

Hugo Chávez, Marx and the “Bolivarism” of the twenty-first century

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The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed a resurgence of bourgeois nationalist populism throughout much of Latin America. In some ways, this development shares common characteristics with what was seen in the previous century in figures like Argentina’s Juan Peron, Brazil’s Getulio Vargas and Mexico’s Lazaro Cardenas.

The election of presidents Hugo Chávez in Venezuela—who is angling for a lifetime mandate—and Evo Morales in Bolivia, and the return of the ex-Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega to the presidency of Nicaragua, as well as the election of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, have all been accompanied by nationalist rhetoric and vows to reverse the brutal period of the bleeding of the Latin American economies over the course of the last two decades. Some even say that Latin America is moving left, toward a new type of socialism, yet in every one of these countries, the domination of capital remains intact.

Hugo Chávez, in particular, has presented this movement as a continuation of the old crusade of Simon Bolivar, the “Liberator,” who two centuries ago said he intended to save Latin America from the imperialist yoke, but who in reality laid the foundations for centuries more of imperialist domination. Chávez has made a point of handing out replicas of Bolivar’s sword to Morales, Correa and Ortega during their respective inaugurations.

Sections of the Latin American left that specialize in sowing illusions in such figures have followed suit, wrapping themselves in the mantle of Bolivar and embracing the Venezuelan president’s perspective of a continent-wide “Bolivarian revolution.”

But who was Bolivar, and what was his real legacy?

In an article written in 1858, entitled “Bolivar y Ponte”, Marx recounts the exploits of the “Liberator” during the anti-Spanish wars. This account portrays Bolivar as a falsifier, deserter, conspirator, liar, coward, looter, etc.

Marx was very clear about the class role played by Bolivar in these struggles, exposing him as a typical representative of the traditional *criolla* local bourgeoisie: “Bolivar y Ponte, Simon, the ‘liberator’ of Colombia, born at Caracas...was the son of one of the familias Mantuanas, which, at the time of the Spanish supremacy, constituted the creole nobility in Venezuela.”

For Marx, Bolivar, at the end of the anti-Spanish conflicts, with the victory of the nationalist armies, was transformed into a false symbol of the Latin American anti-imperialist struggle, founding the so-called “Bolivarism,” which consists basically of proclaiming the national liberation of oppressed peoples against imperialism without, in the process, altering in any fundamental sense the relations between social classes—that is, without changing the socioeconomic structures.

From Marx’s point of view, the Hispanic-American “revolution” led by Bolivar was at best a pale imitation of the European bourgeois revolutions, never going further than the struggle for greater freedom of trade and for better conditions for exploiting Latin American workers. Marx never glorified Bolivar, simply because he never perceived in his

political-military trajectory a single action that advanced the struggle for human liberty. On the contrary, Marx clearly exposed the class limitations of the so-called “Bolivarian revolution.”

The emancipation of the black slaves carried out by Bolivar, for example, was not based on a supposed humanist conscience of the “hero,” but rather on the fear instilled within the *criolla* bourgeoisie of a possible popular revolution, after independence, against the native ruling class itself. To avoid such a popular revolt, Bolivar invented the somewhat original solution that was signed in the hand of the “Liberator” himself in a letter addressed to his principal general, Santander, on April 20, 1820.

In this letter, Bolivar explains that the freedom granted to blacks who enlisted in the national army was linked not to the necessity of augmenting the ranks of the army, but was rather directly driven by a desire to diminish their own “dangerous” number, or, in other words, the threat of a “Haitianization” of the revolution throughout the continent. The recruitment of blacks into the ranks of his army was aimed at killing them off in battle.

As Bolivar proclaimed, “In accordance with Article 3 of the Constitution” ‘all of the slaves useful for service in arms will be sent into the army.’”

“If I am not mistaken,” he continued, “this is not declaring the freedom of the slaves and is using the facility that the law gives me.... Would it not be useful that they acquire their rights in the field of battle and that their dangerous numbers be reduced by a powerful and legitimate means?” (*Bolivar*. Bellotto & Correa. São Paulo: Ática, 1983, p. 50).

