

The revolution delayed

10 years of Hugo Chávez's rule

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The origins of “Chavismo”, between caudillismo and the social movements

Charles Reeve – *we are amazed by the shallowness of political debate in Venezuela. All discussion centres on the “dynamics of Chavismo”. Rarely do we see it analysed through the wider perspective of the general Latin American situation, as a specific case of left populism. Questions such as how to characterise the current period, what explains these developments and the temporary weakening of US political control over the region are hardly taken into account. This despite the fact that changes in the political space occupied by the régime will largely depend on external factors, such as the future path of US policy, transformations in the Cuban system and finally the cycles of oil prices.*

Miguel – There is a lot of talk nowadays of a left turn in Latin America. There have indeed been several governments elected who belong to traditional left tendencies. For us, there are two main currents. On the one hand are governments brought to power after great social movements, such as is the case in Bolivia and Brazil, countries with a long history of struggle. Apart from these – and more particularly, in Venezuela – the so-called “left” governments have not come to power off the back of social movements or grassroots struggles. They belong to a cultural set more linked to Latin American populism of the caudillo variety. It is clear in our eyes that all such governments meet the needs of a situation of political crisis. It is impossible to understand the rise of Chavismo without looking back to the caracazo of 1989. These riots in Caracas left thousands dead. The pact which had existed between the various forces in politics was thus broken and society faced a crisis of governability. This concern was most acute within the ruling class itself. All the more so given that these riots opened up a cycle of struggle in Venezuelan society, with the emergence of grassroots organisations independent of the old left political parties. Some people called this “a new civil society”, particularly as regards the student movement and even the movements in the poor barrios. For example, the Human Rights group, with which I work, came about in these years. The same went for environmentalist groups and women’s groups. So people who identified with leftist ideas escaped the control of the parties. For its part the workers’ movement mostly remained dominated by social democracy (and the Acción Democrática party), with a few fringes controlled by groups of the authoritarian Marxist left. During the 90s there was real turmoil in Venezuelan society, with popular struggles organised in opposition to A. Pérez, the social-democrat president responsible for the 1989 massacres. This turmoil led to huge changes in society. Three years later, in 1992, there was an attempted military coup: a recurrent event in the history of this country, where the army has often intervened in political life. Despite their failure, within a few years these putschist army men, in particular Chávez, had managed to recuperate the whole of this popular resistance movement. Chávez’s appeal in part came from the fact that he was able to make himself seem in tune with the popular movements of the 90s.

That is how this powerful resistance movement fell behind this figure and became part of a new institutional arrangement.

This was a dialectical integration: well known activists in these movements were also on the look-out for some institutional role: in their eyes, indispensable for carrying out their plans.

This “civil society” was new, having existed for barely a decade and had carved out very little space of its own in society. It had little experience in terms of concrete social engagement and anti-authoritarian organising. So now, rather surprisingly, we find the cadres of this new “civil

society” in power with Chávez. The blank cheque they have given in part results from this inexperience and lack of a concrete project. Here we find the imprint of the country’s cultural make-up. Even if revolutions define themselves by breaking with such paradigms, we have to say that Chávez himself is repeating the whole caudillo, statist and militarist tradition long established in Venezuela. He has breathed fresh life into this culture.

From the start one of the characteristics of Chavismo has been improvisation. We should attribute this to the lack of experience on the part of most members of the grassroots movements who have joined Chávez. Individuals who have never organised even a small co-operative were, like a lightning flash, possessed with the idea of “forming co-operatives” and found themselves at the head of the Ministry of Co-operatives... which soon after decreed the creation of 200,000 co-operatives throughout the country!

Venezuela is a society that has long lived off its oil revenue. The left has always claimed that all is necessary for the distribution of this revenue to be more equal is for the state to take control of oil production... In Venezuela, controlling the state means controlling the oil. A mechanical interpretation: once you have the oil, everything can be sorted. Magical voluntarism!

I will return to the weakness of the theoretical analysis of “civil society” groups which you have mentioned. We must understand that in Venezuela we are today living through a rerun of the old Cold War left schema based on confrontation between capitalism and the socialist countries. Thanks to its oil resources and the importance of oil to the world economy, the Chávez government today positions itself as one of the leading forces in this conflict. Much as this confrontation existed before the coming of Chavismo, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Eastern Bloc, the forms of imperialist domination are not the same. It is as if reality has changed but the Chavistas haven’t realised! The régime is trying to answer new problems with old schemas. Both the Chavistas and the opposition, still have Cold War theoretical stances. To put it another way: given the lack of critical thinking and theorising, new practice or fresh reflection, they on old ideas and old strategies.

So Chávez has created the ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean, a new institution intended to build new relationships between Latin American countries and become a counterweight to US hegemony. To achieve this it seeks alliance with the Russian Federation, Iran and China... countries which in our eyes are part of world capitalism. But there is all sorts of propaganda about Chavista Venezuela’s leading role in a so-called new movement for anti-imperialist “liberation”. As if this country is in the vanguard of some global upheaval! Always following the old model of the Cold War, bloc against bloc... that is how this government portrays itself to the outside world. That some comrades in Europe and elsewhere promote this image saddens us, since it means that they cannot see beyond the Chavista spectacle and cannot see the real contradictions of the situation.

In the past, the left rarely won more than 10% in presidential elections in Venezuela. In the early 90s the left had weak social roots, testimony to the weakness of its ideas. Today, these organisations are in power with Chávez and are doing all they can to take up once more all the positions they have abandoned over the years. The construction of socialism, building popular power, the relationship between state intervention of the market... all the debates which ran out of steam in the 90s are now taken up again by those who are now part of the state. We might point out that in terms of anti-globalisation and Third Worldist groups worldwide, the lessons being learnt from Venezuela are more than modest, particularly in comparison with the Argentinian and Brazilian experiences. The only idea is that of the epic anti-imperialist hero Chávez – David

against Goliath. In the last analysis, a bourgeois figure. But the theoretical elaboration on this is practically nil.

