

Mészáros and Chávez: “The Point From Which to Move the World Today”

John Bellamy Foster

István Mészáros was a global thinker strongly committed to anti-imperialist struggles. In this respect, he allied himself with those fighting for socialist transformation in the Philippines, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Brazil, and elsewhere. He argued that in the descending phase of capitalism there was a “downward equalisation of the rate of exploitation,” by which he meant a race to the bottom in wages and working conditions, enforced by a global system of monopolistic competition.¹ In 1978, he edited and introduced a book consisting of thirteen essays by the great Filipino historian and political theorist Renato Constantino, titled *Neo-Colonial Identity and Counter-Consciousness: Essays in Cultural Decolonisation*, in which Constantino developed the concept of counter-consciousness into a powerful philosophy of cultural liberation.² Mészáros took great interest as well in Brazilian developments and struggles over the state, supporting various socialist movements there. But his most singular contribution to struggles in the Global South was the role he was to play in his strong strategic support of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution.



In completing the final version of *Beyond Capital*, Mészáros commented extensively in his chapter “The Historical Actuality of the Socialist Offensive” on the 1993 pamphlet by Hugo Chávez titled *Pueblo, Sufragio y Democracia*.³

¹ ↪ István Mészáros interviewed by Elenora de Lucena, “Barbarism on the Horizon,” MR Online, December 31, 2013.

² ↪ See Renato Constantino, *Neo-Colonial Identity and Counter-Consciousness*, ed. István Mészáros (London: Merlin Press, 1978), reprinted as István Mészáros, “Neo-Colonial Identity and Counter-Consciousness,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 30, no. 3 (2000): 308–21.

³ ↪ Hugo Chávez, *Pueblo, Sufragio y Democracia* (Yare: Ediciones MBR-200, 1993), 5–6; Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 710–11.

Chávez was then in prison after leading an unsuccessful coup in response to the events of the 1989 Caracazo in Venezuela, in which the government killed thousands of protesters. In a remarkable political analysis, Chávez wrote:

Mészáros immediately recognised the revolutionary Rousseauian nature of Chávez’s critique of the state that, in Mészáros’s words, pointed to the “type of radical transformation [of the political sphere] which foreshadows from the outset the ‘withering away of the state’” and thus pointed toward the “sovereignty of labour.”

“The sovereign people must transform itself into the object and the subject of power. This option is not negotiable for revolutionaries.” He argued that electoral power could be used in a revolutionary way, backed up by powerful social movements, to ensure the forceful presence of the “popular sovereignty whose exercise will really remain in the hands of the people.” This, however, would require a “polycentric distribution of power, displacing power from the center

toward the periphery.” Emphasis needed to be placed on transferring decision-making so as to establish “the autonomy of particular communities and municipalities,” bringing to life all the major means of direct democracy, so that “popular sovereignty constitutes itself as the protagonist of power. It is precisely at such borders that we must draw the limits of advance of Bolivarian democracy. Then we shall be very near to the territory of utopia.” Mészáros immediately recognised the revolutionary Rousseauian nature of Chávez’s critique of the state that, in Mészáros’s words, pointed to the “type of radical transformation [of the political sphere] which foreshadows from the outset the ‘withering away of the state’” and thus pointed toward the “sovereignty of labour.”⁴

The pages of Mészáros’s *Beyond Capital* referring to Chávez were translated for the latter while he was in prison. Chávez was astonished that anyone in England could write so perceptively about his political views. The relationship that developed is best expressed in Mészáros’s own words, in a letter to me from February 16, 2015:

*I had no personal contact with him [Chávez] until 2001, other than the Bolivarian Christmas card message he sent me in 1995, by which time he was free. By a strange coincidence this card is dated in his handwriting “19 Dec 1995” which happened to be my 65th birthday. At that time, he had of course no Spanish copy of *Beyond Capital*, but he may have known about its English publication [that is, he may have had some familiarity with parts of the English edition]. For a group of professors at Caracas University—sympathetic to his movement—regularly (at irregular intervals) met and discussed it, finding also a small left publisher (Vadell Hermanos) willing to publish it, who—of course—had no money for a translator. So they started to translate it themselves as best they could. I was told that their translation was “well-meaning but not very good,” except for one member [Eduardo Gasca] who was Professor of Literary Studies and also a very good poet, a master of both languages. In 1997 this Professor (whose old militant socialist father had just died) told the others: “This book has restored my faith in the future of socialism; I am going to translate it completely—also for my father—by myself for nothing,” and he did.⁵ In 1999, when this wonderful translation was finished, they asked me to write a special introduction for the Latin American edition in Spanish and I completed this special [introduction]—nearly 10,000 words, not published in English—in January 2000.⁶ That is how it was published by Vadell Hermanos in 2001, and also the Brazilian Portuguese translation [with *Boitempo*] in 2002.*

