

HUGO CHÁVEZ AND THE BOLIVARIAN MESSAGE

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One would be hard pressed to arrive in Venezuela and not find symbolic forms of Simon Bolívar everywhere. Be it a statue, a painting, or veneration of the *Libertador* on Aló Presidente, the weekly television program of Hugo Chávez, current President of Venezuela. Bolívar is doubtlessly considered one of the most influential figures in Latin American liberation movements. Many historical leaders have emphasized Bolívar's values, yet none so much as Hugo Chávez. Since his inauguration, Chavez has vowed to realize the dreams of Simon Bolívar through his ideology known as 21st Century Socialism.

When we titled this year's symposium as "Venezuela: From Bolívar to Chávez," we sought to bridge the current president's regime with the original *Liberatador*. Many of our panelists reflected on Venezuela's past to explain the country's current issues. This paper serves to encapsulate the perspectives on Chávez and his interpretation of Simon Bolívar's thought.

Bolívar's name is implemented in many of Chávez's programs (Plan Bolívar⁹), international organizations (Bolivarian Alternative to the Americas¹⁰) and even in renaming the country in 1999 to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Article 1 of the Constitution reads: "The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is irrevocably free and independent, basing its moral property and values of freedom, equality, justice and international peace on the doctrine of Simon Bolívar, the Liberator¹¹". Yet at what level does Hugo Chávez's policies symbolize Bolívar's doctrine? How does Chávez interpret the *Libertador's* vision of Latin America? This paper argues that Hugo Chávez does realize the core values of Simon Bolívar's dream of independence, yet effectuates policies that may well be disapproved by the latter, if he were alive today.

Along with several other revolutionary leaders, Simon Bolívar combined his values of leadership, popular uprisings, and liberal democratic principles to lead Latin America to independence from the Spanish Empire. He was a creative intellectual who advocated a policy unique to Latin America, American solutions for American problems⁷. In his oath, in 1805, Bolívar said "...I swear by my honour and I swear by my homeland that I will not put my arm to rest, nor my soul to repose, until we have broken the chains which oppress us by the will of Spanish power¹²." Bolívar was born a Creole in Caracas and educated in Europe, where he was highly influenced by Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau and Montesquieu. However, he was also a fan of federalism in the United States and the separation of powers in its constitution. John Lynch, a biographer, describes Bolívar's policy as "practical liberalism," in which institutional mechanisms were based on practical principles, not on theoretical ones¹³.

⁹ Plan Bolívar is a social welfare program to increase vaccination and food distribution in *barrios*, or Venezuelan slums.

¹⁰ ALBA is a regional organization proposed by Cuba and Venezuela as an alternative to the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). It is discussed further in the paper.

¹¹ Ministerio de Comunicacion e Informacion. *Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*. Caracas: Anauco Ediciones, 2006.

¹² Mészáros, István. "Bolívar and Chávez." *Monthly Review* 59.3 (Jul/Aug 2007): 55

¹³ Wilson, Catherine. "The Bolivarian Revolution According to Hugo Chávez." *Foreign Policy Research Institute Summer* (2008): 530

Furthermore, Hugo Chávez believes that his mission is to rid Venezuela of the imperialist powers that shackle its development. In current-day context, however, he is referring to the spread of neo-liberalism fueled by the United States' foreign policy and US-influenced institutions like the World Bank and IMF. Chávez's condemnation of the United States is constantly making headlines, calling Bush the devil and telling the "gringos to go home."

It is because of Venezuela's struggle against neo-liberalism that Chávez has formed his 21st Century Socialism, an ideology aimed at counteracting the imperialist tendencies of capitalist countries and at creating a free Latin America. Firstly, it entails a plethora of policies, such as the creation of companies assisted by the government through management training and credit for start ups¹⁴. Secondly, the Chávez government would become more decentralized by creating approximately 20,000 *consejos comunales*, where locals would participate in councils to initiate policies¹⁵. Thirdly, Chávez has increased activity of PVDSA, the state-oil company, to fund social programs. He also required that PVDSA own at least 51% of stakes in joint ventures made with foreign investors¹⁶. A final point is Latin American integration. In 2001, Chávez rejected the United States' proposal for a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, claiming it would only advance exploitative neo-liberal policies, and thus pitched the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), along with the Bank of the South. Through these two institutions, Latin America could increase its political and economic relations with less dependency on the World Bank and the IMF¹⁷. Chavez's 21st Century Socialism is by no means limited to these characteristics, yet they prove to be the principle ones.