To conclude, I will repeat the point that, looking at the political activity taking place in Caracas, one can only say that the lessons we have all learnt from the régime are exactly those we already knew before Chávez came to power! They already had some history. That is the case, for example, with the mobilisations of the “23rd January” barrio of Caracas¹ where a large number of committees had been active since 1989. Chavismo is given credit for the activity of these movements, but they did nothing but follow their own logic.

“Chavismo”, a melting-pot

C.R. – *Let us discuss propaganda and ideological struggle and its importance for the Chavista régime. It is banal to remark on the role of the majority of leftist groups in this project, and more original to look at the new Chavista nomenclature and individuals such as Barreto, the (locally) well-known professor who is currently mayor of Caracas. This is a man who invited Negri to Caracas, speaks of “biopolitics”, claims the tradition of Foucault and who has developed unusual post-modern theories. He uses post-leftist rhetoric to carry out the same old bureaucratic measures. A vast confusion – in which Chávez participates – citing everyone from Trotsky to Chomsky and beyond... even more out of the ordinary is the behaviour of a man like Eduardo Rothe, who wrote for l’Internationale Situationniste and is now the number two in the Ministry of Information/propaganda.*

M. – One of the characteristics of South American populism is its woolly ideology! What is the content of the “Bolivarian process”? It’s totally empty! In reality the whole “process” centres on the Chávez personality cult. When we discuss this with comrades from abroad we always emphasise two points. Firstly, how it is simplistic to see Chavismo as the left and the opposition as the right: the best way of not understanding anything! Second, to take account of the economic context: Venezuela is experiencing one of the richest periods of the last thirty years in terms of oil revenue. We have to go back to the ‘70s and the nationalisation of the oil by the social democrats to find an economic situation as favourable to the ruling powers as this. We must also note that the structure of command in the Venezuelan armed forces, the institution from which Chávez and most leading figures in the current régime emerged, is less differentiated by class than in most Latin American countries. The armed forces have allowed for a certain degree of social mobility, and individuals from the poorer classes’ access to a military career has been one of the ways of redistributing oil revenue. That said, the Venezuelan army was formed during the Cold War and until very recently was part of the American counter-insurgency school. The armed forces were responsible for the massacre in 1989. I want to emphasise there that there is absolutely no leftwards dynamic in this institution. There are more conservative and more nationalist sections of the army, and those who are both things at once. There are army men close to the Communist Party and other left parties like “Patria para Todos”. But many of those who initiated the movement around Chávez, and who are today in his new PSUV, come from the old social democratic tradition. The thing that brings this jumble together is the leadership

¹ The 23rd January barrio was the first high-rise estate built in Caracas. It is high up, a stone’s throw from the presidential palace, close to the capital’s administrative centre. This very poor barrio has for 50 years symbolised a high degree of struggle and clashes with the forces of order. The actions of its residents played a decisive role in bringing down the last dictatorship on 23rd January 1958... hence the name. Since, there has been a strong presence of leftist and far-left groups, cultural groups and various barrio associations.

figure, the president! Between 2002 and 2004 this group consolidated itself against its enemies, namely threats of an anti-Chavista coup or United States intervention. But from 2004 onwards the rhythm of the mobilisation of Chavista and anti-Chavista forces came to be determined by the electoral calendar. Their central objective is to win votes. Taking this stance, a lid was put on the significant internal differences in the Chavista camp in order to guarantee a united front against the enemy.

It seems that this second period came to an end with the bad results on 2nd December 2007, when Chávez lost the referendum on constitutional reform. The charm and the myth of the leader's invulnerability took a hit, and since then the differences among the Chavistas have been more clearly visible. Chávez, for his part, has now done enough sloganising to breathe new life into the iconography of the Venezuelan left. In doing so he has counted on the support of individuals who in the past took part in guerrilla and other such movements, legitimising his discourse as a left discourse, as anti-conformist, as a clean break. Now a number of personalities of the old left, as well as some from the new left, are coming into the Chavista scene. We have mentioned the ex-situationist Eduardo Rothe, but there have been others, like the former guerrilla leader who became CEO of the nationalised oil company PDVSA... I will not reduce all this to politically opportune posturing: there is also an attempt to win ground inside a contradictory and shallow movement in order to push their own agendas.

Isabel — the case of Barreto, the current mayor of Caracas, is indicative. He is a man who first spread his wings politically at the university, starting from post-modernist political precepts. It is important to remember that Chavism has never been a monolithic movement, but one which adapts to circumstance and whose supporters have similarly changed attitudes according to circumstances.

That is also its strength. The Chavismo which of the initial abortive military coup; the Chavismo which wins elections; and the Chavismo which survived the 2002 coup are all different things. At the moment we are again experiencing change. In 2002, at the time of the anti-Chávez coup, many activist and political factions were directly involved in the institutions of state. Until then Chávez had never called himself a socialist, Marxist, Marxist-Leninist or whatever... throughout these years he had argued for a social project quite different from traditional left perspectives.

C.R. *Do you mean to say that Chavismo is a confused ideological space, a sort of "melting pot" where diverse tendencies co-exist and where each current or clan looks to conquer ground to promote its ideas?*

I. You could say that. Until the results of the 2007 referendum, they remained united against the common enemy. Since then, for the first time deep disagreements have been expressed openly...

