

Aló Presidente

Hugo Chávez and populist leadership

Martin Marinos

If capitalism resists, we are obliged to take up a battle against capitalism and open the way for the salvation of the human species. It's up to us, raising the banners of Christ, Mohammed, equality, love, justice, humanity, the true and most profound humanism. If we don't do it, the most wonderful creation of the universe, the human being, will disappear, it will disappear ... Let's listen to Rosa Luxemburg when she said: 'socialism or barbarism'.

Hugo Chávez, Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, December 2009

The death of Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías marks the passing of one of the most extraordinary leftist revolutionaries. The reaction to his death highlighted the reach of his legacy and the breadth of his character. While the first indigenous head of state and Bolivian president Evo Morales wept for his 'caring brother', US Tea Party congressman and chairman of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ed Royce was quick to exclaim: 'good riddance to this dictator'. The reaction on the streets was similar. Whereas, for two weeks after his death hundreds of thousands of tearful Venezuelans lined up to see El Comandante, in the late afternoon of 5 March spontaneous parties led by cheering crowds of Venezuelan and Cuban expatriates erupted on the streets of Miami, Florida.

At first sight, these contrasting reactions seem to support the mainstream media's most common portrayal of Chávez as 'polarizing', 'divisive' and 'controversial'. But he was more than that. He eliminated apathy and indifference and transgressed the rigid boundaries of appropriate officialdom. His rhetoric either triggered the compassionate and beautiful or lured to the surface the malicious passions of one's soul. Although silenced by death, Chávez's body brought forth an ocean of empathy and tears that attested to the place of love and affection in politics. But his body also provoked the worst in people. The celebration of his death revealed that individuals who regard themselves as democrats and good Christians can revel in the passing of a democratically elected and devout man.

This capacity to bring to the surface the best and the worst in people earned Chávez the reputation of a 'divisive' figure. However, behind this word we find a character who refused to adopt the pervasive technocratic and wooden language of contemporary politics. The description of Chávez as 'divisive' or 'polarizing' concealed his capacity to unite people – both friends and foes. In their ridicule and denigration following his death, the contrasting characters of Bill O'Reilly and Jon Stewart finally found common ground. Similarly, after his passing both the *Guardian* and *Fox News* expressed their shared criticism of his 'dictatorial' policies and 'mismanagement' of Venezuela. In fact, his capacity to mobilize the enemy emerged immediately after he was elected president for the first time in 1998. His appearance caused the implosion of the decades-old two-party system, the remnants of which coalesced in what today is referred to as 'the opposition'. But, most importantly, Chávez built broad coalitions around socialist and internationalist ideas.

One of Chávez's most precious dreams was the integration of Latin America. In fact no other regional leader, except for Simón Bolívar, has done more for the independence of the region. It is no exaggeration to say that after Chávez the United States of America can no longer view Latin America simply as its 'backyard'. The Venezuelan president spearheaded the formation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), which includes Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, St Vincent and the Grenadines. In 2005, Chávez initiated the alliance Petrocaribe, through which dozens of vulnerable nations in the region receive oil at low prices or in exchange for products such as coffee, milk and beef. Through these and other initiatives Chávez countered US hegemony and sought to unify Latin America. His death only affirmed this unity. Not only the 'good' Left and the 'bad' Left, as the United States likes to present them, came together. Sebastián Piñera, the conservative billionaire president of Chile, praised Chávez's efforts for integration and even declared three days of national mourning. Juan Santos, the president of Colombia, one of the few remaining allies of the United States in the region, also went beyond diplomatic courtesy and argued that the progress made between FARC and the Colombian government was to a great extent due to 'the dedication and commitment without limits from President Chávez', adding that a peace deal would be the 'best tribute to his memory'.

However, Chávez's success was most evident at home. Through his adept leadership of a massive populist movement, Chávez's government transformed Venezuela to the



extent that today the country hardly resembles what it was fourteen years ago. In a very short period the country turned from a classic representative of the 'Washington Consensus' into a model of the leftist movements in Latin America and even a global alternative to neoliberal capitalism. Chávez's extraordinary appeal, rhetoric and radical politics will inspire generations to come. But can the social movements that created Chávez operate without him? Can Chavismo exist after Chávez? Three components of his leadership helped create the extraordinary unity of a left-wing populist bloc that led the movement through fifteen successful electoral campaigns, a *coup d'état* and an unprecedented counter-*coup*

d'état (April 2002), a crippling national oil strike (December 2002–January 2003) and a recall referendum on Chávez's presidency (August 2004). His rhetorical talent, the racial and decolonial component of his identity, and the remarkable achievements of the revolution created a strong link between Chávez and the majority of Venezuelans. These features will be a challenge to the newly elected socialist president Nicolás Maduro. However, if he learns from them, Maduro could prove to be a successful continuation of the populist leadership in Venezuela.

