

LEARNING FROM THE MAKERS OF HISTORY: BOLSHEVISM, BOLIVARIANISM, AND THE LEGACY OF HUGO CHAVEZ

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Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards

– Søren Kierkegaard

Abstract

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Biographical note

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Learning from history

I was in Argentina during the April 2002 coup in Venezuela, whilst masses of betrayed people struggled with the aftermath of the peso's January 2002 collapse. Everyone around me knew that two countries, at opposite ends of the continent, were linked in a common struggle which would change the world. No-one doubted that the change would be for the better.

Returning to England was like flying back to the Stone Age. The coup had triggered a sustained outburst of that cultured scepticism which the well-to-do reserve for those moments when the poor make history. The liberal intelligentsia avidly retailed, as if they were dispatches from the frontline of the War for Civilization, the ravings of coup plotters who had conspired to overthrow a democratic government by force and murder its elected president. Otherwise progressive middle class Latin American earnestly tried to convince me that Chavez was 'just another Caudillo', whilst the British left offered pious lectures on class, the perils of third-worldism, and the distractions of krypto-Marxism.

The coup's defeat left no room for doubt about the nature of the process, nor the direction in which its leadership was taking it. The Bolivarian constitution set out freedoms and rights that no dictatorship could possibly fulfil; when the people elected a government that intended to implement it, the ruling classes responded by mobilising the privileged middle classes to overthrow it. Chavez responded by showing he would risk his life rather than betray the people, and the people mobilised to defeat the coup. This was unmistakably a revolutionary process headed by a revolutionary leadership.

And as Luis Bilbao (2013) has lucidly explained, Chavez breathed life into the historical understanding we find in the writings of great revolutionary leaders such as Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Fidel, Che, Ho Chi Minh,

Vo Nguyen Giap, and in the revolutions they led. So why was it so hard for the 'left' to support a clearly socialist process? Why do history's writers, with so few exceptions, have such problems understanding its makers?

It took four years for left to catch up, and the liberal intelligentsia still offers little better than sophisticated lies. The 'about.com' entry for Chavez, written by an allegedly qualified man, is simply headed 'Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's Firebrand Dictator'. This is a Disneyesque invention: why has no-one removed it from a site that claims to be a recognised source of accurate information?

Behind these reactions lie deeper problems. For example, one cannot imagine a Western university teaching Chavez alongside, say, Weber. Yet Chavez's words and deeds alike express a systematic theory of the world, without which he could not have succeeded or even made the attempt. Academia contains a permanent bias against getting theoretical understanding from history's actors, above all its socialist revolutionaries. In consequence, they systematically misunderstand the historical processes in which these actors are engaged.

The Western left makes the equal but opposite mistake. They take the 'texts' of revolution as a manual of procedure rather than a theoretical analysis. They consequently fail to ask how that theory applies in each concrete circumstance. They did not see that Chavez, far from contradicting the 'texts', was writing a new volume of them. His words and actions not only encompass all the key understanding which we inherit from the early revolutionaries but gave us new ones, inscribed directly on the pages of history with that combination of committed passion, refreshing imagery, and compelling logic with which he created a new socialist language for the 21st Century.

Domenico Lusardo has penetratingly noted that history judges revolutions by what inspired them. A revolution succeeds when future generations recognise that its cause was both just and achievable. We remember the French revolution for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, not for Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. Marx and Engels bestowed unreserved praise on the Communards, who died in their thousands after they had 'stormed the gates of heaven' because they showed the world that workers could organise a new kind of power. We celebrate the 1917 revolution not for the acts of Joseph Stalin but because an entire people dared to claim international justice, freedom and equality, and an end to want and war, as the right of all humankind.

The 'texts' of any revolution express the understanding which lead millions of people act in order to try and achieve its ideals. By their nature these texts combine theory with proposals for action. If they proposed no action, nothing would happen. If they contained no theory, the actions would fail. That is why we should study them. They are exercises in rational ethics, practical attempts to shape new societies based on the highest ideals of the day.

For that same reason, the texts of revolutions are also tests. Peoples conduct experiments in struggle, not in laboratories or classrooms: the texts record how history's *actors* understood what they were doing. They should neither be dismissed nor worshipped. Nor can they be judged solely on the basis of their success. If after every defeat, we rejected the ideas that inspired the defeated, we would give up the struggle against injustice without a fight. We should study these ideas with one aim: to fight better for the ideals that inspired them.