One of the most interesting parts of Marx’s article on the “Liberator” is when he points out to what extent the rebel army was dependent upon external support, especially that of Britain, and that of mercenary militias originating in Europe, which, according to Marx, were decisive in the victorious struggles for the liberation of New Granada (today Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador). As Marx writes: “[In 1818] powerful succors in men, vessels, and munitions of war, poured in from England, and English, French, German, and Polish officers, flocked to Angostura.... [T]he foreign troops, consisting mainly of Englishmen, decided the fate of New Granada.... Aug. 12, Bolivar made a triumphal entry into Bogota.”

As we can grasp, Bolivar freed Latin America from the already retrograde Spanish empire, only to place it under the yoke of the rising industrial imperialist power of Britain and later that of the United States.

In the end, Marx had little admiration for Bolivar, whom he accuses of being a parody of Napoleon Bonaparte, a new Bonaparte in America. Perhaps even a parody of a parody of a parody: he compares him with the Haitian coup leader and dictator Soulouque, who was already a parody of Napoleon III of France, whom he viewed as a parody of Bonaparte the 1st. As he wrote in *Herr Vogt*, “The force of myths, characteristic of popular fantasy, in every epoch have proven their efficacy in inventing great men. The most notable of this type is undoubtedly Simon Bolivar.” And, in a letter dated February 2, 1858, Marx wrote to Engels, “To see the most cowardly, mean and wretched scoundrel decried as Napoleon I was

somewhat too absurd. Bolivar is a true Soulouque.”

Nonetheless, Marx’s exposure of the cowardly, treacherous and lying character of Bolivar appears not to have been sufficient to prevent sections of the so-called “Marxist” left in Latin America from abandoning themselves completely to the idolatry of this pseudo-hero. On the contrary, this left has transformed him into a guide for the Latin American working class, going so far as to invent “Bolivarism,” as a symbol of a supposed Latin American anti-imperialist struggle.

As we have noted, in this, the beginning of the twenty-first century, the clearest example of the survival and resurgence of Latin American Bonapartist Bolivarism is represented by the figure of Colonel Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela. Chávez, a career army officer, led a failed military coup in Venezuela in 1992, was jailed as a result and freed two years later. In 1998, he was elected, by popular ballot, president of the republic. In 1999, he created a new constitution, changing the country’s name to the “Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.”

Since then, Chávez has, from one year to the next, increased his powers. In 2005, thanks to an election boycott by the opposition parties, he gained a total majority in the National Assembly. Now, reelected president in 2006, with 63 percent of the vote, and despite his supporters controlling 100 percent of the parliament, he enacted on January 31 the so-called “enabling law” that gives him extraordinary powers, including the right to rule by decree for 18 months. He has repeatedly threatened to seek a constitutional reform that would allow him to seek infinite reelection, perpetuating his power for life.

After being elected for the first time in 1998, Chávez promised to put an end to the poverty that plagued an absolute majority of the Venezuelan people. However, between then and now, the levels of misery only decreased relatively in the country—the poverty rate fell from 49.9 percent of the population in 1999 to 37.1 percent in 2005, while those classified as indigent fell from 21.7 percent to 15.9 percent. This change is due to the implementation of welfare programs promoted by Chávez during recent years and not to a significant rise in workers’ earnings. In fact, the level of unemployment in 2005 was higher than when Chávez came into office in 1999 (11.3 percent in 1999 compared to 12.4 percent in 2005). In any case, 53 percent of the country continues to live in poverty or extreme poverty. (The figures are from CEPAL—the Economic Commission for Latin America.)

Essential for the success of Chávez’s welfare programs is a greater share of the revenue from the natural resources of the Venezuelan subsoil, above all petroleum. For this reason, his government has been carrying out a process of renegotiation of the contracts with foreign energy corporations, touting these deals as “nationalization.” Under this arrangement, the state-run oil firm PDVSA—Petróleos de Venezuela SA—has gained 51 percent control over oil enterprises, with the other 49 percent under the control of private capital (predominantly foreign). If, according to the Bolivarian president, the greatest enemy of the Venezuelan people is US imperialism, this enemy, at the same time, constitutes the greatest commercial partner of the Chávez government and the principal buyer of Venezuelan petroleum.

According to CEPAL’s figures for 2005-2006, more than half of Venezuelan exports, and especially those of crude oil, have as their destination the US market. The same percentage is valid for imports, with at least half of what Venezuela buys in terms of finished products and manufactured goods coming from the US enemy/partner.