Rhetoric

One of the most significant but neglected reasons why Chávez became a major protagonist of contemporary Venezuelan history was his remarkable oratory, which, despite the tepid reaction of a variety of intellectuals, continues to resound through the loudspeakers in Caracas. On the right, his rhetoric was simply portrayed as 'anti-American' and 'buffoonish'. On the left, intellectuals and commentators were too busy with the analysis of economics and income inequalities to explore the tremendous practical success of Chávez's discourse. This is historically symptomatic of leftist scholars and the Venezuelan case is hardly unique. Capitalist ideologues such as Adam Smith wrote books about rhetoric, but there are hardly any similar examples on the left.

Chávez's discourse deserves attention. Whereas politicians in Europe and North America largely win elections through appeals to fear, most of Chávez's speeches contained utopian ideas and love. One of his most frequent messages was that 'there are alternatives'. This direct negation of the hegemonic Thatcherist rhetoric that 'There is no alternative' (TINA) is one of the major reasons why an unprecedented number of people from the poorest sectors of Venezuela participated in politics for the first time in the history of the country – a fact that is not denied even by members of the opposition.

The influence of this discourse transgressed the borders of Venezuela. The speeches that he delivered at the 2005 World Social Forum in Brazil and during the protests against the former United States president George W. Bush in Argentina in 2007 are two of many remarkable speeches that uplifted the spirit of an international audience. Despite this, the influence of his rhetoric is largely ignored or mentioned only in the form of mockery. Representative of this trend was the abundant ridicule in the mainstream media in 2012 after Chávez's record-length, ten-hour speech.

Chávez's television show, *Aló Presidente*, is also mainly treated as a joke. The programme began in 1999 and was broadcast every Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., although its ending was never firmly fixed. Chávez led more than 300 shows, all of which were impromptu. It is true that some of the conversations with audience members, as well as the frequent dancing and singing demonstrations by Chávez, created a comical and amusing presidential image. For this reason, the descrip-



tion of Chávez as a 'clown' and a 'buffoon' was very common in mainstream media discourses. But one should not forget that the success of a populist discourse depends on its capacity to connect with the broader masses and not with the refined university, middle and upper classes in Venezuela and the West. The fact that Venezuelan state media continues to rebroadcast highlights of *Aló Presidente* testifies to its importance.

Chávez's oratory was more than an incessant verbosity. On the contrary, considering Ernesto Laclau's rhetorical theory of populism and the historical context of Chávez's leadership, the question one should ask is, 'What will happen now that he is silent and is there another discourse that can replace his own?' His hopeful messages and the emotional charge of his speeches, coupled with his natural ease in front of the media, positioned him as one of the best communicators in Latin America and beyond. This makes the filling of the vacuum left by him difficult to conceive. Although during the presidential campaign Nicolás Maduro proved that he can deliver powerful speeches, he lacks the charisma and pathos of Chávez. Nevertheless, during the campaign he also demonstrated that he has learnt from the creativity of his mentor. In a witty comeback to the avalanche of classist attacks by the opposition with regard to his background as a bus driver, Maduro drove a bus to the National Electoral Council on the day he had to register his candidacy for president.

Decolonization and new hegemonic identities

In addition to the populist content and emotional charge of Chávez's discourse, his ethos added another layer to his leadership. While his charisma was widely acknowledged, a number of features of Chávez's character remain overlooked in the West. Hugo Chávez was the first president of Venezuela to publicize his African and indigenous roots. Additionally, he engaged in discussions of the 'black features' of Simón Bolívar, the main historical inspiration of the revolutionary process in Venezuela, and his administration greatly expanded the number of embassies in Africa. Chávez also

emphasized the indigenous heritage in Venezuela, admired María Lionza, an Indian saint, and referred to the Venezuelan constitution as *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan 'Book of the Community'.

Focus on Chávez's socialist rhetoric and his confrontation with the United States tends to neglect the racial element. The fact that Chávez is an Afro-Indo-Venezuelan is crucial, because what is occurring in Latin America is more than the attempt at a transition to socialism. It is also an ongoing process of decolonization in which historically repressed groups, such as the enslaved Africans and the indigenous communities previously subjected to genocide, are becoming hegemonic. Chávez was an important representative of this process. The sharp reactions triggered by Chávez were not only a product of his socialist beliefs, humble background and 'cozy' relationship with Fidel Castro. The fact that an Afro-Indo-Venezuelan occupied a position that historically had belonged exclusively to the descendants of European colonizers added another provocative dimension to Chávez's character. Chávez both embodied working-class struggle and symbolized these historically subaltern racial groups. With his constant praise of and identification with marginalized peoples, Chávez did something very interesting and unusual for our period. His refusal to treat minorities as scapegoats was a sharp contrast to the treatment of immigrants in Western Europe and the demonization of the Roma minority in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. It is also in contrast to Barack Obama, who prefers to avoid questions of race.

Along with Chávez's rhetorical skills, his open identification with the formerly



colonized and enslaved populations makes the affective link between himself and the Venezuelan masses more difficult to replace. But during one of his election rallies, Maduro likened the contest between him and Capriles to the sixteenth-century fight between Spanish conquerors and indigenous people. At that time, the indigenous lost a decisive battle, and Maduro claimed that those who vote for Capriles vote against themselves and would have the 'curse of Maracapaná' befall them. Through this reference Maduro firmly placed

himself on the side of the indigenous who continue to struggle for decolonization.

