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Hugo Chavez and the Revolutionary Imagination

A Benevolent Revolution

by DANIEL KOVALIK
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While I was in Venezuela two weeks ago as an election observer (or “accompanier” as the Venezuelans referred to us), some of us were sitting around musing over the question of why revolutionary Venezuela has not received the same level of solidarity and support from American leftists, progressives and religious groups as Nicaragua had in the 1980’s or as Cuba has received at various times since its revolution in 1959. Where are the “Venceramos Brigades” for Venezuela, we wondered.

One explanation we agreed on was that, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the vast majority of activists and progressives had simply abandoned the dream for socialism and revolution which had up till then inspired their international solidarity efforts. Whatever one’s view of the Soviet Union — and there are of course quite varying and passionate opinions on this subject — it was and is hard not to feel a sense of great loss at its demise. As Vladimir Putin himself once said, “[w]hoever does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart.”

My own view on this is that, whatever its faults and shortcomings, the Soviet Union represented the aspiration for a better and more equitable world; an alternative to a world ruled by greed and the whims of the very rich. And, when the Soviet Union died, and the red flag with the hammer and sickle was taken down from the Kremlin on December 25, 1991, the dream of that better world seemed to die with it.

More than anyone else, Hugo Chavez helped to reawaken that dream, especially in Latin America and other parts of the Global South, and it is that contribution for which the international ruling class, led by rulers of the United States, cannot forgive him.

I had the pleasure of hearing Chavez speak at an international trade union conference in Caracas in the summer of 2010, and I was not a little surprised by how much he was influenced by, and had come to embody, the revolutionary spirit which had been unleashed so powerfully in Russia in 1917, and thereafter in other countries.

Indeed, Chavez made the profound observation that the 20th Century had not been the “American Century” after all, as so many have trumpeted, but that it indeed had been the “Century of Revolution,” seeing socialist revolutions most notably in Mexico, Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam and Nicaragua – revolutions which succeeded in varying degrees in throwing off the chains of domination by the capitalist Western powers, most notably the U.S.

Chavez explained that when he became President of Venezuela in 1999, there was only “one light left on in the home,” and that was Cuba – a socialist island in a sea of capitalism just barely managing to hang on. With Chavez’s election to the presidency, and the mutual support Venezuela and Cuba then gave to each other, Cuba was not only able to thrive but was able to expand its international medical solidarity even further, most notably in Haiti where Cuban doctors are, according to *The New York Times*, the front line against post-earthquake cholera in that country. And, so too did other progressive governments in Latin America – for example, in Nicaragua, Brazil, Ecuador, Honduras, Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina — emerge with the help of Chavez’s example and support.

Therefore, it was no exaggeration for Noam Chomsky to say in an interview shortly after the death of Hugo Chavez (<http://venezuelanalysis.com/video/8695>) that he had led “the historic liberation of Latin America” from the over 500 years of subjugation it had suffered since the time of the Conquistadors – again, much to the chagrin of the United States. Indeed, Chomsky, agreeing with the interviewer that Chavez was a “damaging figure,” explained that Chavez was indeed “destructive to the rich oligarchy, to U.S. power.”

Meanwhile, in a mere 15 years, Chavez helped lead a social transformation of Venezuela, one which would see illiteracy wiped out, children in schools receiving two meals a day, poverty and extreme poverty greatly reduced, the UN Human Development Indicators raised significantly and Venezuela’s oil wealth used for the first time to benefit the people of Venezuela.

And yet, the most significant contribution Chavez has made – though the one he receives least credit for from the mainstream press – is that he carried out his historic anti-colonial role, as well as a socialist transformation of Venezuela, through democratic and peaceful means. The real triumph of Hugo Chavez is that, despite a coup against him in which he was kidnapped and ordered killed, despite a management-led oil strike which crippled his country’s economy, and despite massive resistance from the U.S., he never abandoned democracy or pluralism.

To the contrary, Chavez expanded democracy in Venezuela, enfranchising Venezuelans (most notably the poor and African descendants) who had never voted before, and creating a uniform and sophisticated voting system which Jimmy Carter has called “the best in the world.”

Truly, then, the revolution Chavez led in Venezuela is, without exaggeration, the most benevolent one in human history. Unlike all major social revolutions which had come before — the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions come to mind — neither the real nor proverbial guillotines were ever brought forth by Chavez. And, the U.S., along with the Venezuelan oligarchs, have attempted at every turn to exploit the kindness and restraint of Chavez’s revolution to undermine it. And still, Chavez never stepped back from the democratic path.

In other words, Chavez would not only see the antes of the revolutions that inspired his own, he would raise them.

Moreover, Chavez, in addition to playing a uniting role of the countries of Latin America, was one of the most important voices for peace in Colombia — a country ravaged by over 50 years of civil war. Indeed, Colombia’s current peace process — with talks of course being held in Havana, Cuba — are largely due to Chavez’s unflagging efforts. And, therefore, it should have come as no surprise to me that I ran into Piedad Cordoba — the former Colombian Senator who has been Colombia’s most important voice for peace — in Venezuela. Ms. Cordoba, grateful to Chavez for his ceaseless efforts in support of peace for her country, had also come to accompany the Venezuelan people in their election process.

It is for these reasons that Venezuela, and its new President, the former bus driver, Nicolas Maduro, deserve all of the support we can muster during this rocky time for that country.

What’s more, it occurred to me as I witnessed the final campaign rally for Nicolas Maduro on April 11 — with seven avenues of reveling Venezuelans, mostly poor and many of African descent, waving red flags — that the U.S. needs revolutionary Venezuela as much or more than it needs us, for the revolutionary spirit which Venezuela embodies may be the one thing that can save us from the current economic, political and moral morass in which we currently find ourselves.