



*Changing Venezuela by Taking Power:*

*The History and Politics of the Chávez Government*

Gregory Wilpert (Verso, London and New York, 2007)

*Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon*

Steve Ellner (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colorado, 2008)

Reviewed by Kim Scipes

As the transition takes place from Thabo Mbeki to Jacob Zuma, it seems appropriate to share some experiences elsewhere that might be useful to activists in South Africa. I can think of no more inspiring place than Venezuela.

These two books have been issued in the last couple of years, with Ellner's about to be re-issued in paperback. Both are of high quality, and are the best books to date on Venezuela.

Ellner is trying to understand what happened to allow Hugo Chavez to get elected to the presidency of Venezuela in 1998, and how his politics have evolved.

Chavez's politics were not radical for the first five years of his presidency, but after overcoming a coup, an oil worker lockout in a country dependent on oil, and a recall referendum, he shifted to proclaim "twenty-first century socialism" as his goal.

Ellner argues that the key to Chavez' "Bolivarian revolution" is the interaction on a "horizontal" level among social movements, and on a "vertical" level between the Venezuelan state and other states. He places these processes within a global, continental, and national context, and provides an excellent description and analysis of a "third world" country trying to gain control over its land, people and resources within a context of the United States not wanting them to succeed.

Greg Wilpert's book is important as an account of developments in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez between 1999 and 2007, and as a "critical interrogation" of Chávez' "socialism of the 21st Century". It is therefore important to anyone seeking to create an alternative society to capitalism.

Then, as a result of this critical interrogation, and his own intellectual and personal experiences, most notably living in Venezuela, Wilpert presents some ideals and suggestions for institutions that will move "us" toward 21st century socialism. These contributions overlap and support each other in a way that enhances them.

Venezuela may not seem important for South African activists, but what they have in common is that they got to where they are through struggle. Where they differ most is how that struggle took place. South Africa's was from the 'grassroots', from 'bottom-up' while Venezuela is through electoral politics and 'top-down' processes.

Yet, ironically, the way forward favored by almost all activists globally of building power through bottom-up processes, has actually happened less often than the less-desired 'top-down'. Many of the people I talked with in Johannesburg and Durban told me how limited the changes were under the African National Congress (ANC).

Obviously, the political compromise that Mandela and the ANC made to take power has been an important

factor in this. But, despite promises made by white elites during negotiations, this has not worked: the fruits of 'liberation' have not reached 60% of the population.

Wilpert's book details the institutional changes that Chavez has implemented in Venezuela. Certainly, a key decision was to produce a new constitution which laid the groundwork for implementing future changes. This was debated widely in public, approved by the National Assembly, and then ratified, as have most of Chavez' advances, through a national referendum. And many people today carry a copy of the constitution in their shirt pocket!

While I find Ellner's book the better politically, he sees the interaction between Chavez and 'ordinary' Venezuelans as more important than Wilpert does who over-focuses on Chavez, Wilpert's book might be more important for South African activists. Wilpert gives detail around developments in Venezuela, and it is detail that might be inspiring and more-than-suggestive to in South Africa. A close reading of Wilpert's book would be amply rewarding. LB

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