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President Hugo Chavez: A 21st Century Renaissance Man

By Prof. James Petras

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Introduction

President Hugo Chavez was unique in multiple areas of political, social and economic life. He made significant contributions to the advancement of humanity. The depth, scope and popularity of his accomplishments mark President Chavez as the ‘Renaissance President of the 21st Century’.

Many writers have noted one or another of his historic contributions highlighting his anti-poverty legislation, his success in winning popular elections with resounding majorities and his promotion of universal free public education and health coverage for all Venezuelans.

In this essay we will highlight the unique world-historic contributions that President Chavez made in the spheres of political economy, ethics and international law and in redefining relations between political leaders and citizens. We shall start with his enduring contribution to the development of civic culture in Venezuela and beyond.

Hugo Chavez: The Great Teacher of Civic Values

From his first days in office, Chavez was engaged in transforming the constitutional order so that political leaders and institutions would be more responsive to the popular electorate. Through his speeches Chavez clearly and carefully informed the electorate of the measures and legislation to improve their livelihood. He invited comments and criticism – his style was to engage in constant dialogue, especially with the poor, the unemployed and the workers. Chavez was so successful in teaching civic responsibilities to the Venezuelan electorate that millions of citizens

from the slums of Caracas rose up spontaneously to oust the US backed business-military junta which had kidnapped their president and closed the legislature. Within seventy-two hours – record time – the civic-minded citizens restored the democratic order and the rule of law in Venezuela, thoroughly rejecting the mass media's defense of the coup-plotters and their brief authoritarian regime.

Chavez, as all great educators, learned from this democratic intervention of the mass of citizens, that democracy's most effective defenders were to be found among the working people – and that its worst enemies were found in the business elites and military officials linked to Miami and Washington.

Chavez civic pedagogy emphasized the importance of the historical teachings and examples of founding fathers, like Simon Bolivar, in establishing a national and Latin American identity. His speeches raised the cultural level of millions of Venezuelans who had been raised in the alienating and servile culture of imperial Washington and the consumerist obsessions of Miami shopping malls.

Chavez succeeded in instilling a culture of solidarity and mutual support among the exploited, emphasizing 'horizontal' ties over vertical clientelistic dependency on the rich and powerful. His success in creating collective consciousness decisively shifted the balance of political power away from the wealthy rulers and corrupt political party and trade union leaders toward new socialist movements and class oriented trade unions. More than anything else Chavez' political education of the popular majority regarding their social rights to free health care and higher education, living wages and full employment drew the hysterical ire of the wealthy Venezuelans and their undying hatred of a president who had created a sense of autonomy, dignity and 'class empowerment' through public education ending centuries of elite privilege and omnipotence.

Above all Chavez speeches, drawing as much from Bolivar as from Karl Marx, created a deep, generous sense of patriotism and nationalism and a profound rejection of a prostrate elite groveling before their Washington overlord, Wall Street bankers and oil company executives. Chavez' anti-imperial speeches resonated because he spoke in the language of the people and expanded their national consciousness to identification with Latin America, especially Cuba's fight against imperial interventions and wars.

International Relations: The Chavez Doctrine

At the beginning of the previous decade, after 9/11/01, Washington declared a 'War on Terror'. This was a public declaration of unilateral military intervention and wars against sovereign nations, movements and individuals deemed as adversaries, in violation of international law.

Almost all countries submitted to this flagrant violation of the Geneva Accords, except President Chavez, who made the most profound and simple refutation against Washington: 'You don't fight terrorism with state terrorism'. In his defense of the sovereignty of nations and international jurisprudence, Chavez underlined the importance of political and economic solutions to social problems and conflicts – repudiating the use of bombs, torture and mayhem. The Chavez Doctrine emphasized south-south trade and investments and diplomatic over military resolution of disputes. He upheld the Geneva Accords against colonial and imperial

aggression while rejecting the imperial doctrine of ‘the war on terror’, defining western state terrorism as a pernicious equivalent to Al Qaeda terrorism.