M. I repeat, in Venezuela's history left groups have rarely held power and always lacked a "tribune of the masses". Now, suddenly, they're experiencing a situation where there is talk of "socialism", where there is a charismatic figure capable of "mobilising the people". These left politicians now find themselves in harmony with these mobilisations. They are part of the authorities and have a tribune of the people as represented by Chávez. For these groups, this development is seen as a "gain". Now there is no question of abandoning "the processes of government"! They are gaining ground and continue to justify anything and everything in the name of this or that tactic. Above all they must avoid losing the tribune represented by the régime. These groups are ready to legitimise and justify anything.

“Chavismo” and the neo-liberal model

I. Chavismo has another characteristic beside its links with the traditional left. The régime’s project is tied into the current international situation, which supports a global drive for capitalist rule. I will explain: nowadays it is easier to implement the plans of neo-liberal capitalism in a country with a left-wing government which uses populist slogans without provoking real mobilisation on the part of workers. For us, that is Chavismo’s principal role. Of course, I am not saying that all the people and groups who support Chávez are conscious of this. I repeat, Chavismo does not have a homogenous supporter base. There are those who think the régime is doing the best it can to improve the lot of the people... there are even thous who are convinced that today we are experiencing a unique opportunity to “build socialism”. We, for our part, think that this neo-liberal role can be seen in the régime’s policies on oil and trade, and indeed in its whole economic agenda. This manipulative populist rhetoric covers up the real agenda of clearing the way for the implementation of the neo-liberal model, to a greater extent than ever before.

C.R. — *Chavismo as the spearhead of neo-liberal policies: quite an original take on things! From this standpoint, can we see the rise — or the creation — of a new private sector emerging from the Chávez years: one based on the new networks of patronage and corruption?*

I. — But obviously! In Venezuela such networks have always been integral to the functioning of society. Initially the Chavistas tried to break with this set-up. But in reality there were but minor changes in the structures of bureaucracy, and corruption and patronage continued. There are few studies of this issue. But at an empirical level we can state that it is plain to see in the oil and financial sectors where the government has introduced its plans. In the co-operative sector, for example, cliques have identifiably appropriated projects to build centres of economic power from which they can make personal gains.

C.R. — *What is the place of the military caste in these new structures of economic power? Do they directly control any private enterprises?*

I. — Almost all ministries are under the control of the military bureaucracy.

M. — We have to emphasise several different points here. In Venezuela, given the importance of oil revenue to the economy, the state has always subsidised private companies, like a sort of mixed capitalism. The wealthiest bosses who have emerged have always had ties with the state. Within global capitalism, Venezuela has fulfilled the role of cut-price oil producer. With the current transformations, Venezuelan entrepreneurs in traditional sectors like the service sector and manufacturing have been progressively sidelined by entrepreneurs more linked to modern industries like communication, transport and finance. These domestic developments are linked to the evolution of globalised capitalism. The way things are going, it looks like the new Chavista state has installed a new capitalist caste whose role is to defend the central importance of oil to the economy.

The top of the military bureaucracy have always finished their career in the private sector, as landowners or executives. Today their economic role has increased now that army men are in place at all levels of the state apparatus. Chávez has particular reliance on the military bureaucracy, which he has confidence in and which is charged with stepping up efficiency in the management of the economy. It is a well-established bureaucracy which benefits from significant material and financial privileges and good living standards. What’s more, it benefits from total legal impunity.

I. — The Venezuelan people have always looked upon their children's access to military careers in a favourable light, and as a means of social advancement. That is why the government speaks of "soldiers, part of the people". But this is totally demagogic and fake: when you go into the military, you are separated from the people.

Corruption protected by the "leader"

C.R. — Let us return to the issue of corruption. Among the masses the recurrent explanation given for the failures of the régime is corruption, as if were some simple dysfunction. Well, firstly, corruption is actually a "normal" part of the capitalist system. No capitalism without corruption exists, and the capitalist classes came about and became strong on the basis of corruption: the history of north American capitalism is a good example of this. So is this an attempt at concealing the implementation of a neo-liberal model which you have described? And people see this as a mere dysfunction?

I. — This explanation has the advantage of keeping the image of the leader intact: Chávez is a good leader but surrounded by bad, corrupt people. This is a lie, but a useful lie which serves to protect the régime's populist image and emotional ties with the leader. Things would be different if the workers were more aware of their rights and better understood their situation. On the contrary, the constant complaints about corruption express ambiguous attitudes: they are addressed to the government and accept its authority. No matter what, you can rely on the government to resolve your problems. The idea of 'corruption' serves the interests of the régime.

I will give the example of life in the barrios. All this so-called "socialist" process has done little to increase solidarity, self-help and co-operation between people. On the contrary! If you live in a bad barrio, you look to move to a less run-down one. In general you look to solve your own needs rather than improving living conditions in general. The solution for such problems is far from being seen as a collective effort. The solution is always The Government. The idea of corruption is situated amid this void of independent activity by the people themselves. It's unfortunate, but that's how things are.

Propaganda and reality

C.R. — It is not easy to compare the situation in Brazil with Venezuela. The populism of the Partido dos Trabalhadores is different from Chavismo. The story of the PT is one of a classic socialist party, emerging from a powerful workers' movement, whose cadre are absorbed into the state apparatus. As we have discussed, the history of Chavismo is more linked to the military revolt after the mass riots of 1989.

Here I shall mention the analysis of some of my friends in Brazil. They argue that the PT's coming to power was not the outcome of social struggles but on the contrary brought to completion the crushing of autonomous currents in these movements by the PT and trade union bureaucracy. The PT's victory was the political expression of the normalisation of a radical social movement.

