

Conservative Think Tank Sends Hugo Chavez to Dante's Inferno -

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Readers may be familiar with the conservative Center on Global Prosperity at the Independent Institute in Oakland, CA and its Director Alvaro Vargas Llosa. It's a so-called independent think tank that acts as a vocal supporter for the kind of predatory market-based policies, known not to work, that growing numbers of people around the world are resisting more than ever – especially in Latin America.

The Center's director and members are part of the privileged elite, and they preach the false gospel that everyone can have the same benefits they've gotten, but it's up to them to get them on their own. Simply put, that means market-based policies are always the solution (even though they consistently fail when corrupted by corporate predators making all the rules), and it's the fault of the poor for their own misery.

The Center is clever enough to disguise its message using language sounding sensible but which, in fact, is the same old doctrine it disingenuously claims to be against: "failed domestic policies....dysfunctional national and international institutions....unjust terms of trade, and unfair capital flows." It sounds prudent until the mask comes off revealing its real agenda. It decries the notion of government-run efforts to end poverty and inequality and makes no pretense that the only workable solutions are the same kind of market-based ones that never do. It preaches the gospel of "the entrepreneurial spirit shown by millions of destitute people around the world (and the) success stories" of how they've risen from their impoverishment and prospered. If only they'd tell us where these millions are located and how can it explain the fact that poverty is increasing in most countries, and the dominant entrepreneurial class (the ones that fund the Center) are responsible for it.

In a September 25 article on the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal (a venue where the Center's views are always welcome), The Center joins a growing chorus taking aim at Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. And does it ever in a piece of trash journalism titled Chavez's Inferno in which it begins by saying Hugo Chavez should have held up a copy of Dante's Divine Comedy (many of us read in college) at the UN instead of Noam Chomsky's Hegemony or Survival. The article notes in the first part of Dante's work the Italian master takes his readers on a journey through the nine concentric circles of his Inferno representing various types of evil. Dante's description of the underworld, it says, "reads like a script of present-day Venezuela," and in one phrase the Center destroys whatever credibility it claims to have. It then confirms it by taking its readers through each of Dante's nine circles consigning parts of Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution (and the Venezuelan President) to each of them without ever explaining the elements in it and how they've improved the lives of most Venezuelans. The Center thus portrays a false picture of life in Venezuela under Hugo Chavez making its members likely candidates for a special place in one of the circles he

takes us through.

It begins with the first circle for those who lack faith. This for Chavez, it falsely claims, is for the 80% of Venezuelans who lack food and can't afford a basic daily diet. It says it's because since Chavez took office in 1999, the poverty rate either rose (according to one report he cites) or held steady (in another) and in either case shows Chavez's policies don't work. The writer conveniently twists the facts ignoring the humanitarian social programs under Chavez that provide low-cost food and cheap or free housing for the needy. He also says nothing about Venezuela's dismal history under the oligarchs the Center admires before Hugo Chavez became President and the vastly different performance record in the country afterward. If he did, he'd have had to have told readers that in the 28 years prior to Chavez's election under the corrupted corporatists, Venezuelan per capita income fell 35%. It was the worst decline in the region and one of the worst in the world.

The article also fails to mention the poverty rate in the country in 1997 was 61% according to Venezuela's National Statistics Institute (INE), in 1999 it was 50% when Chavez was elected, and at the end of 2005 it stood at 44%. It also ignored the US and Venezuelan oligarch-directed crippling oil strike in 2002-03 that devastated the economy. Once it ended, the economy began to grow impressively, per capita income rose, unemployment fell and the poverty rate declined from a high of 62% in 2003 to a level near 40% today. The Chavez Revolution has been so successful (helped in no small measure by high oil prices) that since 2004 Venezuela had the highest growth rate in the hemisphere. The writer of this piece clearly has a credibility problem. He poses as a Latin American expert, so either his claim is false or he knows the facts, chooses to suppress them and thus has an even greater problem for his lack of principle and integrity. Maybe the wrong person or persons belong in Dante's Inferno, but we're only through the first circle.