The condescending blindness of the Western intelligentsia to Chavez's achievements has a material basis, revealed by their wilful neglect of the main theoretical discovery of 20th Century socialism. Class relations, which Marx described in painstaking detail in the 19th Century, are overlain and conditioned, as Radhika Desai (2013) has reminded us, by what he termed the 'relations between producing nations'. In the 20th Century this divided the world into oppressed and oppressor nations, laying the basis for all its revolutions starting with Russia from where I write this article. The Chinese, Korean, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions would never have even started without this understanding, let alone survived. Every time intellectuals forget this, they go wrong.

It is now 100 years since Lenin first convinced the communists that the world was divided between a small group of 'robber baron nations' who dominated it economically, and all other nations, whose subservience was secured by force. This division has been extraordinarily stable. A tiny number of countries have moved into the camp of the rich: a handful of peninsulas and islets in East Asia, the Southern and Eastern fringe of Western Europe, in the Americas nobody at all.

The National and Popular Dimension

The division is also extraordinarily marked. When Chavez took office, the rich countries contained a fifth of the world's population, with an average income twenty-four times the rest; the gap between richest and poorest nation was seven times greater than in Lenin's time. Within each group there are divisions, but the separation between the two groups is greater by far, and also greater than that which divides worker from bourgeois in most countries. The theoretical contortions which are made to avoid acknowledging this simple fact and its political implications are truly astonishing.

The 21st century has, however, produced a new great fact. The prospect opens of a genuinely new era which can end this historic division of the world. Over a third of world's population now live in countries whose growth rates put their children in sight of world-league living standards before they grow old. A lengthening list of countries, precisely those who have asserted some measure of sovereign control over their economies, are growing two or three times faster than the 'advanced' countries now entering their seventh year of Depression.

This was accomplished not by a mythical globalization but by *economic sovereignty*: the use of the state to drive development. The hallmarks of success are capital controls, banking systems oriented to national development, and state stimuli, above all the investment stimuli which lie behind China's unprecedented, sustained growth. Even India, a self-proclaimed champion of free market capitalism, has nationalised banks, firm capital controls, and 13 per cent of its industry in state hands and an annual growth rate between 5 and 8 per cent.

Economic sovereignty is no guarantee of socialism. However it clears the decks for a direct struggle, free of external interference, between huge masses of working and poor classes, with an accumulated mountain of grievances created by imperialism, and a national bourgeoisie whose power is tied to a dying order. Of course, no class surrenders power willingly, and Chavez understood that sovereignty could only be achieved through struggle. But he also grasped that because of imperialism's growing internal contradictions, the chances of success were growing day by day. He is hated for this discovery.

This is not to deny the power of the present system of domination, which combines two instruments. *Economic servitude* maintains that natural monopoly of high technology which the international market generates spontaneously, facing the poor nations with the stark alternative of subsidising into simple providers of resources and cheap labour, or resisting. *Military terror* is the response to resistance. It threatens sufficient damage to make opposition more costly than submission.

The privileged classes of the oppressed nations are then bribed, goaded or simply tricked into endless coups, 'colour' revolutions, or acts of economic sabotage such as that which brought down Allende and Alfonsín alike, to the accompaniment of that deafening, orchestrated torrent of falsehoods which I and Radhika Desai call 'the myth industry'.

Chavez outflanked this system: a monumental achievement, paving the way for the radicalisation of an entire continent and indeed, charting new possibilities for the whole world. Combining an understanding of both the national and class dimensions of this system of oppression, he seized on a basic politico-economic weakness of imperialist domination. The dominant countries monopolise the world's resources not just for their own use, but to prevent their rivals using them. It is one of the primary ways they compete. So a nation-state that deploys its resources to the benefit of its people can not only raise millions from poverty, but knocks away a pillar on which the world domination of the rich countries rests. Chavez is equally detested for this discovery.

Chavez further realised that by combining resource sovereignty with human development, a popular alliance could be constructed that could thwart both external intervention and internal sabotage. His courage in staking both his government's survival and his own life on this brilliant insight defeated the coup.

