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Venezuela

The revolution seen from the left: Chavismo's original sin

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Neither "Chavismo" nor the "Bolivarian revolution" are political phenomena originating from the traditional left, and this is their original sin. They emerged from revolt in the streets and uprisings in barracks, not the rational decision of a vanguard or a left political bloc directing a revolutionary process to victory. We are dealing then with a strange and extremely complex phenomenon, informed by the most libertarian and radical elements of society and the popular movement, now bearing the flags of anti-capitalism and socialism.

But we are also dealing with a society traumatised by poverty and by the degree of corruption engendered by a model of accumulation founded on an "economy of extraction", that is a dependent national economy of a state subsisting fundamentally on the oil rent, and a capitalist structure reproduced thanks to the subvention of the rate of profit through an agreement of redistribution (which is moreover, not at all legal and open, hence the permanent "state of impunity" in which we live) between the dominant classes and the political elites in power. This structural base of our social formation, after nearly a century of existence, has created an extremely unequal society (those who profit from the oil booty and those who are excluded from it) but engenders at the same time the motivation for a popular resistance movement which struggles for the most urgent and often elementary popular demands (water, electricity, housing, land, work, education, health and so on.) and which suffers from being a marginal movement, largely excluded from the central debate on the production and distribution of the wealth created.

If there is then a "classist basis" it is undoubtedly formed in contact with certain combative nuclei of the workers and Marxist movement, but above all from the debates and the influence of very diverse and heterodox historic currents of struggle (cultural resistance, liberation theology, "cimarronismo" [1], the street democracy demanded in the neighbourhoods, social movements of every type, spontaneous popular uprisings, national liberation movements, revolutionary Bolivarianism, armed struggle, Latin American critical Marxism, indigenous movements and so on). There lies the second original sin of the "Bolivarian movement": its unusual diversity and heterodoxy today represented by the figure of Hugo Chavez.

The errors of a certain left critique

The "revolutionary sectors", that is those who participate in political and social struggle seeking the necessary juncture between theory and practice, are faced with an immense challenge of comprehension and definition of a line of action coherent with our historic responsibility as well as with the complex reality in which we live. Obviously, that has not been easy and it is still very difficult to identify a pole in this revolutionary left which has clarified entirely its doubts and lacunas. Yet, in our perspective, obvious errors continue to be reproduced, perhaps by the necessity of seeking refuge in a perimeter of certainty which allows this or that organisation, group or tendency, to insulate itself from the chaos of reality and crisis "without certain outcome" of the order of domination in our country.

On the one hand, a left which radicalises its discourse starting from its appreciation of the "class nature" of this government (bourgeois, petty bourgeois), and of the "populist", "reformist", "nationalist" elements which run through it for class reasons. Thus it is a government condemned, beyond its declarations, to defend the interests of national and imperialist capital (we refer to the majority of Trotskyist currents, very active today in some workers' sectors). This can be totally correct if we restrain ourselves to a criterion of formal and sociological comprehension, according to which we would oppose in our political imagination this government (of petty bourgeois, peasant or marginal origin) to a possible government formed by the delegates of workers and exploited classes in general, organised and identified as such. But then we pose a question, perhaps a stupid one: since the Paris Commune and the first Soviet

government of 1917-1919, was there a single government in history which has responded to this indicator and which has lasted more than two years "in power"? If there has been one, send the reference. We prefer in these circumstances to admit that history has shown that this parameter of comprehension and action suffers from immense gaps and from political impotence. Perhaps the anarchists, autonomists, councilists, libertarians, the comrades of Durruti, Zapatistas, were right about the unviable nature of using the vanguard party and the state form as tools for the emancipation of labour? Doesn't this state form (its ideological affiliation doesn't matter much) concentrate in itself all the rules, culture, protocols, relations, which render capitalist domination historically viable?