One major policy for Simon Bolívar was the liberation of black slaves. Slave importing from Africa was very common in Latin America, especially in Venezuela. At the time of independence, 60% of Venezuelans had African origins, and even within those classified as white, 90% of them could trace their ancestry to Africa. Bolívar promised to free the slaves to President Alexandre Petion, the black ruler of the slave-free and independent republic of Haiti, who in turn aided him in the struggle for independence of Venezuela from the Spanish empire¹⁸. At the Congress of Angostura in 1819, Bolívar distinctly pointed out his view to his contemporaries by saying "...I plead with you to confirm the absolute liberty of the slaves, as I would plead for my life and for the life of the Republic"¹⁹.

Indeed, slavery has been abolished in Venezuela since 1854, yet racial equality is still an important issue in Venezuelan life. In the name of the Libertador, Chávez claims that there are equal rights for everyone. In 1992, he led an unsuccessful coup d'état against the then President, Rafael Caldera, a representative of the power sharing agreement between the élites, known as the *puntofijo* system, that had ruled Venezuela for decades. The coup was justified on the grounds that the government was controlled by a corrupt elite, further disenfranchising the lower class. Now as President, Chávez has enacted many policies to help minority groups. One of the examples is Barrio Adentro, which establishes medical clinics in shanty towns run by Cuban doctors. Furthermore, it provides assurance of cultural identity of Indigenous peoples as stated in article 121 of the Venezuela Constitution²⁰.

¹⁴ Gott, Richard. In the shadow of the liberator: Hugo Chávez and the transformation of Venezuela. London: Verso, London, 2000. 480

¹⁵ Gott, 481

¹⁶ Gott, 482

¹⁷ Gott, 485

¹⁸ Gott, 98

¹⁹ Mészáros, 55

²⁰ Ministerio de Comunicacion e Informacion. *Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*. Caracas: Anauco Ediciones, 2006. Pg 50

In his weekly television show *Aló Presidente*, Chávez commonly speaks on the oppression of the lower class by the elite and the racism the latter shows against the Afro-Venezuelans and Indigenous peoples. He has even tied the racism problematic to his message of 21st Century Socialism. Coming from a mixed-ethnic and a not so wealthy background, many Venezuelans relate better to Chávez than to previous leaders, fueling his popularity.

Yet, the Chávez's discourse has accentuated class divisions. Chávez has enhanced his popularity by attacking the privileged classes and speaking about the rise of the poor. As a result, a strong class polarization is present both in the discourse of the government and that of the opposition. For example, Globovisión, an anti-Chávez broadcast company, has characterized the President as an "Indian, monkey and thick-lipped" and his supporters as "those who go on marches because they are paid or given a chance to get drunk²¹."

While the Chávez discourse may increase class and racial tensions, it must be stated that Venezuela's history has continually suffered from this problem, even that Bolívar had ignited it. After independence of many Latin American countries, Bolívar rewarded many caudillos and higher military officers with haciendas, while troops received worthless vouchers for future entitlement²². Even before the end of the war in Venezuela, General Páez was allowed to distribute national property as he pleased, giving himself the best land. He also believed that membership in the senate could be based on a hereditary principle²³. Bolívar was actually very conscious of the class polarization happening, and though he strongly advocated equality, it was more a question of a legally enacted equality rather than a social one²⁴. As a result of the land redistribution and empowerment of caudillos, the Afro-Venezuelans and Indigenous people felt extremely marginalized. This lack of actual equality would be one reason leading to the demise of Bolívar.

In order to realize his 21st Century Socialism, Chávez has concentrated a lot of power on the executive branch of government. Over the course of his presidency, he has nationalized most major industries, particularly PVDSA, Venezuela's largest oil company and by far the biggest exporter. Chávez has revised a criminal code which imposes prison sentences up to 40 months for expressing disrespect for the President or government officials²⁵. Moreover, in February of this year, Chávez won a constitutional referendum that eliminated the two-term limit on presidential mandates, allowing him to be continually reelected. He claimed that with the two-mandate limit, he would not have enough time to fully implement the revolution. It is hard to deny the huge empowerment of the president, regardless of one's view of its legitimacy.

