

On the Legacy of Hugo Chávez

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I first met Hugo Chávez in New York City in September 2006, just after his infamous appearance on the floor of the UN General Assembly, where he called George W. Bush the devil. “Yesterday, the devil came here,” he said, “Right here. Right here. And it smells of sulfur still today, this table that I am now standing in front of.” He then made the sign of the cross, kissed his hand, winked at his audience and looked to the sky. It was vintage Chávez, an outrageous remark leavened with just the right touch of detail (the lingering sulfur!) to make it something more than bombast, cutting through soporific nostrums of diplomatese and drawing fire away from Iran, which was in the crosshairs at that meeting.

The press of course went into high dudgeon, and not just for the obvious reason that it’s one thing for opponents in the Middle East to call the US the Great Satan and another thing for the president of a Latin American country to personally single out its president as Beelzebub, on US soil no less.

I think what really rankled was that Chávez was claiming a privilege that had long belonged to the US, that is, the right to paint its adversaries not as rational actors but as existential evil. Latin American populists, from Argentina’s Juan Perón to, most recently, Chávez, have long served as characters in a story the US tells about itself, reaffirming the maturity of its electorate and the moderation of its political culture. There are at most eleven political prisoners in Venezuela, and that’s taking the opposition’s broad definition of the term, which includes individuals who worked to overthrow the government in 2002, and yet it is not just the right in this country who regularly compared Chávez to the worst mass murderers and dictators in history. New Yorker critic Alex Ross, in an essay published a few years back celebrating the wunderkind Venezuelan conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, fretted about enjoying the fruits of Venezuela’s much lauded government-funded system of music training: “Stalin, too, was a great believer in music for the people.”

Hugo Chávez was the second of seven children, born in 1954 in the rural village of Sabaneta, in the grassland state of Barinas, to a family of mixed European, Indian and Afro-Venezuelan race. Bart Jones’s excellent biography, *Hugo!* nicely captures the improbability of Chávez’s rise from dirt-floor poverty—he was sent to live with his grandmother since his parents couldn’t feed their children—through the military, where he became involved with left-wing politics, which in Venezuela meant a mix international socialism and Latin America’s long history of revolutionary nationalism. It drew inspiration from well-known figures such as Simón Bolívar as well as lesser known insurgents, such as nineteenth-century peasant leader Ezequiel Zamora, in whose army Chávez’s great-great-grandfather had served. Born just a few days after the CIA drove reformist Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz from office, he was a young military cadet of nineteen in September 1973 when he heard Fidel Castro on the radio announce yet another CIA-backed coup, this one toppling Salvador Allende in Chile.

Awash in oil wealth, Venezuela throughout the twentieth century enjoyed its own kind of

exceptionalism, avoiding the extremes of left-wing radicalism and homicidal right-wing anticommunism that overtook many of its neighbors. In a way, the country became the anti-Cuba. In 1958, political elites negotiated a pact that maintained the trappings of democratic rule for four decades, as two ideological indistinguishable parties traded the presidency back and forth (sound familiar?). Where the State Department and its allied policy intellectuals isolated and condemned Havana, they celebrated Caracas as the end point of development. Samuel Huntington praised Venezuela as an example of “successful democratization,” while another political scientist, writing in the early 1980s, said it represented the “only trail to a democratic future for developing societies...a textbook case of step-by-step progress.”

We know now that its institutions were rotting from the inside out. Every sin that Chávez was accused of committing—governing without accountability, marginalizing the opposition, appointing partisan supporters to the judiciary, dominating labor unions, professional organizations and civil society, corruption and using oil revenue to dispense patronage—flourished in a system the US held up as exemplary.

Petroleum prices began to fall in the mid-1980s. By this point, Venezuela had grown lopsidedly urban, with 16 million of its 19 million citizens living in cities, well over half of them below the poverty line, many in extreme poverty. In Caracas, combustible concentrations of poor people lived cut off from municipal services—such as sanitation and safe drinking water—and hence party and patronage control. The spark came in February 1989, when a recently inaugurated president who had run against the IMF said that he no choice but to submit to its dictates. He announced a plan to abolish food and fuel subsidies, increase gas prices, privatize state industries and cut spending on health care and education.