The problem of the orthodox class-based characterisation, inherited from the Leninist tradition, tends to be its excessive contempt both for the social situation (its diversity, the relations which develop, the inter-relationship of social subjects) on which the order of domination rests, and for the recent events which have created new political values, new modes of resistance, new spaces of interaction between the exploited classes, new programmatic perspectives, outside of which the revolution is impossible if not in the heads and mystifications of the vanguards. We don't want to say that we should ignore the role of the traditional working class, the founding act of the conquest and control of the means of production and the advances towards very concrete forms of organisation of power in which the place of this sector is central. The challenge is to extirpate from our heads the sociological obsession of "class" and to see in all these workers' dynamics another expression of the totality of the class struggle, the experience of rebellion and the constitution of new orders of society which emerge from the simultaneous insurrection of the exploited. In itself, the occupation of a building is no more important than the occupation of a rural holding or a factory, the most important fact is the multiplication of these phenomena of expropriation of capital, their massification, their political creativity and their capacity of defence faced with the attacks of the capitalist state.

Another fairly widespread left critique is what we would characterise as radical-nationalist. The focal point of these critiques no longer resides in the class affiliation of the government but in the question of the sovereignty, more concretely in the problem of the ambiguity the government has shown on its "anti-imperialist" positions. It criticises the fact that whereas the government makes declarations opposed to US imperial domination, there is a privatising alliance with the oil capital transnationals (extended now to the sphere of the exploitation of gas) through "mixed enterprises". It is also opposed to the abandonment of orimulsion [2] as energy alternative. We find here a lot of denunciations which bear on the question of the "productive model" as a whole. Criticisms are made that the plans for the mining industry, the carboniferous plan, the southern gas pipeline [3], the participation of Venezuela in the IIRSA [4], the payment of the foreign debt and so on are no more than a simple reproduction of the model of developmentalist capitalism, dependant and predatory. The most extreme versions of this "radical nationalism" claim that Chavez is nothing more than a "puppet" of neoliberalism disguised as a socialist.

We are entirely agreed on the strategic "duality" that traverses the government and its economic policies (exploration of new relations of production/alliance with transnational capital). The establishment of mixed enterprises is without doubt a huge and unacceptable concession to oil capital. Beyond that, projects like the plan for the development of coal extraction in the region of Zulia, the transnational penetration in the territories turned towards mining activities (basically gold and diamonds), the models of development proposed, the very vision of continental integration, the concession of a privileged role for finance capital, witness clearly to the fact that, to say the least, the "transition towards socialism" is still doubtful and contradictory. But does that mean Hugo Chavez and his government are no more than pawns of imperialism? Again, a formal reasoning is employed, emptied of facts, totally abstract and politically impotent as several of these tendencies of ultra-nationalism have shown themselves to be. The problem is that, although some of them speak of a "clash of civilisations" [5] and even of struggle against state capitalism, they do not go beyond simple denunciation and ideological propaganda.

From their position, there is no alternative except a mystification of political power or a kind of original pure community beyond history which will be restored as saviour of humanity. There have never been "people, movement, real and current collective action of transformation". This discourse implies that in reality everything is resolved in closed conspiracies and between leaderships, or thanks to a programme which would impose anew the state

Leviathan. A state owning everything and the enemy of all imperialism. What other outcome could there be beyond a mystification? The most radical proposals objectively resemble the good old programmes of a great part of the Latin American left of the 1930s and 1940s, which have given birth to parties like APRA (Peru) and Democratic Action (Venezuela) and we know today how they ended up. If the problem is Chavez and his government, that would mean that the real revolutionary government, like a God descending from Olympus, would, with divine force and a great number of orders and decrees, establish a national state with absolute sovereignty in the framework of a new civilisational reality. Basically it amounts to the re-elaboration of one of the follies of which the old radical left (at least, its most consistent elites) remains prisoner, the offspring both of Soviet Marxism and the programmes of national liberation and voluntarism specific to our American lands.

The good critique

Of course, there are other wings of the "left" who expose their critical viewpoint, all "anti-Chavistas", like the new liberal left - "anti-Bourbonist" as Petkoff says [6] - annexed by the right opposition. The problem in their view is the "tyrant-despot", the "populist", the "anti-democrat" Hugo Chavez, with a political ideology which is Castroite or "archaic". A logic that one finds in certain anarchist nuclei, for whom the problem is more or less the same. Chavez the militarist, Chavez the authoritarian and so on.). But in truth, it is not in our interest to discuss with these tendencies because either we are their political enemies, or, more simply, because they add nothing to the debate.

