

The Rise Of America's New Enemy

Venezuela's Hugo Chavez

By [John Pilger](#)

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, November 10, 2005

New Statesman 10 November 2005

I was dropped at Paradiso, the last middle-class area before barrio La Vega, which spills into a ravine as if by the force of gravity. Storms were forecast, and people were anxious, remembering the mudslides that took 20,000 lives. "Why are you here?" asked the man sitting opposite me in the packed jeep-bus that chugged up the hill. Like so many in Latin America, he appeared old, but wasn't. Without waiting for my answer, he listed why he supported President Chavez: schools, clinics, affordable food, "our constitution, our democracy" and "for the first time, the oil money is going to us." I asked him if he belonged to the MRV, Chavez's party, "No, I've never been in a political party; I can only tell you how my life has been changed, as I never dreamt."

It is raw witness like this, which I have heard over and over again in Venezuela, that smashes the one-way mirror between the west and a continent that is rising. By rising, I mean the phenomenon of millions of people stirring once again, "like lions after slumber/In unvanquishable number", wrote the poet Shelley in *The Mask of Anarchy*. This is not romantic; an epic is unfolding in Latin America that demands our attention beyond the stereotypes and clichés that diminish whole societies to their degree of exploitation and expendability.

To the man in the bus, and to Beatrice whose children are being immunised and taught history, art and music for the first time, and Celedonia, in her seventies, reading and writing for the first time, and Jose whose life was saved by a doctor in the middle of the night, the first doctor he had ever seen, Hugo Chavez is neither a "firebrand" nor an "autocrat" but a humanitarian and a democrat who commands almost two thirds of the popular vote, accredited by victories in no less than nine elections. Compare that with the fifth of the British electorate that re-installed Blair, an authentic autocrat.

Chávez and the rise of popular social movements, from Colombia down to Argentina, represent bloodless, radical change across the continent, inspired by the great independence struggles that began with Simón Bolívar, born in Venezuela, who brought the ideas of the French Revolution to societies cowed by Spanish absolutism. Bolívar, like Che Guevara in the 1960s and Chavez today, understood the new colonial master to the north. "The USA," he said in 1819, "appears destined by fate to plague America with misery in the name of liberty."

At the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001, George W Bush announced the latest misery in the name of liberty in the form of a Free Trade Area of the Americas treaty. This would allow the United States to impose its ideological "market", neo-liberalism, finally on all of Latin America. It was the natural successor to Bill Clinton's North American Free Trade Agreement, which has turned Mexico into an American sweatshop. Bush boasted it would be

law by 2005.

On 5 November, Bush arrived at the 2005 summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina, to be told his FTAA was not even on the agenda. Among the 34 heads of state were new, uncompliant faces and behind all of them were populations no longer willing to accept US-backed business tyrannies. Never before have Latin American governments had to consult their people on pseudo-agreements of this kind; but now they must.

In Bolivia, in the past five years, social movements have got rid of governments and foreign corporations alike, such as the tentacular Bechtel, which sought to impose what people call total locura capitalista – total capitalist folly – the privatising of almost everything, especially natural gas and water. Following Pinochet's Chile, Bolivia was to be a neo-liberal laboratory. The poorest of the poor were charged up to two-thirds of their pittance-income even for rain-water.

Standing in the bleak, freezing, cobble-stoned streets of El Alto, 14,000 feet up in the Andes, or sitting in the breeze-block homes of former miners and campesinos driven off their land, I have had political discussions of a kind seldom ignited in Britain and the US. They are direct and eloquent. "Why are we so poor," they say, "when our country is so rich? Why do governments lie to us and represent outside powers?" They refer to 500 years of conquest as if it is a living presence, which it is, tracing a journey from the Spanish plunder of Cerro Rico, a hill of silver mined by indigenous slave labour and which underwrote the Spanish Empire for three centuries. When the silver was gone, there was tin, and when the mines were privatised in the 1970s at the behest of the IMF, tin collapsed, along with 30,000 jobs. When the coca leaf replaced it – in Bolivia, chewing it in curbs hunger – the Bolivian army, coerced by the US, began destroying the coca crops and filling the prisons.

In 2000, open rebellion burst upon the white business oligarchs and the American embassy whose fortress stands like an Andean Vatican in the centre of La Paz. There was never anything like it, because it came from the majority Indian population "to protect our indigenous soul". Naked racism against indigenous peoples all over Latin America is the Spanish legacy. They were despised or invisible, or curios for tourists: the women in their bowler hats and colourful skirts. No more. Led by visionaries like Oscar Olivera, the women in bowler hats and colourful skirts encircled and shut down the country's second city, Cochabamba, until their water was returned to public ownership.