Three days of rioting and looting spread through the capital, an event that both marked the end of Venezuelan exceptionalism and the beginning of the hemisphere’s increasingly focused opposition to neoliberalism. Established parties, unions and government institutions proved entirely incapable of restoring legitimacy in austere times, committed as they were to upholding a profoundly unequal class structure.

Chávez emerged from the ruin, first with a failed putsch in 1992, which landed him in jail but turned him into a folk hero. Then in 1998, when he won 56 percent of the vote as a presidential candidate. Inaugurated in 1999, he took office committed to a broad yet vague anti-austerity program, a mild John Kenneth Galbraith-quoting reformer who at first had no power to reform anything. The esteem in which Chávez was held by the majority of Venezuelans, many of them dark-skinned, was matched by the rage he provoked among the country’s mostly white political and economic elites. But their maximalist program of opposition—a US-endorsed coup, an oil strike that destroyed the country’s economy, a recall election and an oligarch-media propaganda campaign that made Fox News seem like PBS—backfired. By 2005, Chávez had weathered the storm and was in control of the nation’s oil, allowing him to embark on an ambitious program of domestic and international transformation: massive social spending at home and “poly-polar equilibrium” abroad, a riff on what Bolívar once called “universal equilibrium,” an effort to break up the US’s historical monopoly of power in Latin America and force Washington to compete for influence.

Over the last fourteen years, Chávez has submitted himself and his agenda to fourteen national votes, winning thirteen of them by large margins, in polling deemed by Jimmy Carter to be “best in the world” out of the 92 elections that he has monitored. (It turns out it isn’t that difficult to have transparent elections: voters in Venezuela cast their ballot on an touch pad, which spits out a receipt they can check and then deposit in a box. At the end of the day, random polling stations are picked

for 'hot audits,' to make sure the electronic and paper tallies add up). A case is made that this ballot-box proceduralism isn't democratic, that Chávez dispenses patronage and dominates the media giving him an unfair advantage. But after the last presidential ballot—which Chávez won with the same percentage he did his first election yet with a greatly expanded electorate—even his opponents have admitted, despairingly, that a majority of Venezuelans liked, if not adored, the man.

I'm what they call a useful idiot when it comes to Hugo Chávez, if only because rank-and-file social organizations that to me seem worthy of support in Venezuela continued to support him until the end. My impressionistic sense is that this support breaks down roughly in half, between voters who think their lives and their families' lives are better off because of Chávez's massive expansion of state services, including health care and education, despite real problems of crime, corruption, shortages and inflation.

The other half of Chávez's electoral majority is made up of organized citizens involved in one or the other of the country's many grassroots organizations. Chávez's social base was diverse and heterodox, what social scientists in the 1990s began to celebrate as "new social movements," distinct from established trade unions and peasant organizations vertically linked to—and subordinated to—political parties or populist leaders: neighborhood councils; urban and rural homesteaders, feminists, gay and lesbian rights organizations, economic justice activists, environmental coalitions; breakaway unions and the like. It's these organizations, in Venezuela and elsewhere throughout the region, that have over the last few decades done heroic work in democratizing society, in giving citizens venues to survive the extremes of neoliberalism and to fight against further depredations, turning Latin America into one of the last global bastions of the Enlightenment left.

Chávez's detractors see this mobilized sector of the population much the way Mitt Romney saw 47 percent of the US electorate, not as citizens but parasites, moochers sucking on the oil-rent teat. Those who accept that Chávez enjoyed majority support disparaged that support as emotional enthrallment. Voters, wrote one critic, see their own vulnerability in their leader and are entranced. Another talked about Chávez's "magical realist" hold over his followers.