What interests us is another critique, very left also but perhaps more ingenuous. We can call this the "popular-moralist" critique. As critique and political posture, it is very simple. It states that Chavez is an honest man, a genuine revolutionary, a man of the people committed to his ideals, but surrounded by a band of traitors, hypocrites, crooks who profit from his authority, organised essentially in the parties of the government - the MVR, PODEMOS and PPT in particular [7] - who use them in their turn as the main tools of appropriation of the functions of government and posts in general, in the state and the organized popular sector. It sees the main difficulty of the Bolivarian revolution as corruption and bureaucracy, and reiterates its total support to the president but increasingly distances itself from the new elites who monopolise the political representativeness of the revolutionary process.

The most important dimension of this critique is not the justice of its analysis or its theoretical depth (obvious weakness: the idealisation of Chavez, the personalisation of the government), what counts, is that it is the only critique which has acquired a mass character. It has become "popular" in all senses of the term and little by little, it has been forced to make qualitative leaps which have obliged it to evolve from commentary to political fact and to the construction of strategies of political action to destroy the shameful enemy of corruption and bureaucratism. It is what we call in the Proyecto Nuestra America [8]: the construction of a "reason for all". This is not the enlightened "reason" of self-consciousness/Hegelian self-reflection. It is simply the concrete domain of collective reasoning in which the revolutionary process is expressed in its most productive and transformative matrix. In fact, it has already led to magnificent processes of mobilisation, social irreverence, radicalisation of the libertarian and egalitarian spirit, self-organisation which is in fact the central point constructed by the Bolivarian revolution in the ideological field. It is also the space in which all our hopes are concentrated, no longer as arrogant vanguards but as revolutionary combatants who both in their material conditions and their emotions are identical to this people.

What should the left say and do?

Beyond interpretations in the vanguard circles or popular sectors, it is in our view important to understand that it is the development of a social movement which although several times encouraged to organise from the bureaucratic government structures (Land Committees, Communal Councils, Health Committees, energy and water committees)

is beginning to take its distance from these forms of leadership and to establish its own policies and strategies developing a critical attitude towards the state as a whole and which is radicalising from day to day. With the most important autonomous social movements (peasants, recovered companies, students, indigenous peoples), this organised base of the popular movement is the unavoidable class matrix for the deepening of the revolution. If we do not found a common theatre for political action and the construction of a project of society, it is very likely that the Bolivarian revolution will in the coming years undergo a decline of such a magnitude that it would disappear as a real phenomenon of the exercise of justice, of freedom and the construction of sovereignty, independently of Chavez.

We are today at a time of "maximum confusion". On the one hand the imperialist offensive against Venezuela, the evolution of "Plan Balboa" and "Plan Colombia" as military plans for attacking Venezuela, and the pressure of the electoral campaign (the campaign for ten million votes [9], aid the cohesion of the popular bases around the figure of Chavez and the position of the government, on the other hand, the institutional decomposition under which we live, increasingly manifest at the level of the municipal and federal governments (town halls, provinces, in the immense majority in the hands of the "bloc of change") produce a collective exhaustion which sometimes borders on despair. In fact, even the institutional authorities are concerned, leading to an increasingly marked tendency to control both the social processes of organisation and self-government and the productive and workers' experiences in the cooperatives and "recovered" enterprises. A situation of "maximum confusion" before which the rank and file leadership tends to repeat the same schema applied for at least four years: keep quiet, wait, pursue organisation, don't underestimate the enemy, but all this begins to look a little inadequate. It is necessary to take a collective step forward. Until now, the attempts have been interesting but insufficient (the mobilisation begun by sectors of the indigenous movements, miners, peasants and above all workers). Faced with the emergence of these phenomena, the state apparatus neutralises them, when it is incapable of repressing them as with the miners, by transforming them into centres of administration of resources which it will grant them for their development. This cooption removes their combativeness by strengthening the tendency to "depoliticisation" of their action and increasing the unity of their bases as corporation and not in class terms (such is the situation of a good part of the alternative communication spaces).

