

# The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas: Knowledge and Progress

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## **Knowledge of human life**

On December 2nd 1823, during his seventh annual State of the Union Address to Congress, President of the United States of America James Monroe proclaimed the “Monroe Doctrine”: that European powers would no longer colonize or interfere with the affairs of the newly independent nations of the Americas. This was a defining moment in the foreign policy of the United States, because it also implied that the U.S.A. assumed the right to intervene in the internal affairs of the sovereign states of Latin America when it was deemed that the interests of the United States were threatened.

And over the next 180 years or so successive governments of the United States have asserted this “right”, by illegitimately meddling in the national affairs of South American countries over eighty times (see, Regalado 2007).

In the globalized world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, capitalist power is exercised through international finance, and effected through neo-liberal, de-regulated, international commodity exchange: free markets.

Human existence is characterized by a social division of labour: individuals consume use values they did not produce, and produce commodities they do not consume: for there to be consumption and production, for individuals to socially exist, there has to be a process of *exchange*. And although market exchange *appears* to be a financial process driven by the “forces” of supply and demand, *essentially* markets manifest relations of material dependence between consumers and producers.

‘...all science would be superfluous if the outward *appearance* and *essence* of things directly coincided.’

Marx 1972: 817, emphasis added.

For neo-liberal (Neo-classical/Austrian) economic theorists it *appears* that individuals’, consumer demand, determines social, producer supply. But structuralist (Keynesian) theorists highlight social, producer supply, as a constraint, and ultimately a determinant of consumer demand.

Does demand determine supply, or vice versa? Both neo-liberal and structuralist theoretical interpretations, ask different questions of the *same* process of exchange. Because demand and supply are two faces of the coin of exchange – they occur simultaneously – determination, or causation, cannot be empirically established.

The questions asked within alternative perspectives have to be framed within particular ontological assumptions about the process of human life: assumptions about human potentials which define the important relationships in human survival. Whether or not *individual* consumer choice determines *social* production, or vice versa, is ultimately a philosophical question, and cannot be resolved within economic theory.

### Individuals in society

‘The properties of *individual* human beings do not exist in isolation but arise as a consequence of *social* life, yet that social life is a *consequence of our being human.*’

Rose, Kamin and Lewontin 1984: 11, emphasis added.

There is a dialectic between personal behaviour and social existence: while individuals’ choices create the context of human life, these objective parameters shape and rationally constrain individuals’ subjective preferences. The individual and social elements of human life are the condition and effect of *each other*.

With regard to processes of economic integration, both neo-liberal and structuralist perspectives consider the widening and deepening of relations of exchange to be progressive: but the development policies associated with neo-liberal theory aim to maximise the liberty of *individual* consumers, as articulated within the Free Trade Area of the Americas [FTAA] (Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas – ALCA), and the North American Free Trade Association [NAFTA]; whereas the structuralist intent is to effect deeper *social*, technical cooperation in production, the purpose of the Common Market of the South [MERCOSUR] (Mercado Común del Sur).

The individualist and social ontological emphases of neo-liberal and structuralist theoretical approaches, and by implication the policies of the FTAA and MERCOSUR, only address one of the *apparent* facets of the *essential* individual-social dialectical process of human existence.

A dialectical understanding of the process of regional integration addresses the *social-individual* – the human being rather than the individual or society – and is hence intellectually inclusive of the individualist and social emphases of neo-liberal [FTAA/ALCA] and structuralist [MERCOSUR] perspectives.

‘Part of the work of the dialectician is ... to translate and transform other bodies of knowledge *accumulated by different structures of enquiry* and to show how such transformation and translations are revealing of new and often interesting insights ... [D]ialectical ... theory deals with totalities, particularities, motion, and fixity in a certain way ... [and] holds out the prospect of embracing *many other forms of theorizing within its frame* ... There is a deep ontological principle involved here ... elements, things, structures, and systems do not exist outside of and prior to the processes, flows and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them.’

Harvey 1996: 7, 9 and 49, emphasis added.

## The appearance and essence of human life

The *apparent* “individual” and “social” facets of regional integration have to be combined to appreciate the *essential* “human” process of integration. Life is a process within which individuals’ decide how to behave, by understanding their existence *through* their experience.

‘To be able to understand we have to examine reality; the most credible source of truth comes from our own existence; that is our experience; we have to learn to observe in order to create; we have to think about our experience; that is we have to reflect.’

José Martí 1991: 362, author’s translation.

Knowledge of life allows people to choose how to behave: existence is more than individuals’ behaviour. And effective knowledge must appreciate the abstract, social relations *between* people: ‘...sensory raw material [of experience], the only source of our knowledge ... may lead us to belief and expectation but not to knowledge [itself] and still less to understanding [existence]....’

(Einstein 1982: 22).

While the FTAA and MERCOSUR are alternative aspects of the “appearance” of Latin America regional integration and may lead to “belief and expectation”, The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas [ALBA] addresses the “essential” process of human life and presages understanding.

There are then distinct aspects to the dialectic of ALBA:

- socially, an institutional framework has to be constructed to enable the peoples of Latin America to objectively integrate their activity;
- individually, peoples’ minds must be armed through an experience of existence which realizes human potentials, linked to an investment in literacy and education, creating the conditions for a subjective appreciation of human life.

Politics is the process of originating the ‘...necessary *subjective conditions* to carry out [socialist change]....’

(Guevara 1963: 172, emphasis added).

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