Political Theory and Practice: The Grand Synthesizer

One of the most profound and influential aspects of Chavez’ legacy is his original synthesis of three grand strands of political thought: popular Christianity, Bolivarian nationalist and regional integration and Marxist political, social and economic thought. Chavez’ Christianity informed his deep belief in justice and the equality of people, as well as his generosity and forgiveness of adversaries even as they engaged in a violent coup, a crippling lockout, or openly collaborated and received financing from enemy intelligence agencies. Whereas anywhere else in the world, armed assaults against the state and coup d’états would result in long prison sentences or even executions, under Chavez most of his violent adversaries escaped prosecution and even rejoined their subversive organizations. Chavez demonstrated a deep belief in redemption and forgiveness. Chavez’s Christianity informed his ‘option for the poor’, the depth and breadth of his commitment to eradicating poverty and his solidarity with the poor against the rich.

Chavez deep-seated aversion and effective opposition to US and European imperialism and brutal Israeli colonialism were profoundly rooted in his reading of the writings and history of Simon Bolivar, the founding father of the Venezuelan nation. Bolivarian ideas on national liberation long preceded any exposure to Marx, Lenin or more contemporary leftist writings on imperialism. His powerful and unwavering support for regional integration and internationalism was deeply influenced by Simon Bolivar’s proposed ‘United States of Latin America’ and his internationalist activity in support of anti-colonial movements.

Chavez’ incorporation of Marxist ideas into his world view was adapted to his longstanding popular Christian and Bolivarian internationalist philosophy. Chavez’ option for the poor was deepened by his recognition of the centrality of the class struggle and the reconstruction of the Bolivarian nation through the socialization of the ‘commanding heights of the economy’. The socialist conception of self-managed factories and popular empowerment via community councils was given moral legitimacy by Chavez’ Christian faith in an egalitarian moral order.

While Chavez was respectful and carefully listened to the views of visiting leftist academics and frequently praised their writings, many failed to recognize or, worse, deliberately ignored the President’s own more original synthesis of history, religion and Marxism. Unfortunately, as is frequently the case, some leftist academics have, in their self-indulgent posturing, presumed to be Chavez’ ‘teacher’ and advisor on all matters of ‘Marxist theory’: This represents a style of leftist cultural colonialism, which snidely criticized Chavez for not following their ready-made prescriptions, published in their political literary journals in London, New York and Paris.

Fortunately, Chavez took what was useful from the overseas academics and NGO-funded political strategists while discarding ideas that failed to take account of the cultural-historical, class and rentier specificities of Venezuela .

Chavez has bequeathed to the intellectuals and activists of the world a method of thinking which is global and specific, historical and theoretical, material and ethical and which encompasses class analysis, democracy and a spiritual transcendence resonating with the great mass of humanity in a language every person can understand. Chavez’ philosophy and practice (more than any ‘discourse’ narrated by the social forum-hopping experts) demonstrated that the art of

formulating complex ideas in simple language can move millions of people to ‘make history, and not only to study it’..

Toward Practical Alternatives to Neoliberalism and Imperialism

Perhaps Chavez greatest contribution in the contemporary period was to demonstrate, through practical measures and political initiatives, that many of the most challenging contemporary political and economic problems can be successfully resolved.

Radical Reform of a Rentier State

Nothing is more difficult than changing the social structure, institutions and attitudes of a rentier petro-state, with deeply entrenched clientelistic politics, endemic party-state corruption and a deeply-rooted mass psychology based on consumerism. Yet Chavez largely succeeded where other petro-regimes failed. The Chavez Administration first began with constitutional and institutional changes to create a new political framework; then he implemented social impact programs, which deepened political commitments among an active majority, which, in turn, bravely defended the regime from a violent US backed business-military coup d’état. Mass mobilization and popular support, in turn, radicalized the Chavez government and made way for a deeper socialization of the economy and the implementation of radical agrarian reform. The petrol industry was socialized; royalty and tax payments were raised to provide funds for massively expanded social expenditures benefiting the majority of Venezuelans.