While Bolívar did emphasize the idea of a life-term president, his powers were to be heavily restricted. After the independence of Bolivia, Bolívar created a constitution, which stressed a centralized executive power led by a life-term president. Bolívar explained: "This supreme authority should be perpetual, because in societies without a hereditary organization, a central point is needed upon which

²¹ Cannon, Barry. "Class/Race Polarisation in Venezuela and the Electoral Success of Hugo Chavez: a break with the past or the song remains the same?" *Third World Quarterly* 29.4 (2008): 742

²² Lynch, 256

²³ Belaunde, Víctor Andres. *Bolívar and the Political Thought of the Spanish-American Revolution*. New York: Octagon Books Inc, 1967. p 181

²⁴ Mészáros, 78

²⁵ Roberts, James. "If the Real Simon Bolívar Met Hugo Chavez, He'd See Red." *The Heritage Foundation* 2062 (August 2007): 4

the other officers depend²⁶." However, he compensated by removing the ability to appoint government officials, which strengthened judicial independence and avoided absolutism²⁷. In fact, the executive branch's powers were limited to appointing members of the treasury and controlling the army²⁸.

The constitution Bolívar proposed raised serious problems and, moreover, seemed contradictory to his earlier writings. Indeed, he advocated a unified and efficient government, yet stripped the president of any non-symbolic power. However, by doing so, he recognized the need for a balance of power, even if his interpretation at this period was imperfect. On the other hand, Chávez has expanded his executive powers to even controlling the judicial branch through the personal appointment of judges.

Chávez hopes to revive Bolívar's dream of Latin American unity through ALBA, an organization based on promoting Latin American integration at the exclusion of the United States. ALBA hopes to achieve this through the creation of TVSUR, a multi-governmental television station, and by unifying oil policies of member countries²⁹. The Bank of the South, likewise an institution proposed by Chávez, is meant to create an alternative devise to stimulate Latin American financial activity without reliance on the World Bank and IMF.

We see that Chávez attempts to thwart imperialist control through institutionalized unification of Latin America. On one hand, he is reflecting Bolívar's attempt at unity through an endogenous confederation. Yet ALBA is directed by the Chávez agenda, not based on a consensus of adhering members. Plan Caribe³⁰, a Caribbean Alliance with Venezuela, can be seen as an example of this. Chávez's opposition to the neo-liberal ideology is clearly heard, and member states are encouraged to take his side. This led the President of Brazil to publicly remind Chávez that ALBA is not meant to attack an ideology, and that 85% of Venezuelan oil is exported to the USA, thus weakening Chávez's case³¹.

Bolívar's concept of unification would encompass not just commercial relations, but political and economic ones as well. Nationalism was indeed the salience of his revolution, yet he believed that national identity surpassed physical boundaries. He hoped that the Congress of Panama, an international conference held in 1826, would thus help materialize his vision of a confederation of Latin American countries. Specifically, Bolívar dreamed of a Greater Colombia, which would include Venezuela, New Granada (present day Colombia), and Ecuador³². Optimally, the confederation of these states would be run under one government, where he would be the federal president³³. In this sense, Chávez is correct to call for economic and social integration with a strong emphasis on state control.

Yet Bolívar remained very pessimistic that a confederation of all Latin American countries would abate the ongoing anarchy. In 1826 he wrote a letter to General LaMar of Peru, urging a Peruvian solution to political chaos without support of a federation³⁴." Chávez, however, lives in a period of globalization, where there is a greater interconnection of global economic activity and a bourgeoning of

²⁶ Belaunde, 243

²⁷ Belaunde, 247

²⁸ Belaunde, 247

²⁹ Altmann, Josette. "The ALBA Bloc: An Alternative Project for Latin America?" *Real Instituto Elcano* (June 2008): 4

³⁰ Plan Caribe is a mainly deal between Venezuela and Cuba where the former give extremely subsidized to free oil to the latter in exchange for doctors.

³¹ Altmann, 4

³² Lynch, 213

³³ Lynch, 215

³⁴ Belaunde, 297

non-governmental actors, who can at times be just as influential as government actors themselves. Therefore, ALBA must be able to take into account these elements of the contemporary world, in order to function properly.

Realizing the limits of a wholly unified Latin America, Bolívar therefore focused on a unification of Venezuela and New Granada, which “could form a nation that would inspire in others the proper consideration due to her³⁵.” Firstly, unity of Venezuela and New Granada (Colombia) would bring about stability, as Bolívar believed the control of the caudillos would be limited. Secondly, unity would help economic prosperity by earning respect of the United States and particularly Britain. Bolívar said that “the union of the new states with the British empire would create the most extensive, most extraordinary, and most powerful league to have appeared on earth³⁶.” Not only had Britain emerged as a commercially powerful country in the 19th century, but Bolívar had always admired much of their philosophical thought, and believed the Latin Americans could be influenced by it as well. It is true that Bolívar and Chávez exist in different time periods, but Bolívar took a practical and liberal approach to Latin American unity, whereas Chávez remains idealistic, even narrow-minded.