Among the people who support ("critically", they say) the populist régimes, in particular Chavismo, some have the idea that every amelioration of living conditions represents a positive factor for future struggles, and that we ought to support these régimes for that reason. You are arguing the opposite, saying that the institutionalisation of popular movements tends to enfeeble them. Firstly, it makes them dependent on the state. We are not seeing any new attitudes emerging in

the popular consciousness, but rather a reinforcement of the values of letting others have control, fatalism, individualism and atomisation. This is also apparent in Brazil, where the establishment of an aid system for the poor (Bolsa Familia) has made millions of poor proletarians dependent on a miserable amount of money set aside by the government each month and distributed to individuals by banks. This leads to individualisation and atomisation. In these aid systems, attitudes of solidarity do not grow, but in fact disappear.

What do you think of this argument that “despite everything, these régimes are better than what there was before”?

I. — Solidarity is something that has to develop among communities of workers, based on their own desires. But if everything is run according to a state-imposed agenda, collective needs are not met, only those determined from on high. Look at the so-called grassroots organisations the régime talks about so much and which are often portrayed as “People’s Power” or even “the Fifth Estate”. The organisations have always been dependent on the state. After the 1989 caracazo we saw an independent current among community organisations, but as we have said, these same organisations have been incorporated into the new state and have become vehicles of the Chavista project. Abandoning their autonomy in order to strengthen a so-called revolutionary government, they legitimise their stance by saying “but now things are going to get better!”. All this expresses a number of failings. People have to understand that they can organise independently of the state. But there is an enormous political polarisation which dominates all these activities: you are with Chavismo or against it. The Chavista grassroots organisations against the oppositionist ones. The new communal councils should, in principle, represent the communities who elect them. But in reality there are Chavista ones where there is no place for critics and anti-Chavista ones where Chavistas are not allowed. The form of these councils is determined by the state. So where are the real, concrete interests of collectives represented?

M. — For my part, I am not afraid to say that living standards have not improved; people are living in ever worse conditions. This despite the fact that Venezuela now has the highest GNP per capita in Latin America, a figure comparable to some European countries. The working classes rely on the help the government gives them. Of course, the existence of health centres in the barrios is a good thing, when they’re running. But in this country the situation of poor women, in particular as regards childbirth, is deteriorating. The public health system is in a disastrous state. Venezuelan prisons reproduce societal violence to the extent that they are among the most violent on the continent. In 2007 alone there were 427 deaths in jails, out of a prison population of 20,000. This aggravation of social problems is the expression of a social fragmentation which our famous “revolutionary process” does nothing to combat. On the contrary, it reinforces individualist attitudes. We are told that we are building “21st century socialism” and yet what we see is an increased number of shopping centres. Luxury car sales have never been so strong... All this shows the flowering of values which have nothing to do with the attitudes socialists have expressed throughout history. To conclude: there are slogans and propaganda, but this does not correspond with the concrete results and is not related to the means actually used. The Chávez government disposes of enormous financial means thanks to its oil wealth, and also has immense political capital. So all the official discourse can to explain the lack of results is that one little word: imperialism....

I. — We must look beyond the current régime and beyond Chavismo. What should be put into question are the habits of living and consuming in a country which has lived off oil revenue for years. Venezuela is a society where materialist alienation is very strong. The Latin American

country with most mobile phones, where women's cosmetics are most widely sold, and more... It is the ability to possess such goods which gives people the impression of increased living standards. But the quality of food, healthcare, education, and the ecological situation, are essentials which do not fit into this picture.

M. — The situation in Caracas is a good example of this. Urban decay and the loss of public space, social breakdown, everyday violence and the decline in public transport are far from corresponding to what is materially possible for the capital of an oil-producing country.

C.R. — *The capitalist class appropriates most of the oil revenue, without the slightest interest for meeting the general interests of society. At this level there is seamless continuity between the régimes of the past and Chavismo.*

M. — Exactly! For us, nothing essential has changed. Among the ruling class there are some who have broken with the new authorities and others who support it. The best example is that of Gustavo Cisneros, one of the big modern Venezuelan capitalists, a man connected to the world market, a “global entrepreneur”. He manages the Venezuelan Coca Cola operation and invests in the communications sector. This man carries out all his affairs while maintaining excellent relations with the current government, which he has a conciliatory and even eulogistic attitude towards. “Money has no ideology”, he says!

Co-operatives in the service of casualisation

C.R. — *Now let's talk about the co-operatives movement. A Venezuelan friend said that the government's co-operatives movement, in the last analysis, amounts to a sort of institutionalisation of labour precarity and black market work. He mentioned the recent (2007) strike by dustmen in part of Caracas, during which the strikers asked for Barreto, mayor of Caracas, to intervene — he who quotes Foucault and invited Toni Negri over. The mayor told them that he could do nothing, since they had accepted the transformation of the old company into a co-operative. Which meant that there was no collective bargaining, since the workers were considered to be associates of the co-operative on the same level as the administrators!*

M. — Of course, we have a totally different idea of co-operatives. For us, a co-operative is an initiative which comes from below. For the Chavistas, on the contrary, enterprises in what they now call the “social economy sector” must operate in the form of state-aided co-operatives. Every day people start organising co-operatives — people who are totally foreign to the spirit and practice of co-operativism... because it is the quickest way of getting contracts and state credit! In many industries the law obliges the state to give priority of tenders to “co-operatives” above private enterprises. So many malign people have started creating co-operatives in order to win contracts with government bodies. That as the case with the public roads enterprise you mentioned. A private enterprise was thus transformed into a co-operative to win the tender, and at a stroke the workers lost all their rights and bonuses. They now have three-month renewable contracts, such that the “co-operativist” (in reality, the new name for the boss!) has no duties towards them. Thanks to this lie, after a few months it could be said that there were 200,000 co-operatives... All this in order to make propaganda showing that society has changed. But it is all artificial, created by decree.