One anecdote alone should be enough to give the lie to the idea that poor Venezuelans voted for Chávez because they were fascinated by the baubles they dangled in front of them. During the 2006 presidential campaign, the signature pledge of Chávez's opponent was to give 3,000,000 poor Venezuelans a black credit card (black as in the color of oil) from which they could withdraw up to \$450 in cash a month, which would have drained over \$16 billion dollars a year from the national treasury (call it neoliberal populism: give to the poor just enough to bankrupt the government and force the defunding of services). Over the years, there's been a lot of heavy theoretically breathing by US academics about the miasma oil wealth creates in countries like Venezuela, lulling citizens into a dreamlike state that renders them into passive spectators. But in this election at least, Venezuelans managed to see through the mist. Chávez won with over 62 percent of the vote.

Let's set aside for a moment the question of whether Chavismo's social-welfare programs will endure now that Chávez is gone and shelve the leftwing hope that out of rank-and-file activism a new, sustainable way of organizing society will emerge. The participatory democracy that took place in barrios, in workplaces and in the countryside over the last fourteen years was a value in itself, even if it doesn't lead to a better world.

There's been great work done on the ground by scholars such as Alejandro Velasco, Sujatha Fernandes, Naomi Schiller and George Ciccariello-Maher on these social movements that, taken together, lead to the conclusion that Venezuela might be the most democratic country in the Western Hemisphere. One study found that organized Chavistas held to "liberal conceptions of

democracy and held pluralistic norms,” believed in peaceful methods of conflict resolution and worked to ensure that their organizations functioned with high levels of “horizontal or non-hierarchical” democracy. What political scientists would criticize as a hyper dependency on a strongman, Venezuelan activists understand as mutual reliance, as well as an acute awareness of the limits and shortcomings of this reliance.

Over the years, this or that leftist has pronounced themselves “disillusioned” with Chávez, setting out some standard drawn, from theory or history, and then pronouncing the Venezuelan leader as falling short. He’s a Bonapartist, wrote one. He’s no Allende, sighs another. To paraphrase the radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens in Lincoln, nothing surprises these critics and therefore they are never surprising. But there are indeed many surprising things about Chavismo in relationship to Latin American history.

First, the military in Latin America is best known for its homicidal rightwing sadists, many of them trained by the US, in places like the School of the Americas. But the region’s armed forces have occasionally thrown up anti-imperialists and economic nationalists. In this sense, Chávez is similar to Argentina’s Perón, as well as Guatemala’s Colonel Arbenz, Panama’s Omar Torrijos, and Peru’s General Juan Francisco Velasco, who as president between 1968 and 1975 allied Lima with Moscow. But when they weren’t being either driven from office (Arbenz) or killed (Torrijos?), these military populists inevitably veered quickly to the right. Within a few years of his 1946 election, Perón was cracking down on unions, going as far as endorsing the overthrow of Arbenz in 1954. In Peru, the radical phase of Peru’s military government lasted seven years. Chávez, in contrast, was in office fourteen years, and he never turned nor repressed his base.

Second and related, for decades now social scientists have been telling us that the kind of mobilized regime Venezuela represents is pump-primed for violence, that such governments can only maintain energy through internal repression or external war. But after years of calling the oligarchy squalid traitors, Venezuela has seen remarkably little political repression—certainly less than Nicaragua in the 1980s under the Sandinistas and Cuba today, not to mention the United States.

Oil wealth has much to do with this exceptionalism, as it also did in the elite, top-down democracy that existed prior to Chávez. But so what? Chávez has done what rational actors in the neoliberal interstate order are supposed to do: he’s leveraged Venezuela’s comparative advantage not just to fund social organizations but give them unprecedented freedom and power.

Chávez was a strongman. He packed the courts, hounded the corporate media, legislated by decree and pretty much did away with any effective system of institutional checks or balances. But I’ll be perverse and argue that the biggest problem Venezuela faced during his rule was not that Chávez was authoritarian but that he wasn’t authoritarian enough. It wasn’t too much control that was the problem but too little.

Chavismo came to power through the ballot following the near total collapse of Venezuela’s existing establishment. It enjoyed overwhelming rhetorical and electoral hegemony but not administrative hegemony. As such, it had to make significant compromises with existing power blocs in the military, the civil and educational bureaucracy and even the outgoing political elite, all of whom were loath to give up their illicit privileges and pleasures. It took near five years before Chávez’s government gained control of oil revenues, and then only after a protracted fight that nearly ruined the country.