Every year since, people have fought a water or gas war: essentially a war against privatisation and poverty. Having driven out President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in 2003, Bolivians voted in a referendum for real democracy. Through the social movements they demanded a constituent assembly similar to that which founded Chávez's Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, together with the rejection of the FTAA and all the other "free trade" agreements, the expulsion of the transnational water companies and a 50 per cent tax on the exploitation of all energy resources.

When the replacement president, Carlos Mesa, refused to implement the programme he was forced to resign. Next month, there will be presidential elections and the opposition Movement to Socialism (MAS) may well turn out the old order. The leader is an indigenous former coca farmer, Evo Morales, whom the American ambassador has likened to Osama Bin Laden. In fact, he is a social democrat who, for many of those who sealed off Cochabamba and marched down the mountain from El Alto, moderates too much.

“This is not going to be easy,” Abel Mamani, the indigenous president of the El Alto Neighbourhood Committees, told me. “The elections won’t be a solution even if we win. What we need to guarantee is the constituent assembly, from which we build a democracy based not on what the US wants, but on social justice.” The writer Pablo Solon, son of the great political muralist Walter Solon, said, “The story of Bolivia is the story of the government behind the government. The US can create a financial crisis; but really for them it is ideological; they say they will not accept another Chavez.”

The people, however, will not accept another Washington quisling. The lesson is Ecuador, where a helicopter saved Lucio GutiErrez as he fled the presidential palace last April. Having won power in alliance with the indigenous Pachakutik movement, he was the “Ecuadorian Chavez”, until he drowned in a corruption scandal. For ordinary Latin Americans, corruption on high is no longer forgivable. That is one of two reasons the Workers’ Party government of Lula is barely marking time in Brazil; the other is the priority he has given to an IMF economic agenda, rather than his own people. In Argentina, social movements saw off five pro-Washington presidents in 2001 and 2002. Across the water in Uruguay, the Frente Amplio, socialist heirs to the Tupamaros, the guerrillas of the 1970s who fought one of the CIA’s most vicious terror campaigns, formed a popular government last year.

The social movements are now a decisive force in every Latin American country – even in the state of fear that is the Colombia of Alvaro Uribe Velez, Bush’s most loyal vassal. Last month, indigenous movements marched through every one of Colombia’s 32 provinces demanding an end to “an evil as great as the gun”: neo-liberalism. All over Latin America, Hugo Chavez is the modern Bolivar. People admire his political imagination and his courage. Only he has had the guts to describe the United States as a source of terrorism and Bush as *Senor Peligro* (Mr Danger). He is very different from Fidel Castro, whom he respects. Venezuela is an extraordinarily open society with an unfettered opposition – that is rich and still powerful. On the left, there are those who oppose the state, in principle, believe its reforms have reached their limit, and want power to flow directly from the community. They say so vigorously, yet they support Chavez. A fluent young anarchist, Marcel, showed me the clinic where the two Cuban doctors may have saved his girlfriend. (In a barter arrangement, Venezuela gives Cuba oil in exchange for doctors).

At the entrance to every *barrio* there is a state supermarket, where everything from staple food to washing up liquid costs 40 per cent less than in commercial stores. Despite specious accusations that the government has instituted censorship, most of the media remains violently anti-Chavez: a large part of it in the hands of Gustavo Cisneros, Latin America’s Murdoch, who backed the failed attempt to depose Chavez. What is striking is the proliferation of lively community radio stations, which played a critical part in Chavez’s rescue in the coup of April 2002 by calling on people to march on Caracas.

While the world looks to Iran and Syria for the next Bush attack, Venezuelans know they may well be next. On 17 March, the Washington Post reported that Feliz Rodríguez, “a former CIA operative well-connected to the Bush family” had taken part in the planning of the assassination of the President of Venezuela. On 16 September, Chavez said, “I have evidence that there are plans to invade Venezuela. Furthermore, we have documentation: how many bombers will over-fly Venezuela on the day of the invasion... the US is carrying out manoeuvres on Curacao Island. It is called Operation Balboa.” Since then, leaked internal Pentagon documents have identified Venezuela as a “post-Iraq threat” requiring “full spectrum” planning.

The old-young man in the jeep, Beatrice and her healthy children and Celedonia with her “new esteem”, are indeed a threat – the threat of an alternative, decent world that some lament is no longer possible. Well, it is, and it deserves our support.

First published in the New Statesman – www.newstatesman.co.uk

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About the author:

John Pilger is an award-winning journalist and filmmaker whose articles and documentaries have been published worldwide. For more information on John Pilger, visit his website at www.johnpilger.com

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