



## VENEZUELA ALERT Understanding Chávez Howard Wiarda

### Overview

- Chávez follows in the footsteps of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Simon Bolívar rather than Locke, Jefferson, and Madison.
- Rousseau was an advocate of direct democracy.
- We need to recognize that other forms of democracy are legitimate.
- Chávez is no threat to U.S. interests at the present time.
- The United States can try to influence Chávez, but should be prepared to wait him out.

A variety of terms and explanations have been used to describe Venezuela's mercurial, "enigmatic" president Hugo Chávez. He has been variously described as a populist, a radical, a man on horseback, a nationalist, and a Maoist. The explanation for his policies and programs is also variously said to lie in his military training, his small town background, the Christian-Democratic belief of his parents, and his frustrations at Venezuela's inability to solve problems during the last 20 years or perhaps they are a reaction to neoliberalism and globalization.

All of these explanations doubtless have some, albeit varying, validity. Here, however, I would like to suggest an additional explanation that may encompass the others offered, and that is that we take Chávez's own self-description seriously, particularly the frank comments offered during his election campaign and early in his presidency-before a legion of self-appointed advisors, foreign and domestic, sought to impose their stamps on him.

Two comments in particular stand out. When Chávez on one occasion declared, "I am a Rousseauian Democrat" and on another said, "I am a Bolivarian Democrat," it drove the U.S. Embassy in Caracas crazy because (1) the embassy had no idea what those terms meant, and (2) it is inconceivable to U.S. citizens that there could be any form of democracy besides our own Lockean, Jeffersonian, Madisonian kind.

It needs to be recalled that the great apostle of republicanism and independence in early nineteenth century Latin America was Rousseau, not Jefferson or Madison. So when Chávez calls himself a "Rousseauian democrat", it resonates powerfully in Latin America, if not in Washington, D.C.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was a *philosophe*, a product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a romantic and an idealist. In Isaiah Berlin's terms he was a "hedgehog" rather than a "fox," that is an advocate of one "great" and usually romantic idea as distinct from many, incremental pragmatic little ones-the North American tradition.

Rousseau was an advocate of the leadership principle, like Plato's "philosopher-kings". He believed that great heroic, charismatic leaders-presumably like Chávez's image of himself-could lead their people in innovative, revolutionary, new directions, without the careful preparation in self-government or the gradual development of institutions that the more prosaic (and boring) writers like Locke, Madison, and de'Tocqueville understood as the base of democracy.

Such leaders knew, understood, and literally personified the "general will" without necessarily having to check with the population through regular, competitive elections. Rousseau, like his student Chávez, was thus the advocate of "direct democracy" (not the representative kind) and "plebiscitary" or "ratifactory" elections ("yes" or "no") or multiparty ones. Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1851) can thus be seen as a manual for engineering revolutionary change or great leaps

forward; it has simultaneously been "the bible" for every totalitarian leader, whether on the left like Fidel Castro or on the right like Augusto Pinochet, who has ever come to power.

It follows from Rousseau's analysis that the separation of power or checks and balances is not needed because those institutions would only get in the way of a heroic leader's ability to act on the general will. Rousseau, like Marx one hundred years later, would also be against intermediaries or what we now call "civil society" because that would also hinder a leader's ability to carry out the general will, which he presumably knows intuitively. Hence, as in Chávez's Venezuela, the Rousseauian precedent can disparage and undermine political parties, and dispense with the give and take of competitive, pluralist, interest-group bargaining and negotiation because those obstruct his ability to implement the general will and rule directly for "the people." In contrast, most of us think that such agencies as political parties, interest groups, and pluralist give-and-take are absolutely essential for democracy.

One can readily understand why Rousseau's vision was and remains so attractive in Latin America and among political leaders throughout the developing world. Knowing the general will, one can dispense with, ignore, or ride roughshod over legislatures, court systems, political parties, and cumbersome interest-group bargaining. In the name of carrying out the general will, Rousseau can be used to justify *personalismo*, authoritarianism if not totalitarianism, and one-man rule. In addition, Rousseau's vision makes it unnecessary to provide training in self-government, the careful and gradual building up of institutional infrastructure, and a rich, dense, civil society that prudent practitioners know are necessary for a consolidated democracy. Taking Rousseau's ideas to heart enables a developing country or its leader to leapfrog over all intermediary stages and preparations and to join the modern world in a kind of Jacobinian explosion of progressive policies. Witness Fidel Castro, the Sandinistas, and now Chávez.

