

Post-Chavez Latin America Will Continue to Drift Away from the United States

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Many questions are arising about what direction the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Latin America will take now that Hugo Chavez has died of cancer. The answer seems to be that the trend towards regional autonomy and populism in what academics would call a question of, either imagined or real, multi-dimensionality and agency will continue. This is more than just about the so-called “pink tide.” It is about anti-hegemonic alliances that have brought different groups together in Latin America. The work of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian activist and the leader of the Factory Councils in Turin, can help us conceptualize this process. Not only did Gramsci inspire Chavez, but [his ideas can be used](#) to explain these alliances.

Despite alienating much of what can be called the Venezuelan middle class, Hugo Chavez campaigned to form united fronts, domestically and internationally, during his presidency. From the start, he burst into Venezuela’s political scene with a mixed coalition of activists, a spectrum of leftists, career soldiers, and small capital. He tried to bring the mosaic of different peoples that represented Venezuelan society together formatively. Even when the middle class was being distanced from his Bolivarianism as it radicalized, Chavez admitted that it was of high importance to align with them. As part of a larger cultural project, this included communicating with them through a politics of what the sociologist Stuart Hall would call “articulation.”

Bolivarian Historic Bloc Building

In the context of class hegemony, the coalition Chavez built is what Antonio Gramsci would describe as a process of “historical bloc building.” This bloc building process is part of a continuous war of maneuver and continuous war of position for hegemony. In June 2007, Chavez would even refer to his Bolivarian Revolution in Gramscian terms as a bloc building process during a speech he delivered to his supporters. He would tell his supporters that they were witnessing the formation of a new historical bloc and that a historic crisis was unfolding with the dying of the old, capitalist society of the Republic of Venezuela (or the Venezuelan Fourth Republic) and the formation of the new, socialist society of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Bloc formation has not only been important for Chavez’s Bolivarian project. If not all of them, historic bloc formation has been an important part of the vast spectrum of social movements; this is why the scholar Peter Thomas refers to Gramsci’s work on historical blocs as leading to a “theory of social power” for various social movements. In “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” Gramsci emphasises that the factory workers movement in Northern Italy could not position itself for the leadership of the Italian state without the

creation of a historic bloc with the peasants of Southern Italy. This alliance was the real “magic formula” for taking over the state according to Gramsci and not a division of land and estates for the peasantry as the socialists claimed.

In Venezuela’s past, after it declared independence, on July 4, 1811, it was defeated by Spanish royalists who convinced the slaves and poorest strata of Venezuelan society to align with them against Simon Bolivar’s republican patriots. After the defeat of what is called the Venezuelan First Republic, a Venezuelan Second Republic would be established in 1814. This too would be defeated, because the poor and slaves would oppose the republicans. Bolivar would realize that slavery had to be abolished and that he needed to form a historic bloc with the slaves and lower strata to become successful. In the case of Chavez and other socialists in Latin America this has also included sectors of local capital.

Bolivarian Historic Bloc Building in Neo-Gramscian Terms

The political shift in Venezuela can also be analyzed in terms of an organic, Gramscian historical crisis unfolding in Latin America. This includes an indigenization of and a localization of political decision making in Latin America. To a degree, the transformations in Venezuelan society can be viewed in microcosm as the transformations in Latin America. Behind this transformation is a populist drive aimed at establishing regional autonomy for both socialist movements and local capital, which also explains the strange alliances of Latin American governments that support neo-liberalism, like Argentina and Brazil, with Venezuela.

In the context of hegemony at an international relations level, neo-Gramscians would also use a term like bloc building to describe the alliances that Latin America has formed with countries like Russia and Iran. This united front concept has led to pragmatic alliances. An example is the Honduran President Jose Manuel Zelaya’s alliance with Venezuela and ALBA, even though Zelaya was relatively right-wing. This again is tied to the common platform of regional autonomy that is serving to unit left-wing and right-wing governments in Latin America.

Chavez made Venezuela pursue a regional agenda as an anti-hegemonic force working to reduce the regional influence of the United States. Just as Simon Bolivar realized, while in exile in Jamaica in 1815, that Venezuela’s freedom could only be attained through a hemispheric pan-Latin American project, so did Chavez. This is why both adopted historic bloc building agendas regionally and internationally. Both realized that a broader struggle or broader struggles were being reflected locally and that networking with others struggling against the same enemy was important. This is what got Bolivar to get the British to be neutral and what has led to Venezuela’s modern alliances with China, Belarus, Iran, and Russia.

Regionally, Bolivar built an alliance with the Haitians, who armed him in exchange for a promise to free all the slaves he came across, whereas Chavez has formed the regional organization ALBA and aligned Venezuela with Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. In 2005, the humiliation of the US government at the Mar del Plata Summit of the Americas through the rejection of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA/ALCA) is an example of the combined success of bloc building and the rising demand for regional autonomy by Latin America’s socialist movements and capital.

The Bolivarian Cultural Mission

Social movements would be handicapped without bloc formations or a politics of articulation that aims to secure consent for their leadership by convincing the greater part of society to support them. This struggle for power, which sits at the heart of the Gramscian notion of hegemony, is also tied to a cultural and educational project that needs the intelligentsia. The media and intellectuals are important parts of this.

Chavez also reached out to many Venezuelan intellectuals and brought them into his administration. This too has Gramscian contours. Firstly, intellectuals are the representatives of culture. Secondly, organic intellectuals work as the agents and officers of their classes. Thirdly, intellectuals act to organize the structure(s) of society within the realms of the private and public.

Gramsci believed that every person through their faculty of reasoning was an intellectual and that there was no such thing as a non-intellectual. What defines an intellectual in the Gramscian sense is an intellectual's immediate social function as a professional or specialist in a society. Moreover, he categorized intellectual within a typology of two: organic and traditional. The organic intellectual is the representative of its class which works for its collective benefit. The traditional intellectuals are specialists who are not directly involved in class politics; they supposedly circumvent it. Thus, organic intellectuals play important roles in the process of establishing hegemony or creating anti-hegemonic movements as functionaries of a specific group and its interests. It is through them that the dominant ideology in a society is constructed.

Without intellectuals the lower strata that form the mass of society will not give their consent to a society's ruling class either. In the context of class, this is why Gramsci explains that one of the most important tasks of a struggle for empowering itself is to effectively assimilate and win over the traditional intellectuals and turn them into that struggle's organic intellectuals. Gramsci wrote that it was of importance to break the bond between the intellectuals and peasantry in Southern Italy, because the traditional intellectuals deceitfully kept the peasantry passive and in check under capitalist exploitation for the big landlords, banks, and North Italian capital. Chavez's Bolivarian project has also tried to do this.

The cultural aspects of Chavez's project are also tied to a politics of articulation, which included his special talk show. Chavez managed to get his message out to the masses that Bolivarianism was working for their interest. This uprooted the articulation of the old elite just enough to allow Chavez to break their ideological dominance in Venezuelan society. This has additionally polarized Venezuelan society, as two cultural projects are competing for hegemony in society.

Simon Rodriguez, the teacher of Chavez's hero Simon Bolivar, said that the people that illuminate humanity's horizons are not born when they see the light of the world, they are born when they begin to radiate their own inner light onto the world. Hate or love the late Hugo Chavez; he has served as a vanguard for Latin American autonomy and helped countries like Argentina pay off their debts to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The process he led in Venezuela has allowed much of Latin America to marshal itself against Washington.

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