I. — I would add that, after the oil workers' strike, the government learned that it had to control the world of work. First it explained that the state would create a new form of organisation based

on solidarity and where all workers would benefit from the same privileges. The co-operatives! At a stroke the government broke the services contracts it had with private companies (particularly for cleaning), which by law had to pay workers 'social bonuses'. The workers were laid off and forced to seek temporary work with these co-operatives now dealing with the state. They lost the bonuses and rights which they had previously (in theory at least) had. Moreover, many of these co-operatives disappeared as soon as they were created. So we are witnessing, as your friend is right to emphasise, the casualisation of work.

Political pressure in the workplace

M. — All this is part of a broader tendency towards casualisation and “flexibility” in Venezuelans' work conditions. The government's recurrent discourse about trade unions is part of the same agenda. The government never ceases to emphasise the need to integrate the trade unions into the new party structures.

The state is one of the main employers in Venezuela. After more than six years, 425 collective bargaining agreements for public sector workers are still waiting to be renegotiated! So there you go: a so-called socialist and revolutionary government which refuses to negotiate the collective deals for its own employees. They don't give a damn about these workers' needs! And here we are talking about sectors which are fundamental to the functioning of the state, such as hospital workers and firefighters. Add to that the fact that the régime has pushed to the limit the loyalty of public sector workers to the state, which has always existed traditionally. You will not be recruited if you do not show Chavista sympathies, and you could even lose your job. The 2004 presidential recall referendum came about after a national petition, which is a constitutional right. Thirty percent of registered voters can demand a referendum. Oppositionists went around collecting signatures, and — we don't know how — they were posted on a web page “Here are the people who signed against Chávez”! So what was meant to be private and confidential became public. There were numerous lay-offs on the basis of this list, and a significant degree of administrative harassment. A nasty little affair, and the international left said nothing! From 2002 to 2004 the polarisation in society reached its height. You went into a public office for some administrative matter or to do some papers, and were asked “Did you sign?": meaning, “did you sign against Chávez?”! Since I am not even on the electoral lists, I was fine...

Sure, in all societies there is political discrimination, but in Venezuela it is truly scandalous. If you want to work in a public service it is absolutely essential that you can prove your sympathy towards the régime. Another thing which you hear more and more of is the obligation for state functionaries to participate in the big demonstrations to support the president — sometimes on weekends — as if it was work time.

I. — I will add a concrete example. A few months ago the president of the Institute for Consumer Protection, INDECO, publicly stated that if a supermarket refused to sell products under the pretext of problems with their inventory, in fact they were hiding attempts at monopoly. This was a lie, since there is a real lack of goods. Because of this, he was replaced by a representative of a harder Chavista bent. This individual had already had a number of ministerial posts and had purged everywhere he had worked! Upon his arrival at INDECO he started again — service directors, although mostly Chavistas — were dragged out of their offices by heavies and were only allowed to take away their personal possessions. My sister works for this body. Although not a

Chavista, she had never had any problems at work before. But in the mix of this re-organisation of the institution, they forced her as well as her colleagues to participate in the 27th March 2007 march in support of Chávez. The pressure became so unbearable that my sister ended up resigning.

C.R. — *Do you think that this hardening of the régime and this obsession with total control will end up counter-productive, weakening its popularity? Problems are mounting and they find ever more bureaucratic answers.*

I. — Yes, this clean-up justified in the name of the Chavista paranoia about the next coup, in fact means strengthening totalitarian tendencies. *chavezresults*

The renewal of social struggles under Chavismo

C.R. — *In the first months of 2008 we saw the development of working-class struggles in Venezuela, in sectors as diverse as steel works and hospitals. In a society extremely polarised between pro and anti Chavistas, the trade union movement appears sharply divided, between the old anti-Chavista social democrat unions, the new Chavista unions and still others who are more politically independent, like the metalworkers' union. In the current circumstances every struggle tends to be characterised as 'manipulated'. The recent strike threat by steelworkers was immediately attacked by the Minister of Labour as "manipulated by the opposition". Today, what degree of autonomy is possible for struggles?*

M. — We think that the results of the 2nd December 2007 referendum represent a turning point. That day, the Chavista government announced that it was to embark on a process of self-critique. By comparison to what had gone before, we could say to ourselves "look, something positive". But the plan was never given any substance! For years we have been living to the rhythm of the electoral process. It was said that the referendum result could perhaps bring about a movement of struggle and that there was at least a change for social movements to find their own dynamics, political space and outlooks. We are indifferent to whether the individual personnel are Chavistas or oppositionists: the state is unable to satisfy the demands of struggles, and the space for autonomous action has to increase.

On International Women's Day the Chavista women's organisations mobilised against imperialism! What was the relationship of this with the needs of women here: help with maternity, health conditions and domestic violence? Similarly, the student movement that broke out in 2007 against the closure of a TV station was unable to formulate its own demands. For their part, the Chavista students were also mobilised, but this time in favour of the closure. That was it! And what were their demands about the conditions of students and the socialist educational agenda? They had none! They had no objectives of their own. On both sides the mobilisations were organised from above. In reality, we have to say, sadly, that the people are prisoners of the electoral calendar and its partisanship. All energies and all mobilisations, whether Chavista or anti-Chavista, are geared towards electoralism.