Once it had access to the money, it opted not to confront these pockets of corruption and power but simply fund parallel institutions, including the social missions that provided health care, education

and other welfare services being the most famous. This was both a blessing and a curse, the source of Chavismo's strength and weakness.

Prior to Chávez, competition for government power and resources took place largely within the very narrow boundaries of two elite political parties. After Chávez's election, political jockeying took place within "Chavismo." Rather than forming a single-party dictatorship with an interventionist state bureaucracy controlling people's lives, Chavismo has been pretty wide open and chaotic. But it is significantly more inclusive than the old duopoly, comprised of at least five different currents: a new Bolivarian political class, older leftist parties, economic elites, military interests and the social movements mentioned above. Oil money gave Chávez the luxury of acting as a broker between these competing tendencies, allowing each to pursue their interests (sometimes, no doubt, their illicit interests) and deferring confrontations.

The high point of Chávez's international agenda was his relationship with Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the Latin American leader who US foreign policy and opinion makers tried to set as Chávez's opposite. Where Chávez was reckless, Lula was moderate. Where Chávez was confrontational, Lula was pragmatic. Lula himself never bought this nonsense, consistently rising to Chávez's defense and endorsing his election.

For a good eight years they worked something like a Laurel and Hardy routine, with Chávez acting the buffoon and Lula the straight man. But each was dependent on the other and each was aware of this dependency. Chávez often stressed the importance of Lula's election in late 2002, just a few months after April's failed coup attempt, which gave him his first real ally of consequence in a region then still dominated by neoliberals. Likewise, the confrontational Chávez made Lula's reformism that much more palatable. Wikileaks documents reveal the skill in which Lula's diplomats gently but firmly rebuffed the Bush administration's pressure to isolate Venezuela.

Their inside-outside rope-a-dope was on full display at the November 2005 Summit of the Americas in Argentina, where the US hoped to lock in its deeply unfair economic advantage with a hemisphere-wide Free Trade Agreement. In the meeting hall, Lula lectured Bush on the hypocrisy of protecting corporate agriculture with subsidies and tariffs even as it pushed Latin America to open its markets. Meanwhile, on the street Chávez led 40,000 protesters promising to "bury" the free trade agreement. The treaty was indeed derailed, and in the years that followed, Venezuela and Brazil, along with other Latin American nations, have presided over a remarkable transformation in hemispheric relations, coming as close as ever to achieving Bolívar's "universal equilibrium."

When I met Chávez in 2006 after his controversial appearance in the UN, it was at a small lunch at the Venezuelan consulate. Danny Glover was there, and he and Chávez talked the possibility of producing a movie on the life of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the former slave who led the Haitian Revolution.

Also present was a friend and activist who works on the issue of debt relief for poor countries. At the time, a proposal to relieve the debt owed to the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) by the poorest countries in the Americas had stalled, largely because mid-level bureaucrats from Argentina, Mexico and Brazil opposed the initiative. My friend lobbied Chávez to speak to Lula and Argentina's president Néstor Kirchner, another of the region's leftist leaders, and get them to jumpstart the deal.

Chávez asked a number of thoughtful questions, at odds with the provocateur on display on the floor of the General Assembly. Why, he wanted to know, was the Bush administration in favor of the plan. My friend explained that some Treasury officials were libertarians who, if not in favor of debt relief, wouldn't block the deal. "Besides," he said, "they don't give a shit about the IADB." Chávez then asked why Brazil and Argentina were holding things up. Because, my friend said, their representatives to the IADB were functionaries deeply invested in the viability of the bank, and they thought debt abolition a dangerous precedent.

We later got word that Chávez had successfully lobbied Lula and Kirchner to support the deal. In November 2006, the IADB announced it would write off billions of dollars in debt to Nicaragua, Guyana, Honduras and Bolivia (Haiti would later be added to the list).

And so it was that the man routinely compared in the US to Stalin quietly joined forces with the administration of the man he had just called Satan, helping to make the lives of some of the poorest people in America just a bit more bearable.

Greg Grandin, March 5, 2013

P.S.

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