The second level is for those unable to control their lust. For Chavez, the Center says, it's for those "unable to control their homicidal instincts (because) His government has degraded social coexistence so much (there were) more homicides in Venezuela (during the Chavez years) than there have been deaths in any single armed conflict around the world in recent years." Is this writer living on another planet? Readers need to pause for breathe to recover their senses after such an absurdity. Aside from the hundreds to thousands of monthly deaths in obvious places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, and the Congo where hot conflicts rage, just across the border in Colombia scores of people or more are being murdered or displaced monthly by President Alvaro Uribe's thuggish military enforcers (armed by the US) and paramilitary hired assassins in service to the corporate interests (getting similar help) plus the many other murders George Bush's favorite Latin American president is responsible for inside Venezuela which the Center wants to blame on Hugo Chavez who's trying to stop them.

On to circle three which Dante has for gluttons who leave us with no food. The Center says it's for Chavez's "corrupt authorities who leave Venezuelans with no wealth." Here it says nothing intelligible other than to mouth disconnected thoughts with no explanation and blame it on Plan Bolivar 2000 that was the first of the new Bolivarian social missions under which 40,000 Venezuelan soldiers were involved helping the country's poor unlike in the US where its military marauds to kill them around the world and does a good job of it. Under this Chavez plan, the Venezuelan military distributes food to the poor, assists in education and conducts mass-vaccinations. It also provides transportation for thousands of poor and sick people who can't afford the travel cost to get to where help is available. The Center called this plan corrupt and also leveled a broadside against the state-owned oil company

and all the social missions and their budgets it falsely claims are controlled “personally” by Hugo Chavez hidden from public view.

All that’s true in this garbled paragraph is that corruption is systemic and a serious problem in Venezuela, but it’s the result of rule by the oligarchs for decades who always stole from the people to enrich themselves. The Center fails to explain Hugo Chavez has fought to change this system of privilege, has made important strides reducing it, but still has far to go to claim success. As for the social programs known as Misiones, they’ve been a huge success and the main reason Chavez is beloved by the great majority of his people. Since 1999, Hugo Chavez not only reduced poverty in Venezuela, he’s greatly improved the living standards of his people from the non-cash benefits these programs provide. They include free quality health and dental care for all, free education to the highest level, housing assistance, subsidized food, land reform, job training, micro-credit and lots more. The Center thinks these programs are a bad idea and ending them all would be good for the people. It prefers how things are done in the US under a system where people can have anything they want – as long as they can pay for it. Members of the Center are sinking lower into Dante’s Inferno.

The fourth circle of the Inferno is for misers. “In Chavez’s Inferno,” that level is for “bureaucrats who claim to provide social services but use funds to pay people to attend rallies or bust up opposition gatherings.” The writer has a bad habit of inventing a single example from his strange imagination to make his claim while ignoring the vast amount of information that would refute it. He pays no attention to how the vital services Venezuelans now receive make all the difference in the world to them because they never had them before and wouldn’t now if it weren’t for Hugo Chavez. The Center ignores this because if it explained it, its argument evaporates just like its credibility is doing.

Just one of many important improvements under Chavez is his education program. It’s free to the highest level for all Venezuelans and virtually eliminated illiteracy in the country. Cuba under Fidel Castro, achieved the same success under his world-class educational system free for all Cubans. Compare that to the “free market” US economy the Center champions where the US Department of Education reports about a 20% level of functional illiteracy and vast numbers more close to it. It’s especially out of control in the inner cities where the rates are astronomically high according to reliable studies and important writings from authors and experts like Jonathan Kozol.

Look also at the state of health care delivery in the US where despite the huge expenditure of \$2 trillion annually on it nearly 47 million people in the country have no health insurance and many millions more have too little. As a result, these people are denied the vital care they can’t get when they need it most. In Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela (and in Fidel Castro’s Cuba) virtually everyone gets free high quality health care. The Center is unimpressed by these kinds of government-run programs that work and undisturbed by the “free market” ones that don’t even exist or work poorly when they do.