⁴ ↪ István Mészáros, [Beyond Capital: Towards a Theory of Transition](#) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 711.

⁵ ↪ István Mészáros, *Más allá del capital*, trans. Eduardo Gasca (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos, 2001).

⁶ ↪ This introduction to the Latin American Spanish edition has since been translated into English (the original English version was lost) by Brian M. Napoletano and Pedro Urquijo and published as István Mészáros, “[The Historical Challenges Facing the Socialist Movement](#),” *Monthly Review Essays*, March 26, 2021.

*With immense electoral success Chávez was installed into the Presidency in 2000. I still had no personal contact with him. I never looked for such things with politically powerful people. However, in 2001 the Minister of Culture of his government—at that time the great painter [Manuel Espinoza] whose words about my comments on Attila József’s lines concerning us, the “faithful listeners to the laws” (on our relationship to nature) I recently quoted to you in an email—invited me to a Conference, which I accepted. The Conference was taking place in Caracas, at the “Cultural Forum of the Latin American Parliament’s Summit on the Social Debt and Latin American Integration,” July 10–13, 2001. I delivered my lecture on “The Challenge of Sustainable Development and the Culture of Substantive Equality,” contained also on pages 121–29 of *The Necessity of Social Control*, as you know. He learned that I was there and sent a car three times to the Hall where I was lecturing and taking part in the discussions. I could only go on the third occasion, by which time my share at the Conference was over. That is when I first met him in the Miraflores Palace, and that is how our close personal friendship started.*

*In September of the same year a distinguished academic body invited me to give a lecture at their international conference in Caracas. I gave a lecture on the world economic crisis, published also in my volume *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*. On that occasion Chávez and I spent much more time together (hours and hours). By that time, he not only had a Spanish copy of *Beyond Capital* but also [had] read most of it, with lots of marginal comments and underlining everywhere. That was the time when he gave me the collected writings of Bolívar’s teacher Simón Rodríguez. You have the picture of it. After that we met quite a few times, not only in Caracas but on one occasion also in London, when on a state visit—after the day-long negotiations—we had a long evening together in a posh London hotel where he and his team stayed, talking several hours and even consuming a rather awful (and no doubt very expensive) luxury hotel dinner. At the door of his hotel room, when I was leaving, he embraced me and said: “István, take good care of your health: we need you.” On most of such occasions Donatella was with me, and she was also very fond of him coupled with great admiration for his great integrity and total dedication to his people. When Donatella died, in June 2007, by coincidence in the same days as Raul Castro’s wife, Chávez in a most moving public speech spoke about the two of them, as great revolutionary wives and life Comrades to their husbands.*

On every visit in Venezuela also after Donatella’s death we spent time talking hours and hours together, usually combined with a dinner in his apartment in Miraflores. On the last occasion he even said that “next time you come we will go away for two weeks.” But even a few days would have been wonderful. As you know, January 2013 he asked me to go and see him, and I promised I would do so in November 2013, combining it with my already existing commitment in Brazil, as I have done on some earlier occasions. In response he sent me the message that he was happy about that. But, as you also know, his health badly deteriorated and in March 2013 he died, a great tragedy for us all. His death affected me more deeply than anything else since the death of Donatella.

This is, very briefly how I can sum up the wonderful relationship of friendship and solidarity I was fortunate to have with him in this critical time of human history.⁷

⁷ ↪ István Mészáros to John Bellamy Foster, February 16, 2015, personal correspondence.

