

# THE COMMUNAL STATE: COMMUNAL COUNCILS, COMMUNES, AND WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY<sup>1</sup>

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## Resumen.

El carácter particular de lo que Hugo Chávez llamó como el proceso Bolivariano, radica en la comprensión de que la transformación social se puede construir desde dos direcciones: “desde arriba” y “desde abajo.” El Bolivarianismo –o el Chavismo– incluye entre sus participantes tanto organizaciones tradicionales como nuevos grupos autónomos; éste comprende corrientes basadas en el estado y corrientes anti-sistémicas. El proceso, así difiere de los enfoques tradicionales Leninistas o de los enfoques democráticos sociales, los cuales consideran al estado como el agente central de cambio. Se diferencia también de los enfoques basados en movimientos que conciben ningún papel alguno para un estado en proceso de cambio revolucionario.

**Palabras clave.** Proceso bolivariano, estado comunal, consejos comunales, democracia radical.

## Abstract

The particular character of what Hugo Chavez called as the Bolivarian process lies in understanding that social transformation can be constructed from two directions: “from above” and. “From below”, or the Chavismo-Bolivarianismo includes among its participants both traditional organizations as new autonomous groups; it comprises based on current state and anti-systemic currents. The process and differs from traditional approaches Leninist or social democratic approaches which consider the state as the central agent of change. Also differs from the approaches that conceive any movement for a state no role in the process of revolutionary change.

**Keywords:** Bolivarian process, communal state, community councils, radical democracy.

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## Introduction.

The current transformation in Venezuela is thus the product of a tension between constituent and constituted power, with the principal agent of change being the constituent. Constituent power is the legitimate collective creative capacity of human beings expressed in movements and in the organized social base to create something new without having to derive it from something previously existing. In the Bolivarian process, the constituted power—the state and its institutions—accompanies the organized population; it must be the facilitator of bottom-up processes, so that the constituent power can bring forward the steps needed to transform society.

This approach was elaborated on various occasions by former president Hugo Chávez and has been confirmed by his successor, Nicolás Maduro, during the recent electoral campaign. It is shared by sectors of the administration and by the majority of the organized movements. Both from the government and from the rank and file of the Bolivarian process, there is a declared commitment

to redefine state and society on the basis of an interrelation between top and bottom and thereby to move toward transcending capitalist relations. Although not free of contradictions and conflicts, this two-track approach has been able to uphold and deepen the process of social transformation in Venezuela.

have seen constituent powers silenced and weakened after barely carrying out their role of legitimating the constituted power. In a genuine revolutionary process, however, the constituent power must maintain its capacity to intervene and to shape the present, to create something new that does not derive from the old. This is what defines revolution: not the act of taking power, but rather a broad process of constructing the new, an act of creation and invention.<sup>1</sup> This is the global legacy of the Bolivarian process.

In Venezuela, the concept of constituent power arose at the end of the 1980s as the defining trait of a continuous process of social transformation. The main slogan of the neighborhood assemblies was “We don’t want to be a government, we want to govern.” This idea, understood in increasingly radical terms, came to orient the revolutionary transformation, acquiring a hegemonic status

in the political-ideological debate of the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

The Bolivarian process began by calling for a strengthening of civil and human rights and for the building of a “participatory



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Constituent power, being comprehensive and expansive, has been the fundament for every revolution, democracy, and republic; it is the greatest motor of history, the most powerful, innovative social force. Historically, however, we

and protagonistic democracy” in search of a “third way” beyond capitalism and socialism. Starting in late 2005, however, President Hugo Chávez described socialism as the only alternative for bringing about the necessary transcendence of capitalism. The presidential election of 2006 was defined by Chávez as a choice between capitalism and a path towards socialism. The onset of the era of Chávez’s presidency expanded and reinforced participatory possibilities and council structures and created new ones. The idea of participation was officially defined in terms of popular power, revolutionary democracy, and socialism. Because of the obvious difficulties of defining a clear path to socialism or a clear concept of what socialism can be today, the goal was defined as “socialism of the 21st century,” which is an ongoing project. The name also serves to distinguish it from the “real socialisms” of the 20th century. The process of seeking and building is guided above all by values such as collectivity, equality, solidarity, freedom, and sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> It is embodied in the construction of councils.