Dante’s fifth circle is for those succumbing to wrath. This for Chavez, says the Center, is for “political persecution (and) Venezuela’s human rights record is atrocious.” The writer of this piece must love going to bad movies and watching TV soap operas as he seems to prefer pulp fiction to fact. As evidence of his preposterous claim, he cites the killing of 12 people in April, 2002 who “were protesting near the government palace.” He never explains the street violence that took place then came from his favorite US president’s instigated, funded and

directed coup to topple the democratically elected Chavez government. It was committed by CIA hired thugs and assassins who did it trying to blame Hugo Chavez unjustly who was a victim of it and not a perpetrator.

The Center also falsely claims there are political prisoners, including former officials, imprisoned because they spoke out against President Chavez. This is another outrageous lie as the opposition freely denounces Hugo Chavez daily including over the dominant corporate-run media where the criticism and vitriol are intense all the time. Try finding any of that in the US corporate media that love whatever George Bush does and suppress most all dissent against his policies and crimes. In contrast, there's a thriving free press in Venezuela because Hugo Chavez does nothing to curtail or suppress it other than to counter the oligarchs' lies and hostility with his own forceful responses and, above all else, by his extraordinary social programs and participatory democracy that speak loudly for themselves.

Dante places heretics in circle six. In Chavez's Venezuela, this level is for heretic journalists, says the Center "who try to tell the truth." It doesn't explain these "heretics" work for the corporate-run media and are paid flacks for their failed policies most Venezuelans want no more of. It goes on to falsely claim Chavez tries to "gag" them, "withdraw radio and TV licenses (and) Government-controlled mobs called Bolivarian Circles, formed with the help of Cuban intelligence, harass journalists." With this kind of black propaganda, the Center's members are heading for the depths of one of Dante's lowest circles (we've yet to get to) reserved for those the Italian master feels are the worst ones. The truth, as already stated and the Center ignores, is that the dominant corporate-run media and journalists in their employ spew their vitriol daily against the Chavez government unobstructed.

As for those Bolivarian Circle "mobs," people living in the US might only wish for them here if they understood what they are and how well they work for the people of Venezuela. These Circles are the heart of Hugo Chavez's participatory democracy meaning, unlike in the US, Venezuelans really have a say in how their country is governed. That right was given to them in Articles 166 and 192 in the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela which the people voted to approve overwhelmingly in a national referendum in December, 1999 and that went into effect one year later. As for Cuban intelligence, the only Cubans in the country, besides the diplomatic ones every country has to conduct normal relations, are the many thousands of doctors and other health workers and teachers who've played a major role in improving the lives of the Venezuelan people. The Center disapproves.

Dante puts the violent in his seventh circle. For the Center it's for Chavez's "imperialism." This staggering misstatement of fact is based on Chavez having purchased "100,000 AK-47s, 53 Mi-35 assault helicopters, fighter jets, transport planes, patrol boats, speed boats and Tucano jets from Russia, Spain and Brazil." No mention is made that most nations buy weapons from abroad or produce their own, and no nation produces and sells more of them than the US in volumes greater than the rest of the world combined. Hugo Chavez denounces imperialism, never attacked another nation or threatened to do it. In contrast, the US is an out-of-control hegemon waging aggressive wars without end for world dominance and is a threat to world peace, security and the ability of the environment to sustain life. Most other nations need whatever weapons they can get and afford just for security and self-defense, especially when they're up against the Bush administration. In the case of Venezuela, Washington already tried and failed three times to oust Hugo Chavez. In light of this and knowing another US attempt to overthrow his government is coming, the action Chavez is taking is prudent but by no means excessive.