I. — It used to be that it was impossible to go on strike in an election year without being accused of being a "guarimbero"². In 2007 there was a transport strike, the small owners demanding an increase in ticket prices and arguing that they did not earn enough to maintain the lines. The government paid no attention to their demands and everyone dug their heels in. So the workers who protested against the lack of transport were in turn accused of being "guarimberos". What's

² A "guarimba" is something concealed, and by extension, a clandestine meeting of "wrong-doers". In Chavista language the term "guarimbero" applies to all those who, for one reason or another, loudly protest against the situation. Treading them as such, it is understood that they are subversive forces disguised as honest citizens, or else individuals manipulated by the opposition.

more, the government threatened to create a “co-operative” (see!) which would replace the lines on strike. Of course, there was no possibility of solidarity emerging. The same thing happened in the strikes by teachers and by doctors in the public health system. The doctors occupied the hospitals and demanded the renegotiation of their deal. The government refused any discussion and called them “guarimberos”. So then Chávez met with a group of pro-régime doctors in a large theatre hall in Caracas and magnanimously said to them “I’ll give you a 30% raise!”. With no discussion of the deal! People end up defeated, giving in to the authoritarian and demagogic methods of the government.

C.R. — *So you’re suggesting that this situation is now changing...*

I. — Yes, I think today attitudes are more open. People say “I am neither of the opposition nor a “guarimbero”, I am not a Chavista — or not — but am a worker and want to be listened to!”. We saw this recently in the nursery nurses’ and transport workers’ strikes. “We are workers and we want our rights respected”. These movements represent a change in people’s consciousness.

M. There are contradictions between the leadership of the régime, who are constantly trying to channel protests into the electoralist camp, and the deep discontent of the base, the poorest layers of the population who tend to pose their demands up front. We can only hope that this divide is accentuated. It is this contradiction which can create a space for people to win back their own sets of objectives and their own interests. This is the only way that, in the long term, autonomous space can be created.

Dissent among the Chavistas

I. — As we have already emphasised, the political process of Chavismo has experienced a series of changes. Since 2007, two things have become clear: the first is that Chávez could lose power. The second is that Chávez does not necessarily represent the interests of the majority of the population. In December 2007, we saw that the project Chávez argues for has raised a number of doubts, even among the Chavista left, some sections of which were very critical. The fragmentation was real. You could see that Chávez’s charisma was weakening. That is why we think that at the present time, what is most interesting politically is what is happening inside the Chavista movement and the critiques arising in its ranks. It represents the discontent of activists who feel that their political space is more and more controlled from above. Since last year, the “missions”³ have been going very badly, with less and less financial means. For example, half of the “Barrio adentro”⁴ health centres have been shut for want of equipment, medicine or doctors... The “Robinson mission”, the avant-garde of the “missions”, designed to combat illiteracy,

³ After the failed April 2002 coup the Chávez government launched a programme of misiones (missions), far-reaching projects aimed at improving various aspects of the lives of the poorest people, in particular as regards health, education and nutrition. These misiones are organised and directly financed by the state oil firm PDVSA. They work outside of the control of the services of the corresponding ministries and are not subject — even at a formal level — to any parliamentary control.

⁴ The mision Barrio Adentro (mission at the heart of the neighbourhood) is the mission designed to improve medical awareness in poor and rural areas (preventative medicine). This mission is based on Health Centres — free medical offices with doctors lodging in the district. The large majority of these doctors are Cubans (over 20,000) put at Chávez’s disposal by the Cuban state, which is supplied with petrol in return. An undefined number of these doctors have since disappeared into the wild... some have found refuge in Colombia. A particular form of set-up has been designed with the goal of supplying the health centre and the doctors’ living space under the same roof. Many thousands of such buildings have been set up in the barrios of the biggest towns.

is no more. Other “missions” have not given the expected results. We are witnessing a crisis of expectations. The first two years, propaganda was still able to pretend that the process was going ahead as planned and we only had to wait. The results could be manipulated for electoral ends. But when, after four or five years in power, there are still no improvements... This is true with the universities too – Chávez initially promised twelve new universities, then thirty... but nothing ever happened... After six years of unconditional popular support, the hopes ended up collapsing, which explains the current implosion of the régime.

M. – The results of the December 2007 referendum confirmed our expectations: the Chavista public had nothing to do with a “socialist movement” and did not at all identify with the so-called socialist project. The majority of the Chavista electorate voted against his socialist constitution. But still Chávez continues to have strong emotional ties to the masses. There is nothing socialist or revolutionary about this: it is mobilisation around a charismatic figure, Hugo Chávez.

I. – There is a joke people tell about Chávez, of coarse Venezuelan taste. It’s the story where the fiancé asks his fiancée to go to bed with him, and she says “No my love, not now!”. And he insists, “But yes, but yes, but yes!”. Chávez proposes a socialist constitution and the people say no, we don’t want it! Instead of going forward with a positive alternative he tenses up and shows himself to be more authoritarian. After all, this guy is a soldier. This attitude leads to division, which is almost emotional in type, since Chávez is an emotional figure. Notwithstanding, if Chávez happens to decide to use authoritarian means to resolve some problem of the masses, the charismatic ties can be patched up again.

M. – One further aspect must not go without mention – the importance Chavismo gives to international affairs. The support he gives to “friendly” régimes is less and less tolerated. “He is busy with others and not us!”. “Why does Chávez say that he wants to help them build hospitals in Nicaragua when the ones here are in such a pathetic state?”. This is what we are accustomed to hear: “We want answers to the problems here, and now!”. After the defeat of the December 2007 referendum Chávez did everything he could to recover his image on the international level. So that’s why we have this constant show, the world a stage.

The spectre of anarchy?