The Continental Dimension

His insights went further: writing a new chapter of socialist theory, he grasped the *continental dimension* of resistance. Its origins lie both in the formation of the USA and in the continental scope of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. In 2004, when I was studying inequality between nations (Freeman 2004), a pattern emerged. The greater the equality between nations in a continent, the better they were doing. Top of the list at that time was Europe, within which the nations in the top quintile of population were only 1.8 times better off than those in the bottom quintile. If Europe is today in chaos this precisely because it has not used fiscal redistribution to maintain the pace of integration. After East Asia came Latin America with a ratio of 4.2. Bottom was Africa with a ratio of 17.6. For the USSR the message was particularly clear; in 1990, it was the world's second most equal geopolitical landmass with a ratio of 2.6. By 2002 it was the second least equal with a ratio of 9.8; and it had witnessed the most brutal collapse in living standards since the war.

Chavez grasped that as long as Europe and North America dealt separately with each Latin American country, they could isolate and crush any government. 'Divide and rule' was their stock-in-trade. This had to be opposed by a continental alliance at every level – economically, in communications, financially, in trade relations, diplomatically and ultimately, militarily. Argentina and Brazil grasped the same point by a different route, in coming to grips with the necessity of independence from the IMF.

Chavez's struggle was thus truly Bolivarian but the form of his struggle gave Bolivar's message an entirely modern form. Western intellectuals have completely failed to grasp this, treating Bolivarianism

as a romantic atavism, an appeal to bygone times with no relevance today. They could not be more wrong. The USA held sway *because* it was the first continental capitalist power. *Because* the USSR, then China, then India, emerged from anticolonial struggles as continental powers, they could implement developmental policies on a modern scale. Continentalization, not any mythical 'globalization' is the future of modern development. Every Latin American nation's fate depends on the unity of the continent, just as no Middle Eastern country will be free until the great European carve-up of the 1920s is thrown into reverse.

The imperialists respond to any struggle for sovereignty by trying to break up the opponent – one of many facts that make globalization a breathtaking hypocrisy. The destructive legacy of the British is well known: the partition of India, Ireland and Cyprus and the dismantling of the Ottoman world became blueprints: a general policy of breaking any centre of resistance, of any scale, into the tiniest possible units on the basis of completely fraudulent claims to 'self-determination' as with the Malvinas or the North of Ireland. This is not however confined to breaking up nations that already exist but also frustrating the emergence of new sovereign polities, whether national or continental, on a geographic and demographic scale with the potential of presenting the USA with a serious economic challenge. The USA not only combined the objective of defeating communism with that of breaking up the Soviet Union and indeed Russia, but systematically pursues the second objective to this day. The US and Europe dismantled Yugoslavia, and even play with such games as the 'independence' of the Bolivian province of Santa Cruz.

Chavez's historic achievement was to express the classic demand of 'self-determination' by joining together the fates of the revolutionary process in Venezuela and the politico-economic unification of the Latin American landmass. The neutralisation of Plan Colombia, the defeat of ALCA, the first steps to genuinely mutual relations of trade and finance, and many other such measures not only laid the basis for the Venezuelan revolution's energetic defence, but created the political space for a succession of radical regimes in Bolivia, Ecuador, and throughout the continent. If it helps give the more irredentist sectarians pause for thought, it is worth pointing out that this confirmed a principle that divided Trotsky from Stalin; to defend itself, the revolution had to extend itself.

None of this is understood by the Western liberal intelligentsia, and far too little by its left. Western intellectuals live in a mythical world without borders, defined by an equally mythical international equality of rights, in which their own state has earned the right to intervene anywhere and everywhere it chooses on the basis of its allegedly superior civilization. It never occurs to them that this 'civilization' rests on the suppression of the rest of the world, maintained and defended precisely by what their state does abroad.