In January 2007, Chávez proposed to go beyond the bourgeois state by building the communal state. He thus picked up and applied more widely a concern originating with anti-systemic forces. The main idea was to form council structures of

all kinds (communal councils, communes, and communal cities, for example), as bottom up structures of self-administration. Councils of workers, students, peasants, and women, among others, would then have to cooperate and coordinate on a higher level in order to gradually replace the bourgeois state with a communal state. According to the *National Plan for Economic and Social Development 2007-2013*, “since sovereignty resides absolutely in the people, the people can itself direct the state, without needing to delegate its sovereignty as it does in indirect or representative democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

The notion of a separation between “civil society” and “political society”—as expressed, for example, by NGOs—is thus rejected. The focus is rather upon fostering the potential and the direct capacity of the popular base to analyze, decide, implement, and evaluate what is relevant to its life. The constituent power is embodied in councils, in the institutions of popular power, and in the basic concept of the communal state. As was proposed in the constitutional reform that was rejected in the 2007 referendum, the future communal state must be subordinated to popular power, which replaces bourgeois civil society.<sup>5</sup> This would overcome the rift between the economic, the social, and the political—between civil society and political society—which

underlies capitalism and the bourgeois state. It would also prevent, at the same time, the over-centralization that characterized the countries of “real socialism.”<sup>6</sup>

The communal councils are a non-representative structure of direct democracy and the most advanced mechanism of self-organization at the local level in Venezuela. In 2013, approximately 44,000 communal councils had been established throughout the country. Since the new constitution of 1999 defined Venezuela as a “participative and protagonistic democracy,” a variety of mechanisms for the participation of the population in local administration and decision-making have been experimented with. In the beginning they were connected to local representative authorities and integrated into the institutional framework of representative democracy. Competing on the same territory as local authorities and depending on the finances authorized by those bodies, the different initiatives showed little success.

Communal councils began forming in 2005 as an initiative “from below.” In different parts of Venezuela, rank-and-file organizations, on their own, promoted forms of local self-administration named “local governments” or “communitarian governments.” During 2005, one department of the

city administration of Caracas focused on promoting this proposal in the poor neighborhoods of the city. In January 2006, Chávez adopted this initiative and began to spread it. On his weekly TV show, “Aló Presidente,” Chávez presented the communal councils—*consejos comunales*—as a kind of “good practice.” At this point some 5,000 communal councils already existed. In April 2006, the National Assembly approved the Law of Communal Councils, which was reformed in 2009 following a broad consulting process of councils’ spokespeople. The communal councils in urban areas encompass 150-400 families; in rural zones, a minimum of 20 families; and in indigenous zones, at least 10 families. The councils build a non-representative structure of direct participation that exists parallel to the elected representative bodies of constituted power.

The communal councils are financed directly by national state institutions, thus avoiding interference from municipal organs. The law does not give any entity the authority to accept or reject proposals presented by the councils. The relationship between the councils and established institutions, however, is not always harmonious; conflicts arise principally from the slowness of constituted power to respond to demands made by the councils and from attempts at interference. The

communal councils tend to transcend the division between political and civil society (i.e., between those who govern and those who are governed). Hence, liberal analysts who support that division view the communal councils in a negative light, arguing that they are not independent civil-society organizations, but rather are linked to the state. In fact, however, they constitute a parallel structure through which power and control is gradually drawn away from the state in order to govern on their own.<sup>7</sup>

At a higher level of self-government there is the possibility of creating socialist communes, which can be formed by combining various communal councils in a specific territory. The councils decide themselves about the geography of these communes. These communes can develop medium and long-term projects of greater impact while decisions continue to be made in assemblies of the communal councils. As of 2013 there are more than 200 communes under construction.