Almost every day Chavez prepared clearly understandable educational speeches on social, ethical and political topics related to his regime’s redistributive policies by emphasizing social solidarity over individualistic acquisitive consumerism. Mass organizations and community and trade union movements flourished – a new social consciousness emerged ready and willing to advance social change and confront the wealthy and powerful. Chavez’ defeat of the US-backed coup and bosses’ lockout and his affirmation of the Bolivarian tradition and sovereign identity of Venezuela created a powerful nationalist consciousness which eroded the rentier mentality and strengthened the pursuit of a diversified ‘balanced economy’. This new political will and national productive consciousness was a great leap forward, even as the main features of a rentier-oil dependent economy persist. This extremely difficult transition has begun and is an ongoing process. Overseas leftist theorists, who criticize Venezuela (‘corruption’, ‘bureaucracy’) have profoundly ignored the enormous difficulties of transitioning from a rentier state to a socialized economy and the enormous progress achieved by Chavez.

Economic Crisis Without Capitalist Austerity

Throughout the crisis-wracked capitalist world, ruling labor, social democratic, liberal and conservative regimes have imposed regressive ‘austerity programs’ involving brutal reductions of social welfare, health and education expenditures and mass layoffs of workers and employees while handing our generous state subsidies and bailouts to failing banks and capitalist enterprises. Chanting their Thatcherite slogan, ‘there is no alternative’, capitalist economists justify imposing the burden of ‘capitalist recovery’ onto the working class while allowing capital to recover its profits in order to invest.

Chavez’ policy was the direct opposite: In the midst of crisis, he retained all the social programs, rejected mass firings and increased social spending. The Venezuelan economy rode out of the worldwide crisis and recovered with a healthy 5.8% growth rate in 2012. In other words,

Chavez demonstrated that mass impoverishment was a product of the specific capitalist ‘formula’ for recovery. He showed another, positive alternative approach to economic crisis, which taxed the rich, promoted public investments and maintained social expenditures.

Social Transformation in a ‘Globalized Economy’

Many commentators, left, right and center, have argued that the advent of a ‘globalized economy’ ruled out a radical social transformation. Yet Venezuela, which is profoundly globalized and integrated into the world market via trade and investments, has made major advances in social reform. What really matters in relation to a globalized economy is the nature of the political economic regime and its policies, which dictate how the gains and costs of international trade and investment are distributed. In a word, what is decisive is the ‘class character of the regime’ managing its place in the world economy. Chavez certainly did not ‘de-link’ from the world economy; rather he has re-linked Venezuela in a new way. He shifted Venezuelan trade and investment toward Latin America, Asia and the Middle East – especially to countries which do not intervene or impose reactionary conditions on economic transactions.

Anti-Imperialism in a Time of an Imperialist Offensive

In a time of a virulent US—EU imperialist offensive involving ‘pre-emptive’ military invasions, mercenary interventions, torture, assassinations and drone warfare in Iraq, Mali, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan and brutal economic sanctions and sabotage against Iran; Israeli colonial expulsions of thousands of Palestinians financed by the US; US-backed military coups in Honduras and Paraguay and aborted revolutions via puppets in Egypt and Tunisia, President Chavez, alone, stood as the principled defender of anti-imperialist politics. Chavez deep commitment to anti-imperialism stands in marked contrast to the capitulation of Western self-styled ‘Marxist’ intellectuals who mouthed crude justifications for their support of NATO bombing Yugoslavia and Libya, the French invasion of Mali and the Saudi-French (‘Monarcho-Socialist’) funding and arming of Islamist mercenaries against Syria. These same London, New York and Paris-based ‘intellectuals’ who patronized Chavez as a mere ‘populist’ or ‘nationalist’ and claimed he should have listened to their lectures and read their books, had crassly capitulated under the pressure of the capitalist state and mass media into supporting ‘humanitarian interventions’ (aka NATO bombing)... and justified their opportunism in the language of obscure leftists sects. Chavez confronted NATO pressures and threats, as well as the destabilizing subversion of his domestic opponents and courageously articulated the most profound and significant principles of 20th and 21st Marxism: the inviolate right to self-determination of oppressed nations and unconditional opposition to imperial wars. While Chavez spoke and acted in defense of anti-imperialist principles, many in the European and US left acquiesced in imperial wars: There were virtually no mass protests, the ‘anti-war’ movements were co-opted or moribund, the British ‘Socialist’ Workers Party defended the massive NATO bombing of Libya, the French ‘Socialists’ invaded Mali- with the support of the ‘Anti-Capitalist’ Party. Meanwhile, the ‘populist’ Chavez had articulated a far more profound and principled understanding of Marxist practice, certainly than his self-appointed overseas Marxist ‘tutors’.