Simon Bolívar, a Venezuelan known as the "George Washington of Latin America" for heroically leading South America's independence movement, is the other main source of Chávez's inspiration. Of the elite, an intellectual and revolutionary as well as an eminently practical political leader, a close student of Rousseau, a realist as well as a visionary, and a sophisticated traveler in France and throughout Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Bolívar is a fascinating figure. If Rousseau is the intellectual inspiration of Chávez's ideas, Bolívar is clearly his political inspiration.

Looking around Latin America in the 1820s in the wake of having defeated and driven out the Spanish colonial forces, what did Bolívar see? He saw a vast, still largely empty, unpopulated continent, with immense open spaces, no roads or communication grids, dense jungles, and impassable mountains. He also saw an unknown and potentially unruly indigenous population, with no training or background in self-government, and a complete vacuum of institutions, economic or political, on which the newly independent republic could be grounded.

What to do? What form of government to put into place? Here is where Bolívar's (and Chávez's) wiliness and political astuteness come into play. For Bolivia (named after the liberator) at the time, the least institutionalized of all the Andean countries, Bolívar prepared a monarchical form of government because, in the absence of institutions or a democratic background, he reasoned that only a monarch, a just kind, could hold the country together. However, that was soon abandoned. Bolívar saw realistically that the nineteenth century would be the century of republicanism, not monarchy. He also recognized, prudently, the power of the United States and that under the Monroe Doctrine it would not permit new forms of European-style monarchy on the South American continent.

Bolívar's solution to these problems was ingenious and is still with us today, and not just in Chávez's Venezuela. He designed a republican, representative form of government patterned formally after that of the United States but adapted it to Latin American realities. It contains the familiar three-part division of powers but with the executive given such extensive powers as to be able to rule (like Alberto Fujimori in Peru) as a *de jure* dictator. The constitution contained elaborate lists of civil and political rights borrowed from the U.S. Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, but these could be suspended by the declaration of a "state of siege" through "emergency laws." To help keep order, the armed forces were elevated to the position of "moderative power," as virtually a fourth branch of government. Federalism was a feature in Venezuela but it was subordinated to central state control and, in the absence of a common law tradition, Venezuela adopted a modified version of the Napoleonic Code, which reinforced this call for unity, authority, and central administration.

Bolívar's political design was thus an ingenious one combining Rousseauian principles, the necessity of following the U.S. lead, and yet doing things in accord with Latin American realities. As North Americans, we need to keep these principles in mind as we often scurry pell mell in Latin America to create forms of governance as civil society that look just like our own but, as Bolívar (and now Chávez) recognized, may be inappropriate, or unworkable, given the particular distinct political traditions as well as continuing underdevelopment (including underinstitutionalization) of Latin America.

This is not just an exercise in intellectual history. Quite a number of important policy implications follow from the above analysis. First, to understand Latin America we need to come to grips seriously with Rousseau and Bolívar (and also Saint Thomas, Comte, and Rodó) whose political ideas are much closer to the Latin American tradition (but almost completely

unknown in the U.S.) than are Locke, Jefferson, and Madison. Second, we need to recognize there are forms of democracy and civil society different from our own and that not everyone will follow our path. After all, we acknowledge that Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Scandinavia are all democracies even while differing from our own. Why is that so hard to admit and live with in Latin America?

Third, we need to stop worrying overly about Chávez in a foreign policy sense. Unless he mucks around in the internal affairs of next door and precarious Colombia or assists guerilla movements elsewhere in Latin America, or engages in manifestly anti-democratic politics and human rights abuses in Venezuela, the precise form of Venezuelan democracy is of no concern of ours. Chávez is no Fidel Castro, and even if he turns in that direction, absent the Cold War and the Soviet threat, that is not of great import to the United States.

The United States needs to understand Chávez in his own Rousseauian/Bolivarian context. He may not be our kind of democrat but he is very much a Venezuelan and Latin American one. Given the rising negative reaction to neoliberalism, the disillusionment with democracy throughout the hemisphere, and the growing chorus of voices, according to Latin American opinion polls, that calls for "strong government" (in some countries they are more numerous than the advocates of democracy), perhaps the first in a series of Rousseauian or Bolivarian Democrats.

Unless he engages in some truly massively stupid behavior (unlikely), the United States can clearly live with a Chávez administration and wait him out. We may also in a noninterventionist; nonconformational way want to urge him toward greater adherence to U.S. democratic values and practices. However, pragmatically we also need to be prepared to accept Chávez and other such likely hybrid or mixed regimes (limited democracies, Rousseauian democracies, Bolivarian democracies) because we may well see quite a number of them in Latin America in future years.

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