In reality, Venezuela’s present economic growth is based upon the enormous worldwide demand for its petroleum (the country is the world’s fifth-largest producer), of which the US is the major consumer. In 1999, Chávez’s first year in office, the country produced fewer than 2.8 million barrels a day. By 2005, according to figures provided by PDVSA, daily production had reached around 3.3 million barrels.

What emerges clearly is that the Chavista bonapartism rests heavily on

the wealth provided by petroleum. The near 20 percent increase in production between 1999 and 2005 took place under conditions of a substantial increase in the price per barrel on the world market. In 1999, a barrel traded for US\$25; in 2005, it reached US\$55. In 2006, with speculation rising over a possible US attack on Iran (the world’s fourth-largest producer), the price topped US\$70 a barrel, nearly matching that recorded during the oil crisis of 1979 following the Iranian revolution. Now, at the beginning of 2007, with continuing rumors of new US wars, the price of oil remains at more than US\$50 a barrel (CEPAL).

Chávez’s so-called “Bolivarian revolution” is entirely supported by the high world demand for fossil fuels, exacerbated by the US wars in the Middle East. In this sense, George W. Bush is in reality not the greatest enemy of Chávez, as the Venezuelan leader asserts, but, on the contrary, it is thanks to Bush’s militarist policy that Chávez is able to bring in fantastic dividends for the country’s economy. Bush is, if not his government’s best friend, at least its greatest business partner, because without this contradictory partnership, Chávez certainly would not have the means to implement the aid programs that have reduced poverty in the country over the past several years. These programs, while they have not meant any real development of the Venezuelan economy as a whole, remain a fundamental pillar of Chávez’s bonapartist rule.

To get an even better view of Chávez’s dependence on petroleum and on the militarist policy of Bush, it is enough to compare the figures of the Venezuelan economy from his first coming into office until today. In the years of 1999, 2002 and 2003, the gross domestic product of Venezuela suffered a monstrous fall of close to 24 percent. In 2004 and 2005, however, during years of high petroleum production and favorable international prices, Venezuela’s GDP grew at a fantastic rate of 27.2 percent. In this same period, as we already indicated, the price of petroleum jumped from US\$25 a barrel to more than US\$50 a barrel.

However, over the course of the seven years of the “Bolivarian revolution,” discounting the highs and lows of the economic cycle, the Venezuelan GDP grew at an average rate of only 1.5 percent annually. In 1999, the government’s revenues from petroleum reached 3,947,429 million bolívares. In 2005, these same revenues jumped to 40,703,315 million bolívares, a real increase of close to 1,000 percent (CEPAL, *Estudio Económico 2005-2006*).

Chávez has no intention of breaking with imperialism or with the domination of the banks over his country’s economy. To understand this, it is enough to review the accounts on payments on the public debt that are made to the bankers annually. In 1999, Chávez paid the country’s creditors a total of 1,647,017 million bolívares; but by the years 2003, 2004 and 2005, he paid a massive sum of 23,017,422 million bolívares (an increase of close to 1,400 percent).

To get a clearer idea of Chávez’s commitment to both the imperialist bourgeoisie as well as to a new national *criolla* bourgeoisie, one only has to look at the figures paid to financial creditors by the governments that preceded his. Between 1990 and 1998, for example, the Venezuelan state paid 4,863,869 million bolívares in interest on the public debt. This figure, paid out over the entire nine years, is equal to the amount paid by Chávez in only one year (CEPAL).

Chávez’s “Bolivarian twenty-first century socialism” is a socialism that is thoroughly adapted to the needs of world capitalism. The multinational corporations, the much-publicized “nationalizations” notwithstanding, continue to operate freely in the country and have their profits guaranteed by the Venezuelan government itself. As is stated on the Web site of the state oil firm PDVSA, “The National Executive Board has clearly stated that the presence of companies in Venezuela and the fact that they receive revenues from their investments is not questioned, but what is really being demanded is their participation with full respect to the nation’s laws and sovereignty.”

Simon Bolivar, basing himself on the power of the army and on his

supposed liberation of the oppressed classes, was one of the greatest Latin American caricatures of Bonaparte III of the eighteenth century. Today, Chávez, who bases his political and economic power over the working class not on any program for the socialist transformation of society, but upon the support of the army and on a welfare policy made possible by high oil prices, appears as a modern-day imitation of Bolivar, or better yet, an imitation of an imitation, the Latin American Bonaparte of the twenty-first century.



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