No other political leader or for that matter, leftist academic, developed, deepened and extended the central tenets of anti-imperialist politics in the era of global imperialist warfare with greater acuity than Hugo Chavez.

Transition from a Failed Neo-Liberal to a Dynamic Welfare State

Chavez' programmatic and comprehensive reconfiguration of Venezuela from a disastrous and failed neo-liberal regime to a dynamic welfare state stands as a landmark in 20th and 21st century political economy. Chavez' successful reversal of neo-liberal institutions and policies, as well as his re-nationalization of the 'commanding heights of the economy' demolished the reigning neo-liberal dogma derived from the Thatcher-Reagan era enshrined in the slogan: 'There is no alternative' to brutal neo-liberal policies, or TINA.

Chavez rejected privatization – he re-nationalized key oil related industries, socialized hundreds of capitalist firms and carried out a vast agrarian reform program, including land distribution to 300,000 families. He encouraged trade union organizations and worker control of factories – even bucking public managers and even his own cabinet ministers. In Latin America, Chavez led the way in defining with greater depth and with more comprehensive social changes, the post neo-liberal era. Chavez envisioned the transition from neo-liberalism to a new socialized welfare state as an international process and provided financing and political support for new regional organizations like ALBA, PetroCaribe, and UNASUR. He rejected the idea of building a welfare state in one country and formulated a theory of post-neo-liberal transitions based on international solidarity. Chavez' original ideas and policies regarding the post-neo-liberal transition escaped the armchair Marxists and the globetrotting Social Forum NGO pundits whose inconsequential 'global alternatives' succeeded primarily in securing imperial foundation funding.

Chavez demonstrated through theory and practice that neo-liberalism was indeed reversible – a major political breakthrough of the 21st century.

Beyond Social Liberalism: The Radical Definition of Post-Neo-Liberalism

The US-EU promoted neo-liberal regimes have collapsed under the weight of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Massive unemployment led to popular uprisings, new elections and the advent of center-left regimes in most of Latin America, which rejected or at least claimed to repudiate 'neo-liberalism'. Most of these regimes promulgated legislation and executive directives to fund poverty programs, implement financial controls and make productive investments, while raising minimum wages and stimulating employment. However few lucrative enterprises were actually re-nationalized. Addressing inequalities and the concentration of wealth were not part of their agenda. They formulated their strategy of working with Wall Street investors, local agro-mineral exporters and co-opted trade unions.

Chavez posed a profoundly different alternative to this form of 'post-neoliberalism'. He nationalized resource industries, excluded Wall Street speculators and limited the role of the agro-mineral elites. He posed a socialized welfare state as an alternative to the reigning social-liberal orthodoxy of the center-left regimes, even as he worked with these regimes in promoting Latin American integration and opposing US backed coups.

Chavez was both a leader defining a more socialized alternative to social liberation and the conscience pressuring his allies to advance further.

Socialism and Democracy

Chavez opened a new and extraordinarily original and complex path to socialism based on free elections, re-educating the military to uphold democratic and constitutional principals, and the development of mass and community media. He ended the capitalist mass media monopolies

and strengthened civil society as a counter-weight to US-sponsored para-military and fifth column elites intent on destabilizing the democratic state.

No other democratic-socialist president had successfully resisted imperial destabilization campaigns – neither Jagan in Guyana , Manley in Jamaica , nor Allende in Chile . From the very outset Chavez saw the importance of creating a solid legal-political framework to facilitate executive leadership, promote popular civil society organizations and end US penetration of the state apparatus (military and police). Chavez implemented radical social impact programs that ensured the loyalty and active allegiance of popular majorities and weakened the economic levers of political power long held by the capitalist class. As a result Venezuela ’s political leaders, soldiers and officers loyal to its constitution and the popular masses crushed a bloody rightwing coup, a crippling bosses’ lockout and a US-financed referendum and proceeded to implement further radical socio-economic reforms in a prolonged process of cumulative socialization.