This context demands a qualitative leap towards a new conjuncture in which relations between the government and the "non-administered" popular movement would change radically. Today, critical and combative nuclei have emerged across Venezuela. They struggle in defence of the Bolivarian revolution, but at the same time represent a faithful testimony to the exhaustion of the institutional schema of the state as central lever of the process of transformation. We have proposed steps forward in the future presidential campaign (December 2006) by creating inside it an alternative dynamic axised on the synthesis of all these programmes through dialogue, mobilisation, mass meetings, raising the themes of anti-bureaucratism, the struggle against corruption, capitalism and imperialist aggression. We propose as slogan: "Ten million wills to deepen the revolution".

We have called this campaign "for all our struggles". An "other" campaign [10] on Venezuelan territory so that the real struggles can breathe, so that the right words are found, so that the rank and file nuclei can organise, through the necessary mobilisation to erect the bases of an "autonomous transitional programme" shared by all the communities in struggle. The idea is not to limit this campaign to the elections. The ideal would be to go beyond them so that by February 27 [11] we have the bases of a common programme and plan which allows the effective deepening of the revolutionary process. There is even talk of an electoral ticket common to all the movements associated in this initiative to form a counterweight to the parties of the government [12]. It is a significant decision but it will be still in the background in relation to the priority objectives of mobilisation, meeting, listening, the construction of the programme "of the poor" so as to initiate from next year a new stage of the revolutionary process, characterised by the autonomy and unitary radicalisation of the popular struggles. This campaign should begin in one or two months, following a unitary conference to form "the command for all our struggles". Our creativity and political will are going to be determinant to its development, and we want to find ourselves in a totally different terrain, in which equality and the fight for the dignity of others will be the priority and not a political use of the collective.

[1] "Cimarronismo", one of the most original components of the cultural syncretism of the "New World", emerged from numerous new artistic forms originating from the mix of Amerindian, African and European cultures.

[2] A combustible created in Venezuela from the combination of water and bituminous or extra-heavy oil.

[3] A single and united gas network from Venezuela to Argentina.

[4] An initiative to integrate the regional infrastructure of South America, a vast programme of construction of new roads, bridges, waterways and energy and communication links especially in the tropical and Andean zones. It is a wing of the ALBA (Bolivian Alternative For the Americas).

[5] The quotation is from Douglas Bravo. A long-term anti-imperialist militant, Douglas Bravo was leader of the Party of the Venezuelan Revolution (PRV) and its armed wing, the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN, 1962-1969). He is today the main leader of the "Tercer camino" movement, an evolution of the PRV-FALN of which Hugo Chavez was a member until 1986.

[6] A former member of the PRV and the Venezuelan Communist Party, Teodoro Petkoff created the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) in 1971 on a line of democratic critique of Stalinism before evolving towards social-democratic and then outright neoliberal positions. Under the government of Rafael Caldera (last Christian Democrat government before Chavez), he was minister of planning (Cordiplan) and applied a neoliberal programme of reduction of inflation and the size of the administration (Agenda Venezuela). He left the MAS when the majority of the latter decided to support Chavez in 1997. He is now the main representative of the social-liberal anti-Chaves left and is a candidate for the presidential elections of December 2006.

[7] The government coalition is made up of these parties and others: the MVR (Movement for a Fifth Republic) was founded in 1997 to provide Chavez with an electoral presence; PODEMOS (POr la DEMOcracia Social) is the pro-Chavez split from the MAS whose leadership left the Chavez coalition in 2000, protesting against the radicalisation of measures; the PPT (Patria Para Todos) exists since 1997 as a successor to La Causa Radical, a split from the PCV in the early 1970s; the PPT has provided the main cadres of the Chavez government. Among the parties of the governing coalition, we should mention the PCV (Venezuelan Communist Party).

[8] "Our America Project"

[9] So that the legitimacy of the coming elections - the right, which knows it will lose, is considering a boycott - is not contested, Chavez has spoken of an objective of 10 million votes.

[10] The author here clearly refers to the "other campaign" of the Zapatistas.

[11] Reference to the popular uprising of February 27, 1989.

[12] In Venezuela, voting is done through a party. One can thus vote for Chavez by voting for the PCV, the MVR, or any other group which presents him as its candidate.