In the context of the creation of communes and communal cities, it is important to analytically distinguish between (absolute) political-administrative space and socio-cultural-economic (relational) space.<sup>8</sup> Communes reflect the latter; their boundaries do not necessarily correspond to

existing political-administrative spaces. As these continue to exist, the institutionalization of the communal councils, communes, and communal cities develops and shapes the socio-cultural-economic space. Thus, the idea of council-based non-representative local self-organization creates a “new power-geometry.” The concept of power in human geography, as elaborated by Doreen Massey, has been put “to positive political use” following the “recognition of the existence and significance, within Venezuela, of highly unequal, and thus undemocratic, power-geometries.”<sup>9</sup>

Various communes can form communal cities, with administration and planning “from below” if the entire territory is organized in communal councils and communes. The mechanism of the construction of communes and communal cities is flexible; they themselves define their tasks. Thus the construction of self-government begins with what the population itself considers most important, necessary, or opportune. The communal cities that have begun to form so far, for example, are rural and are structured around agriculture, such as the Ciudad Comunal Campesina Socialista Simón Bolívar in the southern state of Apure or the Ciudad Comunal Laberinto in the northwestern state of Zulia. Organizing and



the construction of communes and communal cities has been easier in suburban and rural areas than in metropolitan areas, since there is less distraction and less presence of opposition, while at the same time common interests are easier to define.

Regarding the democratization of ownership and administration of the means of production, Venezuela has experimented with a series of different models. Between 2001 and 2006, the Venezuelan government—in addition to asserting state control over the core of the oil industry—focused on promoting cooperatives for any type of company, including models of cooperatives co-administrated with the state or private entrepreneurs. The 1999 constitution assigned the cooperatives a special weight. They were conceived as contributing to a new social and economic balance, and thus received massive state assistance. The favorable conditions led to a boom in the number of cooperatives founded. In mid-2010, according to the national cooperative supervisory institute Sunacoop, 73,968 cooperatives were certified as operative, with an estimated total of 2 million members, although some people participated in more than one cooperative and were thus counted twice.<sup>10</sup> The initial idea that cooperatives would automatically produce for the satisfaction of social needs and that



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their internal solidarity based on collective property would extend to their local communities, proved to be an error. Most cooperatives still followed the logic of capital; concentrating on the maximization of net revenue without supporting the surrounding communities, many failed to integrate new members.<sup>11</sup> In the light of these experiences the government's focus in supporting the creation of cooperatives switched to cooperatives controlled and owned by the communities.

In response to the employers' lockout of 2002–2003, the “entrepreneurs strike,” with the stated intention of toppling the Chávez government, workers began the process of taking over workplaces abandoned by their owners. At first, the government relegated the cases to the labor courts, and then in

January 2005 began expropriations. Beginning in July 2005, the government began to pay special attention to the situation of closed businesses, and since then hundreds of such companies have been expropriated. But a systematic policy for expropriations in the productive sector did not exist until 2007. The expropriated enterprises are officially supposed to be turned into “direct social property” under the direct control of workers and communities. In reality most of them are not administered by workers and communities but by state institutions. Working conditions have not fundamentally changed, and expropriations have not automatically produced co-management or workers' control.

The concept of “direct social property” is also supposed to

apply to hundreds of new “socialist factories” built by the government in the context of an overarching strategy of industrialization. The local communal councils select the workers, while the required professionals are drawn from state and government institutions. The aim is to gradually transfer the administration of the factories into the hands of organized workers and communities. But most state institutions involved do little to organize this process or prepare the employees, which has generated growing conflicts between workers and institutions.

In 2007, Chávez picked up the idea of “socialist workers councils,” which was already being discussed by many rank-and-file workers and by existing councils and workers’ initiatives. In fact, there was a network with the same name: Socialist Workers Councils (CST). Chávez presented CST as a good practice and called on workers to form CST at their workplaces. Nevertheless, since most institutions were opposed to workers councils, only a few councils were formed at the beginning, mainly in recovered factories like the valve factory, Inveval, or the water pipe factory, Inefa.