C.R. – *In March 2008 a plain clothes policeman put a bomb in the headquarters of the bosses’ organisation. A man linked to the régime, he did it with his policeman’s card in his pocket! The Minister of the Interior spoke of the actions of a “small anarchist group”... Why speak of an anarchist group in reference to an action which was, by all accounts, an operation of the secret services?*

M. – Chávez’s Interior Minister is one of the most sinister characters in the régime. He is a mercenary, a man who made his career in the army’s secret services and responsible for the massacre of a guerrilla group in 1988.

I. – This sort of talk is nothing new. Each time there are actions which take place outside the control of the régime’s institutions and organisations, they cry “anarchism”. Chávez himself came on TV to say that this terrorist action was the work of “anarchist groups”. Of course, we could get worried that this was part of a clamp-down strategy, but I think it’s more that it’s an easy explanation. As yet there have been no consequences for us as a result of our activism. We are few in number, but are on our guard. In any case, at a recent meeting of his new PSUV party

Chávez said “There is no place for anarchists in the PSUV”. There is a place for “obedient, critical socialists” but not for anarchists (laughter).

“Revolutionary tourism”

C.R. — *You often refer to “revolutionary tourism”... in early March 2008, in the TV programme “Alo Presidente!” Chávez appeared, surrounded by a group of young members of the German party Die Linke.*

M. — What happened with the anarchist movement in Cuba is particularly of interest, given the resemblance between the two situations. They are two governments who present themselves to the outside world as revolutionary and progressive. So the régime chooses a certain number of sights for sympathisers to go and tour round. But this is quite the caricature: they organise international conferences on occupied factories without the participants visiting a single occupied workplace. They organise big international Masses, the World Social Forum, the International Camp of Anti-imperialist Youth, the International Forum of Intellectuals for Peace, etc. All this as an attempt to constantly feed the propaganda and publicity for the régime.

I. — There is one “revolutionary tourism” run by the state, and another more spontaneous kind involving people who have certain hopes and expectations about Venezuela. I think that the people who come in the latter state of mind are more free and ultimately see more than those who visit under the control of the state. Celebrities like Noam Chomsky and Naomi Campbell come, are led around some barrio under construction for the benefit of the poor, to some co-operatives or to some state farm. Their visits are filmed in order to make propaganda.

M. — We know that most people who come here want to see what they expect to see. Like those who visit Cuba. So it all depends on their ideological training. Visitors from more libertarian and critical backgrounds can accept seeing the good and the bad, while those from more traditional Marxist Leninist groups, Guevarists and Maoists, tend to confirm in their heads what propaganda has told them. For our part, whenever we meet comrades from abroad we tell them what we think of the situation. But we also say that they ought not just take our word for it, just as they shouldn’t believe the government! They have to open their eyes, visit what you can visit, walk around Caracas and the towns of the interior.

Debord, Bolivar and the avatars of propaganda

C.R. — *Gabriel, you are a keen reader of Guy Debord. What use would you make of his writings in order to understanding Venezuelan society?*

M. — I think that thirty years ago some words had a certain meaning — for example, if you were an anti-imperialist you aligned yourself with one of the Cold War blocs. Today, in a period of capitalist globalisation, you can call yourself an anti-imperialist and remain a partisan of neo-liberalism... In Venezuela socialists’ mentality is highly eccentric and you can’t be sure of what is being said. The spectacle as a representation of reality greatly interests me in understanding the situation I see. I think that the Chavista phenomenon is not analysed in a satisfactory manner by us or anyone else. The results of the December 2007 referendum surprised all intellectuals whether of left or right. So we must continue to reflect.

C.R. — *But it is a purely electoral rejection. What it really means is that people do not totally accept the image of reality portrayed by propaganda and that it does not conform to the reality of social relations. Which also implies that the forms of domination are in crisis.*

M. — Without doubt. Look at the Bolivar myth. It is the myth fundamental to Venezuelan nationalism, the myth of the liberator. It means that within nationalism there is this historic role for Venezuela, predestined to fight for the liberation of the Latin American peoples. With two corollaries: the Venezuelan has a universal epic and heroic role; and Venezuela is a rich country with poorly distributed wealth. Chávez perfectly embodies this culture. He is the man predestined to fight a second independence struggle, against the United States.

I. — The hiatus came when people started to realise that the political remedies were far from enough to meet their needs. But there was this image of the régime and Chávez. Plans for the future collapsed faced with the disasters of everyday life. The régime drew much of its strength from cultural aspects: nationalism and in particular the image of the régime abroad. “Bolivarian socialism” and “21st century socialism” were presented as being able to answer concrete questions of hunger, housing and living conditions. In the elaboration of this propaganda it was necessary to give pride of place to people like Juan Barreto (mayor of Caracas) and Andrés Izarra. They knew how to sell Chavismo and the image of the régime to the outside world. Andrés Izarra, whose closest advisor is the ex-situationist Eduardo Rothe, is a leading figure in the régime. He dreamt up the document “If I was Venezuelan I would vote for Chávez” which all the “progressive” North American and European intellectuals signed. The idea was to show that the Chavistas weren’t alone in the world.

C.R. — *But all this was just a rerun of history... it’s in the tradition of historic Stalinism, the congresses of “progressive” artists and intellectuals in support of this or that progressive régime...*

I. — Yes, for you it’s déjà vu. But you must understand that here in Venezuelan this is a totally new situation. The country came out of a long reign of social-democratic rule financed by oil revenue and directly tied to the USA. These conflicts between left and right, neo-liberalism and anti-neo-liberalism, are new ideological struggles for this society.

M. — My father was a rank-and-file member of the social democratic Acción Democrática. Later he abandoned politics. The oil was flowing, he had money and work and made his living. Today his is a Chavista and has ‘discovered’ the Cuban revolution! Chavistas’ attitudes are greatly naive. Now they are finding out about all these questions, as if they were experiencing some belated revolutionary adolescence...