Another false claim is that Chavez “is a long-time supporter of FARC, Colombia’s terrorist group.” No mention is made of the Uribe government in Colombia that has one of the worst documented records in the world of state-directed terrorism against its own people. Also, at the likely direction, funding and insistence of the Bush administration, he’s doing it against Venezuelans as well. He’s been at it for many months by infiltrating his state-supported paramilitary death squads across the Venezuelan border to commit a growing number of killings and kidnappings that Hugo Chavez has now created civilian and military units to combat. Tachina state on the Colombian border has been particularly hard hit as the number of deaths there rose from 212 in 2002 to 566 last year and over 2,000 since Hugo Chavez became President. Alvaro Uribe and George Bush are widely believed to be behind this as part of a plan to destabilize the Chavez government and create a reason for the US to intervene militarily - supposedly to protect US citizens as happened using those contrived pretexts in the 1980s to justify invading Grenada and Panama. In those cases, the real reasons were to overthrow governments not adhering to the US agenda. The same situation is true in Venezuela because Hugo Chavez refuses to follow the same old neoliberal Washington Consensus policies that don’t work and denounces them forthrightly.

One more claim was that Hugo Chavez supports Evo Morales in Bolivia politically and financially as well as the opposition in Peru and Mexico which “was a major factor in both men’s recent defeats.” Chavez does support Evo Morales and lent political support to Ollanta Humala and Lopez Obrador in Peru and Mexico respectively. Those candidates’ defeats, however, had nothing to do with that support and everything to do with both elections having been stolen by the dominant parties of Alan Garcia and Felipe Calderon (with plenty of US help) who both pledge their allegiance to the corporate interests of their countries and to Washington and its corrupted business-as-usual policies.

“Chavez (also) buys influence through oil,” says the Center. “It’s a form of blackmail: At OPEC Chavez fights for increasing prices, making life hard for poor countries that import oil, and then offers those very nations oil subsidies they have no choice but to accept....Chavez is denying his nation its wealth from oil....He sponsors 30 countries....to buy their vote for a seat at the U.N. Security Council.” Where to begin to debunk this outrageous barrage of unfounded and poisonous inversions of fact. Reverse all the Center’s claims and therein lies the truth about Hugo Chavez, his dedication to his people, and his enlightened social programs and real participatory democracy people in most other nations might only dream of, if they knew about them, but don’t have.

Chavez has also been a champion of his progressive Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA). It’s his alternative to the corrupted neoliberal Washington Consensus model based on exploitation, military conquest and domination. He believes in the “social state” benefitting everyone and not just the privileged elite the Center pledges fealty to and is funded by. He even once proposed a put-up-or-shut-up offer to George Bush as part of an effort to normalize relations between the two countries and was turned down flat. He offered to sell discounted oil to the US at \$50 a barrel when it was selling on world markets in the \$70 range. Had the offer been accepted, it could have lowered the cost of gasoline at the pump as much as \$1 dollar a gallon and been a boon to US consumers who were never told about Chavez’s generosity.

Center members surely know this but it’s left out of their column. It also didn’t mention that Chavez’s generosity was rejected because the Big Oil interests so close to the Bush administration wanted no part of it as lower gas prices would come right out of their bottom line. As for buying votes to win the Latin American seat on the UN Security Council, the

nations supporting Venezuela's bid see the Chavez government as the only alternative to the unacceptable other choice - Guatemala with its long history of thuggishness and brutality against its majority indigenous people earning it no right for anything but world condemnation.

Dante's eighth circle is for those who commit fraud which is Chavez's "fraudulent anti-Americanism" for the Center. Because Venezuela sells much of its oil to the US and imports billions of dollars in return in goods and services, by the Center's strange reasoning that means Hugo Chavez "lusts for....US capitalism." What he "lusts for" is the full development of the "social state" and his desire for forthright dealings with all other nations based on cooperation, solidarity and fairness.

To help his people, Chavez is committed to building a socialist state, but he's done nothing to abolish the basic elements of a capitalist one that includes private and foreign ownership and the right to private profits. What he does insist on is that private businesses, domestic and foreign-owned, operate under fair practice rules. That includes paying their fair share of taxes to the state and for foreign owners in joint state-owned resource ventures agreeing to a minority ownership arrangement of 49% maximum. This is no different than how most developed nations deal with foreign investors, but it's way different from the freewheeling, deregulated, low tax, full or majority ownership arrangements that used to prevail in Venezuela and throughout Latin America for decades. It's also the inverse of the corrupted one-way US Washington Consensus "free market" model based on rule by a dominant corporatocracy and the exploitation of ordinary people to make it work.