Growing pressure from below led several government institutions to start to accept or even promote the creation of workers councils in institutionally administered workplaces,

even without the benefit of an enacted law on workers councils. But while on the one hand the majority of institutions tried to prevent the constitution of workers councils in their workplaces, in others, and in state administered enterprises, the institutions often tried to assume the lead and constitute the CST themselves. This move represented an attempt to distort the councils’ purpose and reduce them to a representative authority dealing with work and salary related questions within the government bureaucracy. As a consequence, the CST turned into another site of struggle for workers control.<sup>12</sup>

The most successful attempt at a democratization of ownership and administration of the means of production is the model of Enterprises of Communal Social Property (EPSC), promoted to create local production units and community services enterprises. The EPSC are collective property of the communities, which decide on the organizational structure of enterprises, the workers incorporated and the eventual use of profits. Government enterprises and institutions have promoted the communal enterprises since 2009, and since 2013 several thousand EPSC have been constituted. Most belong to the sectors of community services like public transport or are engaged in food production and food

processing. The state-owned oil company, PDSVA, set up a local liquid gas distribution administered by communities called Gas Comunal.<sup>13</sup>

Since 2007, the government’s ability to reform has increasingly clashed with the limitations inherent in the bourgeois state and the capitalist system. The movements and initiatives for self-management and self-government, designed to overcome the bourgeois state and its institutions, with the goal of replacing it with a communal state based on popular power, have grown. The broadening of direct grassroots participation brings an increase in the conflicts between the state and its popular base (especially in the sphere of production) as well as within the state itself, which becomes a site of class conflict. Not surprisingly, the deepening of social transformation multiplies the points of confrontation between top-down and bottom-up strategies. But simultaneously, because of the expansion of state institutions’ work along with the consolidation of the Bolivarian process and growing resources, state institutions have been generally strengthened and have become more bureaucratized. Institutions of constituted power aim at controlling social processes and reproducing themselves. Since the institutions of constituted power are at the same time strengthening and limiting

constituent power, the transformation process is very complex and contradictory.

Institutions, as well as many individuals in charge in institutions, follow an inherent logic of perpetuating and expanding their institutional power and control to guarantee the institution's survival. Oras Tamara Esis, a *consejo comunal* activist from Caracas explains in a personal interview, "These nice people who already made themselves comfortable in their offices, are not willing to renounce their benefits, they live on the needs of the people. It is like a little enterprise, you understand?" This tendency is strengthened in times of profound structural changes when the purpose and existence of any institution is questioned in the context of transformation.

In fact, the Ministry of Communes turns out to be one of the biggest obstacles to the construction of communes and most of the communes under construction complain about the Ministry. Only the growing organization "from below," especially the self-organized network of commune activists that brings together about 70 communes could bring enough pressure on the Ministry of Communes to start changing its politics at the end of 2011. They forced the ministry to register some 20 communes. In return, the communes had to set up the registration sheet since



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the Ministry of Communes not only did not register any communes in the first three years of its existence, but one year after the law on communes had been released, it had not even created an official procedure for the registration of communes.

Nevertheless, strategies "from above" and "from below" have maintained themselves in the same process of transformation for 14 years and the conflictive relationship between constituent and constituted power has been the motor of the Bolivarian process. In his government plan for 2013-2019, presented during the electoral campaign for the 2012 presidential elections, Chávez stated clearly "We should not betray ourselves: the still dominant socio-economic formation in Venezuela is of capitalist and rentist character."<sup>14</sup>In order to

move further towards socialism, Chávez underlined the necessity to advance in the construction of communal councils, communes and communal cities, and the "development of social property on the basic and strategic factors and means of production."<sup>15</sup> His successor, Nicolás Maduro, committed to the program, and one of the central slogans of the movements supporting his electoral campaign was "*Comuna o nada*".

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