They get up from their beds, eat their breakfasts, dress up and drive to work without once reflecting that their oil, their gadgets, their coffee, their foodstuffs, their minerals and metals, the very basis of their everyday existence costs an eighth of what they would pay if all world labour were rewarded equally. Their governments patrol the seas and the air, alternately treating Bin Ladens, Husseins or Ghaddaffis as allies to be forgiven any atrocity, or as demons justifying any degree of violence against civilians in the name of 'fighting terror'. They rape the world and kill those who oppose them. They conspire endlessly to overturn any government that stands in their way, whether by sanctions, destabilisation, *coup* or plain military terror. This, the Western intelligentsia defend in the name of 'humanitarian' principles.

The first 'humanitarian' measure required of any Western power is to get out; to *completely cease* all external involvement. If and when this is achieved then the prospect opens, in a future world of non-aggressive equals whose foundations Chavez may well have helped lay, to set in place genuinely international standards to safeguard human rights, defended by genuine multilateral arrangements.

Until then, Lenin's principle that the robber nations have no business anywhere outside their own frontiers remains the only way to 'deal with' dictatorship and human rights abuses. Were it not for Britain's absurd claims on a tiny island eight thousand miles from its shores, Galtieri could never have prolonged a spent dictatorship by going to war. Had Reagan and Bush not supplied Hussein with vast quantities of munitions, money – and chemicals – when it suited them to deploy him against Iran, his own people would have settled accounts with him long before this same Bush, and his heirs, started slaughtering them in hundreds of thousands, without mercy, in the name of freedom.

The Western left too often forgets, in the name of Leninism, Lenin's own conclusion that the communists in the oppressor nations have different tasks from those in the oppressed nations. In the latter, the communists needed to spearhead the liberation movement, exposing and displacing the collaborating or vacillating bourgeoisie. But this was *not* the business of the communists in the oppressor countries. The 8th condition for admission to the Communist International (Lenin 1920) states that:

Parties in countries whose bourgeoisie possess colonies and oppress other nations must pursue a most well-defined and clear-cut policy in respect of colonies and oppressed nations. Any party wishing to join the Third International must ruthlessly expose the colonial machinations of the imperialists of its "own" country, must support—in deed, not merely in word—every colonial liberation movement, demand the expulsion of its compatriot imperialists from the colonies, inculcate in the hearts of the workers of its own country an attitude of true brotherhood with the working population of the colonies and the oppressed nations, and conduct systematic agitation among the armed forces against all oppression of the colonial peoples.

This duty is utterly independent of the class character of the liberation movement. Nothing in the heritage of Leninism or Marxism says the western Communists should *limit or condition* their support, depending on whether it is going in a socialist direction or has a working class leadership. Such conditionality is the hallmark of the nationalist-sectarian tradition in the Western left. It has seduced layer after layer of once-revolutionary Western socialists to back intervention against whatever 'latest atrocity' serves as an excuse: poor little Slovenia, Milosevic's treatment of Kosovo, the Taleban, the 'suppression' of the Falung Gong, Ghaddafi's suddenly-discovered authoritarian practices, Islamic terror in Mali – the list is endless.

Those leftists who spent four years waiting for the Venezuelan process to unveil its 'socialist character' confused their duty to stop, impede, frustrate, throw boulders in the path of and generally make it difficult for their own imperialists to intervene in other countries, with a duty that is not theirs – to assist the socialist or working class of those countries to better fight the bourgeoisie of those countries. The *only* people entitled to take on that task are those whose lives are bound to the fate of those countries. The *only* task of those who do not depend on that fate is to get out of the way.

Neglecting these Communist principles, the UK left has mistakenly forgotten Argentina, where we find today's greatest military threat to Latin American sovereignty, organised directly by their own

government. At the height of the Malvinas war the second largest UK left group called for a socialist federation of Argentina, Britain and the Falklands, supporting the war because it would defeat a dictator. From then on, even though Argentina is the only Latin American country in which the British government is directly implicated (with the possible minor exception of Belize), it has played second fiddle to the UK left's justified celebration of Castro and Chavez's achievements.

Whenever the Western left merges the duty to 'ruthlessly expose the colonial machinations of the imperialists of their own country' with its well-meant desires to support social progress in the oppressed nations, its identity starts merging with that of the pro-intervention liberal intelligentsia. The most effective way for Western socialists to support social progress in the Third World is to defend unconditionally the right of whole nations, and as Chavez has shown us, the whole continents to which they belong, to choose their own course – using every means at our disposal to get our own government off their backs.

