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Chavez and the Continent of Politics: a Conversation with Chris Gilbert

Creator and co-host of the Marxist educational program Escuela de Cuadros, Chris Gilbert has written about the Bolivarian Process's revolutionary approach to the past in Walter Benjamin in Venezuela, and Chavez's strategic vision in The Chavez Hypothesis. In this brief interview, Gilbert touches upon the importance of recovering a political discourse in Marxism, the battle over historical meanings, and how to confront the emerging fascist threat – all in relation to the crisis that Venezuela is facing today.

Cira Pascual Marquina (CPM): You think there is an important historical dimension to socialist projects that many analysts overlook. In Venezuela, that historical component is obviously present because of Chavez's references to Bolivar, Zamora, and other figures from Venezuela's revolutionary past. Yet that dimension often falls by the wayside when people tell the story of the Venezuelan revolutionary process, especially in the more "scientific" accounts.

Chris Gilbert (CG): Yes, that's right. First of all, backing up a bit, I should say I am struck these days by how, in the ideological crisis that has followed on Venezuela's economic and political crisis, people tend to go back to very crude simplifications. In effect, they often fall back to thinking that what they have always believed was right (as if nothing were to be learned from the Venezuelan experience over the past 15 years).

For example, some people quickly jump to the bat to say that Chavez should have just advanced toward socialism, taken the means of production, etc. It may well be true. But what we must attend to is the nature of this discourse: it is always framed in terms of

should have, needed to... Yet, in politics, the most important question is often what mediates between the is and the ought. Otherwise, making socialism would just boil down to laying down a series of categorical imperatives and following them.

Then there are people who say that the problem was that the Bolivarian revolution only went halfway. That criticism could mean one of two things. On the one hand, it could mean that the revolution failed because it wasn't completed, which is more or less tautological (like saying it failed because it failed). On the other hand, it could mean something about timing, i.e. that the revolutionary process was too slow, that it paused too long at one point...

The latter would be a reasonable argument, but what is problematic is an outright rejection of mediations, as I fear is often the case when people criticize revolutions for only going "halfway." Because it's obvious that to go the whole way you have to first go halfway. So the problem is not that you go halfway before going all the way – which is a logical necessity – but how long you can stay halfway and which mediations between the present situation and the final goal are beneficial and which aren't.

The general error that I see is people disregarding and throwing out mediations altogether. In politics, sometimes the main problem is not so much the ultimate goal but rather how to get there. In brief, strategy and tactics, and Chavez had a genius for both.

In this sense, it's important to point out that political activity and class struggle do not take place in some kind of Newtonian ether. Instead, both happen in history. So what I argue that Chavez did was activate a historical possibility, a latent revolutionary tendency in Venezuela, which drew on Bolivar, Rodriguez, and Zamora, and also the popular movements behind them. It's a rich tradition, but perhaps we can summarize it with a shorthand, as Chavez did, using the proper name "Bolivar."

That was the historical legacy that Chavez pulled out of the past, dusted off, and put into action. It is interesting to me that when most people give an account of the Bolivarian Process today, they have nothing to say about Bolivar. How different that is from Chavez, who couldn't stop talking about Bolivar! Was he crazy? Ninety-five percent of the analyses of the political process – whether critical or affirmative – implicitly assume that this part of Chavez's discourse was just madness or populism on his part.

CPM: In summary, you think that class struggle in Venezuela has an irreducible historical component.

CG: That is a good way of putting it. In effect, class struggle always takes place in history. That much is clear. But the important thing to realize is that a social class is not part of

some universal dramatis personae that enters into different historical scenarios. No, in fact, a social class, whether proletarian or bourgeois, takes shape in history and even forms itself in the drama of history, through struggle. This, of course, is not to deny the role of a productive apparatus in shaping social classes, but it is to recognize that the formation of a mode of production is itself a historical process.

For example, in Venezuela the formation of the working class – as a class dispossessed of the means of production – has everything to do with the failure of Simon Bolivar’s project, which involved land reform and the construction of a sovereign continental bloc that could face down the colonial metropoli and the emerging British empire. For that reason, the oppressed class in our context, insofar as it is conscious of its situation and insofar as it has its own project, is Bolivarian. Its revolutionary project is Bolivarianism.

The problem with a lot of sociological (ahistorical) perspectives on class is that they strip the class of its self-assigned project. In effect, the members of a social class are transformed into a kind of naked, bare life. Or they become mere placeholders in a static social stratification.

CPM: In your view, the left has often overlooked politics and done so to its own disadvantage. Politics has been its weak suit.

CG: Yes, that is absolutely right. The reasons are complex. First of all, capitalism is the first social formation in which the economic and political spheres achieve significant autonomy. This happens to such a degree that the economic sphere can be studied apart, for the first time in human history, as governed by a set of economic laws. By the same token, the first scientific analyses of capitalism had to focus on its economic dimension.

In this new form of society, the most important expressions of power are not part of what is called politics. A worker is exploited by his boss, dominated by his boss or more exactly by capital itself, but the boss has no political power, nor apparently does capital either. That is what is novel in capitalism. Meanwhile, what passes for politics increasingly becomes an empty show or fairy tale (Marx talks about the “idealism” of the state and contrasts it with the “materialism” of civil society) that has apparently nothing to do with the world of suffering where people struggle for their daily bread.