The Center also makes the absurd claim that Chavez "manipulated the voter registration rolls, adding two million phantom voters, including 30,000 who are 100 years old and citizens named 'Superman.'" Further, "Four out of five members of the Electoral Council are Chavez lackeys." Where do these people come up with this stuff? The Center knows the truth but prefers to ignore it and concentrate instead on unfounded and outrageous accusations.

In fact, all elections in which Chavez was a candidate were monitored by the opposition and independent observers who judged them to be free and fair. In addition, there's no evidence whatever of manipulating voter registration rolls or unfairly stacking the Electoral Council. The simple truth, the Center ignores, is that Hugo Chavez is so popular he just has to announce he's running, put his name on the ballot, show up on election day (unlike the opposition afraid to run against him), and he's swept to victory overwhelmingly.

Compare that to the way things are under the Bush administration the Center won't talk about. The US president's lackeys stack the Congress and court system up to the High Court, and the electoral system is so corrupted and flawed that any notion of a free and fair process is something from another age. It's this way now because increasing numbers of far-right candidates and George Bush are themselves lackeys of the corporate interests and war-profiteers they represent. The result is wars without end and growing repression at home to keep a restive population in line. Growing numbers of voters are getting so fed up with this and their needs being ignored because of it, they'd surely vote the bums out in a really free and fair election. They can't do it because the process is controlled and corrupted by the big corporations running it. Their hand-picked officials decide who gets on and stays on the voter rolls and they're in charge of proceedings on election day. Worst of all, corporate-owned and operated electronic voting machines are now widely used and are easily manipulated to rig the outcomes so enough business-friendly candidates win. It's

called democracy, American-style.

The ninth and lowest of Dante's circles is for traitors, the worst ones in Dante's world. Surely George Bush would qualify for that level and member of the Center with him based on the above discourse of hateful dishonesty and character assassination. The Center makes another choice reserving a spot in all of Dante's nine levels for Hugo Chavez. Here again its comments are garbled. It first mentions Army officers betraying Chavez with three of them, imprisoned for real crimes he won't explain, managing to escape. More likely they were sprung with CIA help, but that's unmentioned in the column. The CIA is an old hand at this kind of business. In 1985 it's operatives bribed prison guards in Venezuela so that world-class terrorist Luis Posada Carriles, on the CIA's payroll, was allowed to "escape" to find sanctuary in El Salvador from where he resumed his CIA service participating in the Contra wars in Nicaragua. No mention is made of this in the Center's anti-Chavez diatribe which then ends comparing Dante's center of the earth Cocytus frozen lake, where Satan is held captive, to "Venezuela's Inferno (where) Satan is oil-rich Lake Maracaibo" that the writer uses metaphorically for the "astronomical wealth squandered by (Chavez's) tyrannical popularism."

Again, the facts on the ground and in the hearts and minds of most Venezuelans belie the outrageous inversions of truth coming from the Center on Global Prosperity which claims expertise on Latin America. What the Center is expert at is black propaganda, gross distortion of truth and shameless lies. Based on what it recounts above, its members deserves a special place in one of the lower circles of Dante's Inferno. For those who know how Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution has benefitted the Venezuelan people, the Center has lost all credibility and shamed itself for its dishonesty. It lies exposed as a charlatan-organization and false prophet of right wing imperialism based on market-based solutions that don't work and must be forced on the unwilling from the barrel of a gun. Hugo Chavez has a different world vision that's growing and spreading because his way does work. The Venezuelan people know it, and greater numbers of others are beginning to find it out and want the same benefits for themselves. Those people are fed up with the old order based on exploitation and want no more of it. The Center needs some enlightened new members to explain that to the others putting out the kind of material in this hate-piece. It shows the Center is on the wrong track supporting a failed system, and nothing it says trumpeting the party line will ever change that.

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