Two strategic elements of Mészáros’s work were to prove essential for Chávez and for the course of the Bolivarian Revolution.⁸ The first of these was the conception, drawn from Marx, of capital as a system of social metabolic

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reproduction, a self-reinforcing, integrated system of complex reproductive relations, which could not be simply abolished, or changed piecemeal, but had to be replaced with an alternative organic metabolism based in communal relations.⁹ The second was the core framework of “The Communal System and the Law of Value” as depicted in chapter 19 of *Beyond Capital*, in which

Mészáros provided the strategic foundation for the revolutionary institutionalisation of a system of “communal social relations,” whereby the population reabsorbed sovereign rule into itself: a new kind of communal state or system, key to the transition to socialism. Such shifting of power to the people was at the same time a way of making the revolution, in Mészáros’s terms, “irreversible,” since the people would defend with their lives what was their own.¹⁰ In the Organic Law of the Commune, passed in Venezuela in 2010, those elected by the communal assemblies would not be representatives, as in bourgeois representative government, but delegates or spokespeople, voceros.¹¹ In his treatment of communal exchange Mészáros emphasised the creation of exchange directed to use values and basic needs as opposed to commodity exchange, as a way of building inter-communal relations, an idea that was to be expanded on an international scale through the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America.

In 2005, in a key moment in the struggle to build twenty-first-century socialism in Venezuela, Chávez, rooting his analysis in Mészáros’s work, began to call for the immediate building of a communal economy and state. “The Point of Archimedes, this expression taken from the wonderful book of István Mészáros, a communal system of production and

For Mészáros and Chávez, such a permanent social revolution was the means to the generation of new creative, associated human beings able to make their own culture, their own economy, their own history, and their own collective and individual needs.... This demanded substantive equality in the cell structure of society: the family, community, and communal structures.

of consumption—that is what we are creating, we know we are building this. We have to create a communal system of production and consumption—a new system.... Let us remember that Archimedes said: ‘You give me an intervention point [a place on which to stand] and I will move the world.’ This is the point from which to move the world today.”¹² For Mészáros and Chávez, such a permanent social revolution was the means to the generation of new creative, associated human beings able to make their own culture, their own

economy, their own history, and their own collective and individual needs. As Mészáros put it in his 2007 article “Bolívar and Chávez: The Spirit of Radical Determination,” “it remains true today as it was in Bolívar’s time that one cannot envisage the sustainable function of humanity’s social macrocosm without overcoming the internal antagonisms of its microcosms: the adversarial and conflictual constituent cells of our society under capital’s mode of social metabolic control. For a cohesive and socially viable macrocosm is conceivable only on the basis of the corresponding

⁸ ↪ The following three paragraphs are adapted from John Bellamy Foster, “Chávez and the Communal State: On the Transition to Socialism in Venezuela,” *Monthly Review* 66, no. 11 (April 2015): 9–10.

⁹ ↪ For a summary of this aspect of Mészáros’s thought, see John Bellamy Foster, foreword to István Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 1–21.

¹⁰ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 758–68; István Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 251–53. It was this understanding that the population would defend the revolution that allowed Chávez to arm the people, creating a widespread system of armed militias encompassing a very large portion of the population. See Misión Verdad, “Civic-Military Union,” *Internationalist 360°*, May 7, 2020.

¹¹ ↪ Marta Harnecker, *A World to Build* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 74–77; *Leyes del Poder Popular*, 57 (Ley Orgánica de las Comunas, Artículo 35).

¹² ↪ Chávez quoted in Michael A. Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 80–81; István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 76–77.

and humanly rewarding constitutive cells of interpersonal relations.”¹³ This demanded substantive equality in the cell structure of society: the family, community, and communal structures.¹⁴

In January 2007, Chávez presented the general strategy of socialism for the twenty-first century in the context of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution by introducing the concept of “‘the elementary triangle of socialism’—the organic unification of social property, social production, and satisfaction of social [communal] needs.” As Michael Lebowitz indicated:

Once again, Chávez’s theoretical step can be traced back to Mészáros’s Beyond Capital. Drawing upon Marx, Mészáros had argued the necessity to understand capitalism as an organic system, a specific combination of production-distribution-consumption, in which all the elements coexist simultaneously and support one another. The failure of the socialist experiments of the twentieth century, he proposed, occurred because of the failure to go beyond “the vicious circle of the capital relation,” the combination of circuits “all intertwined and mutually reinforcing one another” that thereby reinforced “the perverse dialectic of the incurably wasteful capital system.” In short, the lack of success (or effort) in superseding all parts of “the totality of existing reproductive relations” meant the failure to go “beyond capital.”¹⁵