But it is one thing to realize this, and it is another to let politics fall by the wayside. Capitalism wants that to happen, in fact. It wants us to think that its forms upare eternal and history has ended. (Francis Fukuyama said this a few decades ago, following Hegel, but he was really just articulating something that’s implicit in every capitalist theory.) Yet at some point, the workers, the oppressed, have to wake up from their sleep and formulate,

from their own position, a political question. They will have to launch a political project (admittedly, changing the nature of politics and changing its rules) aimed at bringing down both the capitalist state and the special kind of semi-political power that is incarnated in private property.

That is why I think Chavez is important for relaunching the left into the political sphere. Remember that the dominant leftist model when he started in the 1990s was Zapatismo with its apparent rejection of state politics, its political abstentionism. Well, Chavez jumped with both feet into politics, donning the tricolor sash, becoming President of the Republic, etc. Of course, in so doing he landed into a den of vipers. But he was pretty good at doing battle with those animals (in no small measure because he maintained an open, dialectical relationship with the masses).

But most of the left isn't like that. Precisely because the revolutionary left has a certain faith that political projects will spontaneously emerge in reaction to exploitation, it has a weak grammar of politics. There are some notable exceptions, including Lenin who pointed out the fallacy of spontaneity. Gramsci, too, developed an interesting discourse on politics, as did Trotsky. In fact, there were fascinating debates about political tactics in the Third International during its first decade. Since then, however, the left has often shown a chronic lack of creativity. Take state power! Organize an independent party! I agree. But how to do so? Remember that Lenin once thought of working with the crazy orthodox priest, Georgy Gapon. He quickly abandoned the idea, which is fortunate. But the important thing to remember is that creativity and invention are important and inevitable parts of politics.

This situation has created a kind of void in our discourse, an impoverishment of the left's political repertoire. As a result, it's simply the case that you might learn more about political power by watching an episode of Game of Thrones or paying attention to Chavez-in-action than by consulting some leftist manual.

Mind you, Lenin himself is not the spare, schematic figure, offering readymade answers to everything, that sometimes figures in the popular imagination. Lars T. Lih has shown how Lenin articulated his project with a set of weighted terms such as *narod* (\approx people), *vozhd* (\approx hegemon), and *vlast* (\approx power), which were all deeply rooted in Russian history and culture. They formed an important part of Lenin's political grammar. Well, I think Chavez did the same thing, using the rich resources of Venezuelan and continental history to construct a powerful political discourse.

CPM: If there is a danger in overlooking the creative political discourse that emerged in Venezuela's recent history, there must also be a price to pay for similar errors on a global scale. When the left attempts to face the current worldwide crisis, does it fall into similar errors?

CG: Globally, the dangers are all too evident. In a word, if the left forgets about historical meanings and politics as fields of struggle, it leaves those spaces open to the right, to fascism. Perhaps with some exaggeration, I have compared Chavez's reactivation of politics to his discovering "the continent of politics." Well, the problem is as simple as this: If the left doesn't occupy that continent, then the right will not lose time in doing so. It's happening right now. Look at how the US's extreme right mines the country's history to develop its symbols and codes, creating a horrible iconography of white supremacy. Now it has an ally in the presidency! Faced with that situation, the US left shouldn't be ahistorical – that's simply suicide. Instead, it should jump into the historical fray and declare itself to be abolitionist: It should be defending the incomplete projects of Nat Turner and John Brown.

In Europe, the fascistoid party Vox, which has suddenly reared its head in Andalusia, is also deploying a retrograde historicism. Should we face them down saying that history begins just yesterday, with the Transition[*]? Of course not, although that is the mainstream response: the mass media and hired intellectuals like to talk about the 1978 constitution, for example. But the left should go back much further and declare that it's going to defend Durruti, Nin, etc. pointing out how there's some unfinished business in history that goes back to the Guerra Civil and beyond.

In Venezuela, it's terrible to see how the right wing has begun to appeal to the Bolivarian legacy, and they also just called for a *cabildo abierto*, which is an idea that has profound historical resonances. But we on the left should be doing that! We should have anticipated it and headed them off!

What's become clear in the crisis is that politics is an open terrain of struggle. In part, it's a struggle over historical meanings. Politics is a territory that is rife with danger – it presents an ample array of deviations and abuses of power – but the most dangerous thing is to abandon that territory to the enemy!

Here a certain kind of historical revisionism has played an especially insidious role in disarming the left. It tells us that the problem with 20th century fascism was its "voluntarist" politics. No, the problem with fascism is that it was genocidal, racist, anti-Semitic, anti-communist, and anti-democratic. But historical revisionism tries to deprive

the left of “voluntarist” (ie. interventionist) politics altogether by putting Jacobinism and fascism in the same basket. Yet now, more than ever, the left needs to be very Jacobin – that is, it needs to be democratically wielding state power, history, creativity and force – precisely to win the battle against fascism!

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Notes.

[*] The “Transition” refers to the process initiated after Franco’s death that opens the way to the Spanish state’s new constitution (1978) with a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy. The Transition was, in the end, a superficial reorganization of the political sphere, leaving the interests of the dominating class (both political and economic) intact.