Bolívar once said “The most perfect form of government is that which produces the greatest degree of happiness possible, the greatest degree of social security, the greatest amount of political stability³⁷.” He showed this very clearly when he allowed caudillos to take control of the mass of the population. He believed that Latin American *pardos*, or the poor, were not ready for such liberty, and even feared that *pardocracia*, or domination of the lower-class, was just as bad as absolutism. “Until our people acquire the political virtues of our brothers in North America, I fear that popular systems of government, far from helping us, will be our ruin³⁸.” It could even be argued that Latin Americans were searching for autocracy, as without firm leadership, political disarray would engulf the continent.

Based on the above quote, perhaps Bolívar would not necessarily oppose government that incorporated socialist principles. According to a Latino Barometro poll conducted in 2007, over 56% of Venezuelans claimed they were happy with President Chavez and his social programs, the highest rating of all Latin American countries³⁹. Confronting the ever present economic crisis, Chavez may need to readapt his policy of handouts to the poor. Keep in mind that Bolívar too often needed to readapt his policy for Latin America by working with caudillos.

In fact, Bolívar had accepted the responsibility of becoming a dictator in 1828. He said “Colombians, I shall say nothing to you of liberty, because if I fulfill my promises, you will be more than free - you will be respected⁴⁰.” Bolívar reestablished military discipline. He greatly supported the Archbishop of Bogota as religious fervor would not only solidify his popular support, but would reinforce missionary activity, which he considered the only respectable aspect of Spain’s colonial policy⁴¹.

Nonetheless, he used powers very authoritatively. He banned popular societies, suspended municipal authorities, empowered prefects, and reinstated the tribute. His reign, however, did not last long, as anarchy erupted, particularly in the sanguine battling between Peru and Colombia. Losing optimism, he later wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Relations to see if US or England would intervene. In a sense, they could take “custody” of Latin America to prevent further anarchy. Even between New

³⁵ Lynch, 216

³⁶ Lynch, 217

³⁷ Belaunde, 234

³⁸ Lynch, 286

³⁹ Latino Barometro “A Warning for reformers”

http://www.latinobarometro.org/docs/LB_2007_informe_Economist.pdf (accessed May 13, 2009)

⁴⁰ Belaunde, 373

⁴¹ Belaunde, 374

Granada and Venezuela, whom Bolívar had esteemed the most ready for unification, tension accumulated. Therefore, Bolívar put aside his dream and ideals and proposed a peace deal to separate the two states.

Chávez has not yet reached the point of seeking help from those who he considers his enemies. But the political stability in Venezuela has shown signs of deterioration. In 2002, the opposition took to the streets to overthrow Chávez. He was imprisoned for three days, then reinstated. Ever since, Chávez has relied more heavily on the military to ensure not only stability, but also political progression. The armed forces in Venezuela can be found in the PDVSA, the administration of social welfare project called Plan Bolívar, and over one-third of all regional governments⁴². Bolívar too relied on military force in reaction to political degeneration. Yet he did not employ a discourse that might further exacerbate tensions. Moreover, Bolívar tried to be realistic in his plans for unification and independence. Currently, the PDVSA finances most of Chavez' social programs. However, with the current economic crisis, the price of oil has significantly dropped. Instead of initiating serious reforms to his policy, he has instead continued to attack the Venezuelan private sector and political parties supported by the United States.

So does Hugo Chávez accurately revive the memory of Simon Bolívar through his presidency? The passion and drive that Chávez expresses are indeed comparable to that of the *Libertador*. Bolívar strived to create a Latin America not only politically and economically independent, but in spirit as well. Chávez sees the spread of neo-liberal policies as a form of exploitation and oppression of Latin America.

Bolívar and Chavez are both concerned with the racial and class issues in Venezuela. Bolívar made the liberation of black slaves vital to his campaign. For Chávez and his 21st century socialism, the poor and marginalized must be empowered in order to reduce the influence of the United States. However, the racial and class tension in Venezuela is rooted in its history, and Chavez has only exacerbated it.

Their messages may be similar, but Simon Bolívar probably would have never melded liberal democratic values with socialist policies as Hugo Chávez advocates. Bolívar truly wanted a Latin America that was unified with rights for everyone. The anarchy that ensued and the rise of caudillos are testimonies to the difficulties encountered by Bolívar and indeed to the complexity of the task. In *El general y su laberinto* (1989), Gabriel García Márquez retells how Bolívar's life ended in exile. This is also supposedly Chávez's favorite book.⁴³ While this essay is not meant to evaluate Chávez's 21st Century Socialism, it is hard not to see that some of his policies seem to contradict Bolívar's doctrine of equality and independence.

41 Wilson, 525

42 Wilson 527

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