Achievements of the revolution

Another factor that solidified Chávez as a leader was his close identification with the achievements of the Bolivarian revolution. Regardless of the multitude of writings that claim that populist regimes are ephemeral and dysfunctional, Chávez's government had achieved numerous remarkable social and political advances. The fact that the opposition now campaigns on a social-democratic platform with a promise not to remove but to strengthen the social programmes instituted by the Venezuelan government testifies to this. In fact, the central message of the opposition's candidate, Henrique Capriles, was that 'Maduro is not Chávez'. In this way, even the opposition linked the tangible and real achievements of the revolution to the body of Chávez. A few of his accomplishments are of especial importance.

1. Drastic reduction of poverty. When Chávez was elected for the first time in 1998, poverty levels surpassed 50 per cent, and 30 per cent of the population lived in

‘extreme poverty’. According to the statistics of the World Bank, in 2003 poverty in Venezuela stood at a staggering 62 per cent. By 2011, poverty had been cut to 32 per cent.¹ What is more, extreme poverty was reduced by 70 per cent. To a large extent these successes are due to Chávez’s government’s increased control of the oil industry following the unsuccessful *coup d’état* of 2002 and the oil strike of 2003. As a result, today Venezuela has the lowest levels of economic inequality in Latin America as measured by the Gini coefficient.

2. Creation of ‘missions’ (*misiones*). Since 2002 the Venezuelan government had created more than twenty ‘missions’ or social programmes that address socio-political problems. The most remarkable ones are Misión Robinson, Misión Ribas and Misión Sucre, which focus on education. One of their successes is the vast reduction in illiteracy as more than 1.5 million Venezuelans have learnt to read and write. Additionally, education in general is now accessible and free through to university level. Mercal is a social programme that supports the development of local state-run supermarkets which sell basic foods at subsidized prices that can be 40 per cent below the market price. Misión Barrio Adentro is another cornerstone of Chávez’s government fight against poverty. After an agreement with Cuba, Venezuela employed 22,000 Cuban doctors in some of the most impoverished areas of Venezuela, where many people had never seen a doctor.
3. Co-operatives and communal councils (*consejos comunales*). Of matching significance are the democratic achievements in Venezuela. The Venezuelan political landscape is rich in grassroots initiatives which aim at building direct democracy and parallel structures of governance. In the words of two recent commentators: ‘While representative democratic institutions are maintained, now participation in all spheres of the state is regarded as a key educational practice for transforming fundamentally unequal social relations.’² There are now approximately 40,000 ‘communal councils’, each of which consists of 200–400 families in the cities and 20–40 families in the rural areas. The utopian idea behind these local political spheres is that eventually they will replace official governmental structures. Venezuela is the country with the highest number of co-operatives governed by workers themselves. According to the National Superintendence of Co-operatives (SUNACOOOP) the number of co-operatives grew from 910 in 1999 to 100,000 in 2006 and to more than 228,004 in 2008.³

These and many other grassroots initiatives, such as ‘people’s media’, have led to the participation of unprecedented numbers of marginalized people in the sphere of representative democracy. The increasing number of people who go to the polls testifies to this. A remarkable 81 per cent of voters cast ballots during Chavez’s final presidential campaign. Along with the economic achievements, these advances in the sphere of democracy have created tangible and real change. This change is often identified with Chávez himself, which is one of the reasons why his body remained central to the last presidential campaign. Initially the government decided to embalm Chávez like ‘Ho Chi Minh, Lenin and Mao Zedong’. But later this proposal was reversed due to the complexity of the operation and the delay in initiating the process. Instead, throughout the presidential campaign Chávez’s body remained at the military headquarters in Caracas. Thus the symbol of the revolution and its advances remained in close proximity to the transitional process.

Although Maduro won the elections, the campaign remained under Chávez’s shadow. His images and voice dominated the streets and his body remained nearby. Hence, despite the victory, it is yet to be seen whether Maduro can exhibit the strength of Chávez and lead the populist movement. If this is to happen, it is essential for Maduro not only to hone his rhetorical skills and to continue the decolonial and racial features of Chávez’s discourse, but also to preside over an economy that continues to improve.

Last year, Venezuela's economy grew by 5.5 per cent, while during Chávez's years unemployment was reduced by half to 8 per cent. Maduro's success will depend on expanding the economic and social achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution. In this way the populist movement can demonstrate to itself and to the world that it can operate without the physical presence of Chávez. Yet his memory, his words and his radicalism will continue to fuel the Bolivarian Revolution, Latin American integration and the struggle against neoliberalism. *No Volverán!*

Notes

1. World Bank, 'Poverty Headcount Ratio at National Poverty Line', <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC/countries/VE?display=graph>.
2. Margarita Lopez Maya and Luis E. Lander, 'Participatory Democracy in Venezuela: Origins, Ideas, and Implementation', in *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture Under Chávez*, ed. David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, p. 59.
3. April Howard, 'Venezuela: Creating an Endogenous Cooperative Culture', *UpsideDownWorld*, 4 September 2008, <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/content/view/1457/35>.

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