Chavez has handed both sides a weapon, insufficiently explored because it is so new. Contrary to the myth-makers, Chavez elevated democracy to a higher stage than in any previous socialist experience. The Venezuelan people are still writing chapters of this experience: the criterion of their success, as explained at the start of this tribute, does not depend on what they finally achieve, but on what they have already shown to be possible.

'Parliamentary democracy', rightly criticised by Lenin as a disguised dictatorship while the state remains a private monopoly, is nowadays presented as some pinnacle of civilization. But even within those countries that so present themselves, parliamentary institutions are confined to peacetime conditions. During World War II the USA interned all ethnic Japanese and the UK banned all strikes and held no elections for ten years, while such 'civilized' countries as Canada banned even the Communist Party for the duration. Vigilance against potential collaborators, and the suppression of proven ones, is a norm of wartime politics which populations enthusiastically support, as is to be expected since their lives are at stake.

That is why 'parliamentary' freedoms are routinely suppressed in the face of externally-sponsored threats to overturn governments by force, including mythical threats, as we see from the current quasi-militarised state of US society, the treatment of Bradley Manning, the extremities of Homeland Security, or indeed, special rendition, the re-legitimization of torture, or Guantanamo. What are we really to make of a society that claims the right to rule the world in the name of democratic freedoms which it cannot even protect within its own borders, on the grounds that the world is resisting?

As for *real* threats, who can conceive of a Western government which would not only let the leaders of a *coup* go free and take no action against its supporters but provide them with a blank cheque to try again – the secret demand that lies behind the endless idiotic and craven branding of Chavez as a 'dictator'?

Yet the military activity of the West, together with its incessant attempts at destabilisation, place all but the most supine third-world countries on a permanent war alert, Cuba being an obvious case in point. This systematic state-sponsored terror has for many years made parliamentary institutions a supplementary vehicle of external domination. The defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 was actually a vote to stop the war. After ten years of gruelling struggle against the US-funded contrast, the Nicaraguan people were literally battered into submission. This can hardly be treated as a democratic verdict on Sandinista social policy.

Any simplistic division of the world into 'democracies' and 'dictatorships' misses the point. Since parliamentary democracy is a peacetime institution, this peace must first be secured. Freedom from external compulsion is therefore a precondition for realising 'democratic rights'. The interventionist liberal project is completely self-contradictory: it proposes to enforce a universal right by removing the conditions for its existence.

The working-class standpoint goes beyond these limited liberal horizons. Democracy, defined correctly as the assertion of popular will, has many expressions other than parliamentary, many of which remain valid under battle conditions and even improve the chance of victory. The defeat of the coup by a mass irruption of the Venezuelan people onto the streets was a higher expression of popular will than Western governments elected by a third of the population.

As for the party system, that darling of the parliamentary correspondents who snipe away at the 'clientilism' of Latin American parties, or lambast China where an 80-million-strong Communist Party remains a genuine field of class struggle, it is not for nothing that the US legislature is described as 'the best government money can buy'. Those same critics' dayjob is to cheerlead the conversion of what remains of the Western socialist parties into stage-managed fronts for bought-off celebrity leaders.

These contradictions have reached an extreme which is intolerable even by the standards of Fox-TV logic, in the USA's refusal to recognise Maduro's election only five years after George Bush Junior 'defeated' Al Gore having secured half a million less votes, on the wafer-thin outcome of a Florida facedown which everyone knows was rigged.

Chavez's greatest achievement may yet be that even under the circumstances of Venezuela's military and internal threats, he not only created parliamentary institutions of an international standard which the West itself cannot conform to, but made it possible for Venezuela's popular forces to express their will through them. The establishment of a mass party of socialism is no small part of this achievement.

The vitriol which greets Chavez's electoral successes expresses a growing anxiety that he has shown how even the parliamentary system, since the defeat of Bismarck the traditional mode of bourgeois domination, can become an expression of popular will, given sufficient determination from the political leadership and the degree of class polarization which imperialism has created in the lands it can no longer control. In short, the greatest fear of the Western 'defenders' of parliamentary democracy is that Chavez may actually have made it democratic. If the Venezuelan people maintain this achievement, the Western intelligentsia will have something new to think about.

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