The condition of women: advances and retreats

C.R. — *Have there been significant changes in the condition of women?*

I. — I am very pessimistic. Many women’s organisations have been integrated into the state. The régime itself has created various women’s bodies such as the Casa de la mujer. Women active in society are integrated into the work of such institutions. Only a small number have pursued work at grassroots level.

In Venezuela the image of women in a consumerist world is above all characterised by association with sexual objectification. Every advert is about woman and her body. What are presented as the needs of women have nothing to do with women’s specific interests. So, unfortunately, woman is reduced to reproducing sexist ideas. If we want to measure women’s access to posi-

tions of authority, we can see that the régime has established a certain parity. For example, if you have a job in public administration you'll have the same salary as a man would. The régime has also placed several women in positions of political responsibility. But these posts reproduce the system of oppression within the authorities themselves. They do not smash the structures of the system, but reproduce it with the figure of the woman-in-power.

Through cultural factors and the weight of tradition, the fact is that in Venezuela the question of women's conditions has up until now led to very few demands of their own. This has left the women's movement more vulnerable to traditional political dynamics.

A telling example. We have a law, two of whose most significant articles were revoked by the Chavista régime. According to one article, if a woman was attacked in her home by her husband or partner, he would be banned from returning home for 72 hours after his detention. This article was wiped deleted from the law. Another article was revoked with the consequence that if the home belongs to the man, the woman and the kids have to leave if they separate. That tells you well enough the weakness of women's cause in the current climate.

In Venezuela the issue of contraception is not taboo, even if it is a very religious country and we know how religion weighs on this matter. Contraceptives are freely on sale and distributed in schools, while the morning-after-pill is also available. There are many types of pills, some of which are not too expensive and are relatively accessible to young people. On the contrary, abortion is not allowed. Only miscarriage is recognised as abortion. There is also the problem of very young women having kids. I see that mostly as a cultural problem. Childbirth here remains the central thing which makes a woman a woman. A couple like us, in our thirties, without kids, are very rare. Everyone criticises you and most people think of it as proof that we are not at all normal. Here, childbirth is something fundamental. In the poorest layers of society motherhood is seen as a way out. Giving birth means young girls can leave their homes — often places of repression and violence against women — and start their lives again somewhere else. But, of course, violence is reproduced in the new circumstances, nothing changes and the demands for a change in women's conditions is let drift. However, they do not see it like this, and for them motherhood is a means of starting afresh. It is a contradiction which is obvious to us, but it isn't for young mothers.

The discovery of libertarian ideas

C.R. — *How did you arrive at libertarian ideas?*

I. — I studied sociology and took part in an editorial co-operative linked to the university. I was on the left, from a social-democratic background, but lots about the Marxist-Leninists and Trotskyists didn't appeal to me. I grew closer to young anarchists and was also influenced by reading Camus.

M. — For me the crucial moment was meeting an old Spanish anarchist who lived in my small town. As a young man I saw Guevara as a heroic Don Quixote figure, but I didn't understand why my here was implicated in a political and social project involving the Soviet Union, an empire carrying out horrors in Afghanistan and dominated over other countries. When I found anarchist ideas, they answered my questions. I was won over. That was when I met the old anarchist who lived an hour away from me in a little farming town called Nirgua. He started giving me literature. This old anarchist was the first man in Venezuela to make pirate books — not to make money

but to make them accessible to more people. Visiting him, I appreciated his ethics, his way of life, and his coherence. The Marxists who I knew had a clear idea of revolution but day-to-day behaved themselves in a manner I disapproved of. They had a double life — one as a militant, one day-to-day. There was a separation. So I read a lot and arriving in Caracas I made contact with the small anarchist circles. I also knew two old members of the Spanish CNT, Civil War exiles living in Caracas and with who I established strong emotional bonds. Later, one died and only Antonio Serrano was left. The old comrade from my little town is still alive and a few years ago we organised a meeting of young anarchists at his place. Venezuelan anarchism lacks real historical roots, making it less dogmatic.

C.R. — *Tell us a bit about your magazine El Libertario.*

M. — At first it wasn't easy. We were part of the milieu comprising leftists and organisations from human rights campaigners to ecologists. With the coming of Chavismo, everything was quickly polarised and almost all of these organisations were integrated into Chavismo. But not us! The first years were terrible. We were completely isolated. After 2002, criticising the régime became an act of courage. In producing our little magazine — 1,500 copies per issue — I lost 90% of my friends, whether Chavista or anti-Chavista. No-one talked to me any more! If we criticised the opposition we were taken for Chavistas, if we criticised Chavismo we were treated like members of the opposition. And if you criticise the state you are accused of being an imperialist agent, a petit bourgeois intellectual and all the rest... As we were overcome with criticism and rebuttals we were forced to refine our arguments. We went beyond critical theory and started making analysis of concrete situations.

I. — Those who criticised us were far from constructive. They did not discuss our arguments and ideas. It was always at the level of personal rebuttals and breaking emotional ties. We felt very isolated.

M. — After the 2002 coup attempt against Chávez we were explicitly threatened with death. All this because we distributed a communiqué where we wrote “Neither Chávez nor Carmona, for self-management and life!”. Some went as far as saying that El Libertario had supported the coup d'état! Today the situation has changed. The readership of El Libertario certainly goes beyond our own milieu. The magazine is now read by people on the left looking for an alternative. We distribute 2,500 issues every two months, 60% by face-to-face sales. Our web page also gets a lot of hits. We're always here, and we'll go on!

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Charles Reeve
The revolution delayed
10 years of Hugo Chávez's rule
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