In Mészáros’s conception, the initial successes of the political revolutions in Venezuela and Bolivia were the product of

Chávez had reached back into the Bolivarian tradition and to Rousseau, challenging the dominant form of representative government. This critique was deepened through Mészáros’s reading of Rousseau’s argument, emphasising that aspects of executive power could be delegated while the legislative power must remain entirely with the sovereign people. As Chávez put it: “By socialism we mean unlimited democracy....

their break with the Leviathan state through their initiation of constitutional conventions that rewrote the constitutions of their countries to increase the power of the population. Even before encountering Mészáros’s work, Chávez had reached back into the Bolivarian tradition and, via Bolívar’s teacher Simón Rodríguez, to Rousseau, challenging the dominant form of representative government.¹⁶ This critique was deepened through Mészáros’s reading of Rousseau’s

argument, emphasising that aspects of executive power could be delegated while the legislative power must remain

In 2010, Chávez and Mészáros had a long discussion on the need for a New International as an absolute necessity for the development of socialism globally in the face of the ongoing attempts by the United States and its European allies to “recolonise the world.”

entirely with the sovereign people. As Chávez put it: “By socialism we mean unlimited democracy.... From this comes our firm conviction that the best and most radically democratic options for defeating bureaucracy and corruption is the construction of a communal state which is able to test an alternative institutional structure at the same time as it permanently reinvents itself.”¹⁷ This took the form of the

“Organic Law of the Commune” in 2010, followed by Chávez’s urgent calls in his last speech, “Strike at the Helm,” on October 20, 2012, to expand the communes as the essence of the revolution and its irreversibility.¹⁸

¹³ ↪ István Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 124.

¹⁴ ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 187–223.

¹⁵ ↪ Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative*, 24–25, 85. Lebowitz played a crucial role in interpreting this aspect of Mészáros’s analysis for Chávez at the latter’s request. This story is told in Michael Lebowitz, *The Socialist Imperative* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015), 111–33 (a book dedicated to Chávez).

¹⁶ ↪ See Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 710; Mészáros, *The Structural Crisis of Capital*, 126–30.

¹⁷ ↪ Hugo Chávez, “Onwards Toward a Communal State,” *Venezuela Analysis*, February 25, 2010; Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*, 709.

¹⁸ ↪ Hugo Chávez, “*Strike at the Helm*,” MR Online, April 1, 2015 (Original Speech October 20, 2012).

In 2010, Chávez and Mészáros had a long discussion on the need for a New International as an absolute necessity for the development of socialism globally in the face of the ongoing attempts by the United States and its European allies to “recolonise the world.” They agreed that this new organisation would be called a “New International” and not a “Fifth International” in order to break with the sequence of a series of Internationals that had emphasised doctrinal unity in

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ways that undermined the socialist cause. Chávez asked Mészáros to draft a paper along the lines of their discussions, which Mészáros did that year, titled “Reflections on the New International.”¹⁹ Chávez intended to carry out a global initiative along these lines after his next election. However, his illness in the following year and death in 2013 prevented any action. Mészáros was to publish the “Reflections on the New International” in *The Necessity of Social Control* in 2015. In addition to laying out the

whole dialectic of an alternative system of social metabolic reproduction that would go beyond capital and socialism, it outlined the New International as an organisation “with the broad general principle and the fundamental emancipatory objective of a socialist transformation of society” while rejecting any “doctrinal prescription as to the sustainable particular ways of instituting the practical measures and modes of action.” The object was to maximise vernacular revolutionary traditions responding to particular historical conditions and to “create a mode of operation” that would be “cooperatively additive and cohesive, instead of fragmenting.”²⁰

It was in this context of revolutionary struggles with respect to the state in Venezuela and elsewhere that Mészáros began in September 2012 to devote his energies full-time to his massive work, *Beyond Leviathan: Critique of the State*.

Related links:

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¹⁹ ↪ Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control* (2015), 199, 215, 314. The discussion here is partly based on conversations that I had with Mészáros on the subject.

²⁰ ↪ Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control*, 215–17. On vernacular revolutionary traditions, see Teodor Shanin, ed., *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 243–75.

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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❖ **Tags:** capitalism, socialism, direct democracy, Mészáros, Chávez, family cell structure, New International.

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