capabilities of human beings, too, was central for Marx.

What was his vision? It was the development of what he called 'the rich human being' – the person for whom her own development is an inner necessity, the person who is rich in both abilities and needs. This, for Marx, was *real* wealth – *human* wealth, 'the developed productive power of all individuals.' He asked, 'what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces'..? The goal, Marx insisted, is the 'totally developed individual', the 'development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption', the 'absolute working- out of his creative potentialities,' the 'complete working out of the human content,' the 'development of all human powers as such the end in itself.' Here was Marx's goal – the creation of a society which would permit this, a society which encourages 'the all-round development of the individual.'

Of course, Marx was not alone in stressing the importance of human development. This was the theme of most 19th Century socialists – the idea that people should have the opportunity to develop and use their faculties. And, this goal was described by Marx's partner Frederick Engels as the organisation of a 'society in such a way that every member of it can develop and use all his capabilities and powers in complete freedom.' But, human development has become also a focus of many writers in the late 20th Century and at the present time. Why? Because it has become so obvious that the development of human beings and human capacities is not at all the same as rising national income. So, in recent years, literature on social and economic development has emphasized increasingly the process of human development. Moving away from the crude identification of development with statistics on economic growth, this focus (most obvious in the Human Development Reports published by the UN Development Program) stresses the necessity to place human beings at the centre of the meaning of development.

The UN Human Development Reports draw in particular upon the theoretical work of the economist Amartya Sen. In this work, the central focus is upon the development of human capabilities, and this is sometimes described as the 'capabilities approach.' The development of human capabilities is seen as at the core of human development and as the condition for people to be able to live lives of respect and value.

But, what exactly do people like Amartya Sen and others in this school (such as Marsha Nussbaum, a feminist philosopher) mean by capabilities? What they emphasize is the

removal of barriers. Having capabilities for them is having opportunities. So, this approach stresses the broadening of opportunities – e.g, removing racism, removing sexism, removing inadequate education, removing conditions which generate poor health, removing restrictions on the opportunities that people have for a life of dignity.

And, that's what the UN Human Development Reports do – they record the achievements of different societies in terms of what they provide in areas such as education and health. But, they say nothing about how the *struggle* to end racism, sexism, inequality in education and health *itself* transforms people and develops their capacities. They say nothing about the role of human activity. Rather, their focus is upon creating a level playing field and removing the barriers to equality which restrict opportunities.

Essentially, this perspective is liberalism, liberal reformism. It certainly rejects the neoliberal worship of the market with all its inhuman effects, and it accepts the importance of the role of the State in supporting human welfare. However, it implicitly argues that broadening and equalising opportunities-something that States should do – is the answer to neoliberalism. The difference between this liberal reformism which dominates current discussions of human development and the concept of revolutionary practice that we see in the Bolivarian Constitution is most obvious when it comes to talking about education.

In the capabilities approach, what matters is how much States choose to spend on education-i.e., what their priorities are. What proportion of the society is illiterate? What proportion has completed high school? What proportion has gone to university? And, it would also ask what are the gender differences in this data – in order to explore the effect of sexism and patriarchy in preventing human development. Do all castes and races have the opportunity for education or are they excluded?

But, what it doesn't ask is – what *kind* of education? Is it education delivered vertically from the top to the bottom? Is it education that involves the memorisation by students of accepted truths? Truths accepted by and acceptable to those at the top? Is it education that supports the maintenance of existing power structures? Or, is it education as a process in which people learn through their own activity?

These are the very types of questions posed by Paulo Freire, who was himself profoundly influenced by Marx. Freire distinguishes very clearly between the delivery of 'banked knowledge' and knowledge which develops from a critical process which examines the world and our place in the world. 'In the banking concept of knowledge,' Freire pointed out, 'knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' [[Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), 72]. In other words, it is a gift from above. The state provides a gift; the teacher provides a gift.

In contrast, Freire's own concept of education (what he calls 'problem-posing education') stresses revolutionary practice: the relation between our activity and the development of our capacities. 'Problem-posing education,' he notes, 'affirms men and women as being in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished, uncompleted beings'; it is, he stresses, a 'humanist and liberating praxis' – one which 'posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation' [84, 86].

There is no place in the liberal concept of human development for this emphasis upon practice. Whether education comes as a gift from above to the deprived who are below or whether it emerges from our critical problem-posing and reflections appears irrelevant.

Again, let me stress the relationship to Marx's point. When he first developed his concept of the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and self-change, it was in a particular context. He was criticising the idea that we can give people a gift, that we just change their circumstances for them and they will be themselves different people. And what Marx said right before introducing his concept of revolutionary practice was – you are forgetting something rather important. You are forgetting that it is human beings who change circumstances. You are forgetting that 'the educator must himself be educated.'

This idea that we can change circumstances for people and thus change them, he noted, divides society into two parts-one part of which is superior to society. In other words, the same point that Paulo Freire was making: the idea that knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.

The fact that the liberal concept of human development does not put human activity and practice at its core means that it is essential to develop a revolutionary concept of human development. That is especially essential here in Venezuela. Why? Because what is the Bolivarian Revolution about if it is *not* about development through practice?

Revolutionary practice is not a concept buried in the Constitution. It lives every day in the idea of combining education and work – a concept not only at the core of [Mision Vuelvan Caras](#) but also in the new ideas of education in workplaces and in Moral y Luces. And, it is obviously present in the idea of the communal councils, where people can work together in their neighbourhoods to diagnose and begin to resolve their needs.

Precisely because there is little explicit consideration of this revolutionary concept of human development, it is important to develop these ideas here. Once you understand the concept of revolutionary practice, you recognise that *without* practice, you can not have the full development of human capacities. People don't develop all their potential if they can't make decisions in their communities. If the State is hierarchical and issues instructions from above through transmission belts, you cannot have people's complete development, both individual and collective. If people are prevented from using their minds within the workplace but instead follow directions from above, you have what Marx described as the crippling of body and mind, producers who are fragmented, degraded, alienated from 'the intellectual potentialities of the labour process.' The more we explore these ideas, the more we recognise that this is what socialism for the 21st Century must be – a profound democracy as practice, a process in which we simultaneously transform society and ourselves.

That is what our programme, at Centro Internacional Miranda in Caracas, on Transformative Practice and Human Development is all about – it is an attempt to develop these ideas and to attempt to spread them. It is a way to spread the concept of socialism for the 21st Century. And, it is not simply a process of developing the idea. We also want to try to develop measures that can *demonstrate* the link between practice and human development. Because a process of demonstrating that human beings develop through their own activity points the way beyond the despotism of capitalism (in which the only real practice in which people engage is shopping) to a new socialist society. •

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