Chavez’s originality, in part the result of trial and error, was his ‘experimental method’: His profound understanding and response to popular attitudes and behavior was deeply rooted in Venezuela ’s history of racial and class in justice and popular rebelliousness. More than any previous socialist leader, Chavez traveled, spoke and listened to Venezuela ’s popular classes on questions of everyday life. His ‘method’ was to translate micro based knowledge into macro programed changes. In practice he was the anti-thesis of the overseas and local intellectual know-it-all who literally spoke down to the people and who saw themselves as the ‘masters of the world’ ...at least, in the micro-world of left academia, ingrown socialist conferences and self-centered monologues. The death of Hugo Chavez was profoundly mourned by millions in Venezuela and hundreds of million around the world because his transition to socialism was their path; he listened to their demands and he acted upon them effectively.

Social Democracy and National Security

Chavez was a socialist president for over 13 years in the face of large-scale, long-term violent opposition and financial sabotage from Washington , the local economic elite and mass media moguls. Chavez created the political consciousness that motivated millions of workers and secured the constitutional loyalty of the military to defeat a bloody US-backed business-military coup in 2002. Chavez tempered social changes in accordance with a realistic assessment of what the political and legal order could support. First and foremost, Chavez secured the loyalty of the military by ending US ‘advisory’ missions and overseas imperial indoctrination while substituting intensive courses on Venezuelan history, civic responsibility and the critical link between the popular classes and the military in a common national mission..

Chavez’ national security policies were based on democratic principles as well as a clear recognition of the serious threats to Venezuelan sovereignty. He successfully safeguarded both national security and the democratic rights and political freedoms of its citizens, a feat which has earned Venezuela the admiration and envy of constitutional lawyers and citizens of the US and the EU.

In stark contrast, US President Obama has assumed the power to assassinate US citizens based on secret information and without trial both in and out of the US . His Administration has murdered ‘targeted’ US citizens and their children, jailed others without trial and maintains secret ‘files’ on over 40 million Americans. Chavez never assumed those powers and never

assassinated or tortured a single Venezuelan. In Venezuela , the dozen or so prisoners convicted of violent acts of subversion after open trials in Venezuelan courts, stand in sharp contrast to the tens of thousands of jailed and secretly framed Muslims and Latin American immigrants in the US . Chavez rejected state terror; while Obama has special assassination teams on the ground in over 70 countries. Obama supports arbitrary police invasions of ‘suspect’ homes and workplaces based on ‘secret evidence’ while. Chavez even tolerated the activities of known foreign (CIA)-funded opposition parties. In a word, Obama uses ‘national security’ to destroy democratic freedoms while Chavez upheld democratic freedoms and imposed constitutional limits on the national security apparatus.

Chavez sought peaceful diplomatic resolution of conflicts with hostile neighbors, such as Colombia which hosts seven US military bases – potential springboards for US intervention. On the other hand, Obama has engaged in open war with at least seven countries and has been pursuing covert hostile action against dozens of others.

Conclusion

Chavez’s legacy is multi-faceted. His contributions are original, theoretical and practical and universally relevant. He demonstrated in ‘theory and practice’ how a small country can defend itself against imperialism, maintain democratic principles and implement advanced social programs. His pursuit of regional integration and promotion of ethical standards in the governance of a nation – provide examples profoundly relevant in a capitalist world awash in corrupt politicians slashing living standards while enriching the plutocrats.

Chavez’ rejection of the Bush-Obama doctrine of using ‘state terror to fight terror’, his affirmation that the roots of violence are social in justice , economic pillage and political oppression and his belief that resolving these underlying issues is the road to peace, stands as the ethical-political guide for humanity’s survival.

Faced with a violent world of imperial counter-revolution, and resolved to stand with the oppressed of the world, Hugo Chavez enters world history as a complete political leader, with the stature of the most humane and multi-faceted leader of our epoch: the Renaissance figure for the 21st century.