

**LATIN AMERICA**  
**"POPULISM FOR THE XXI CENTURY"**  
**Walking forward --- Looking backward**

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**The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not  
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## **A STARTING POINT**

It is quite possible that the most logical place to begin this paper is to accept that, if we are doing an analysis of the populist movements in the hemisphere and not as an historical investigation but rather as a current event study, it is because, at least from the perspective of a good many, something went wrong. We've "done" something wrong to make, quoting the Cuban writer Carlos Alberto Montaner, "zombie ideas" rise once more from their graves and haunt us.

That there is a generalized disillusionment with the economic reforms, privatization, the opening of economies and everything that falls in the "neo-liberal" category can't really be argued against. What can be argued are the real causes for that disillusionment, and what is more important, if the solution is a return to a State as an actor capable of solving the global deterioration of the quality of life of our population.

"...Latin-American populisms are always the result of spectacular failures of what could be called normal politics, which follows the line of western democracies. They are direct consequences of corruption, extreme inequality, and a complete economic and political irresponsibility".

"Political maturity, modernization, economic development, are all things which require time, patience, and hard work, but populism aims precisely at those that do not have time to wait. If a marginal family, that has never seen anything, that has no access to a job, education, or even a decent meal, suddenly receives 160 dollars from the government, they will be unconditional supporters of that Government. Every time the government asks for their vote they will give it".

"This means the following: that in a situation of under-development, in the atrocious disparities that the democracies did not know how to solve, a populist Government, that controls the great power of the state, that has the backing of sectors in the military and that also has the wealth derived from oil is quite unstoppable. We should not delude ourselves. We should rather

think that Chavez's opposition obtains an important vote, that represented a solid minority, more illustrated than the general public, and that now has a long way to go..."<sup>1</sup>

Since the end of the eighties and practically throughout the whole of the following decade, we slowly convinced ourselves that the region had, more or less, found the right path, with different shades and variants but generally accepting the ideas of a democratic republic, the division of power, basic liberties, market economy and institutional consolidation.

Today, toward the end of 2006, none of this seems assured, on the contrary, with the exception of Chile, Uruguay, Colombia and Costa Rica, in the rest of the Hemisphere powerful centrifugal forces seem to foretell new tensions and disagreements. Not only the development models are questioned, but rather there are some that are based more on negatives than on any positive programs.

If this brief paper will refer to the characteristics and geopolitical projections of the populist movements in the Western Hemisphere, it is valid to start by trying to define the subject of our inquiry.

The concept of "populism" was born on the XIX century "... in Russia and the United States, it began as an attempt to ameliorate the social dislocations caused by capitalism. In Latin America it became an urban movement. Its heyday was from the 1920s to the 1960s, as industrialization and the growth of cities got under way in the region. It was the means by which the urban masses-the middle and working classes-were brought into the political system".

"But populism does have a more precise set of meanings-though these vary from place to place. In 19th-century Russia, populists were middle-class intellectuals who embraced peasant communalism as an antidote to Western liberalism. In France, politicians from Pierre Poujade in the 1950s to Jean-Marie Le Pen have championed the 'little man', especially farmers and small shopkeepers, against big corporations, unions and foreigners".

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Jorge. "*Nuevas Caras del Populismo.*" *El Pais* (Madrid), 29 agosto 2004, p.2.

"In the United States, too, populism had rural roots, in the prairies of the Midwest. In the 1890s, the People's Party campaigned against what it saw as the grip of urban cartels over the economy. This cause reached its zenith in the 1896 presidential election, when the populists backed the campaign of William Jennings Bryan, a Democratic crusader against the gold standard".

"In Europe, that job was done by social-democratic parties. In Latin America, where trade unions were weaker, it was accomplished by the classic populist leaders. They included Getulio Vargas, who ruled Brazil in various guises in 1930-45 and 1950-54; Juan Perón and his second wife, Eva Duarte; and Victor Paz Estenssoro, the leader of Bolivia's national revolution of 1952. They differed from socialists or conservatives in forging multi-class alliances..."<sup>2</sup>

We accept that "...the definition of populism in our day and age, referred to by some as an 'always current phenomenon', is still a challenge for Latin American sociology and political science".

" Peruvian "*fujimorismo*", and "*chavismo*" in Venezuela, should be considered, until further notice, as the two principal contemporary versions of traditional populism. Thinking about the new populism, the Bolivian political analyst Rene Mayorga was the first to propose the expression neo-populism, in connection with the phenomenon of the rapid growth of the anti-politics in our countries in the nineties. In this way the critics to the 'actual existent populism', particularly in the 90's, was always made from democratic positions, a bit on the defensive, excluding on principle the well known vocabulary of the leftist socialists, this last more inclined toward known integrationists or 'revolutionary' formulas..."<sup>3</sup>

Figures like "*caudillo*", leader, conductor and "*el jefe*" (the boss) all connect with historical traditions that trace their roots to the war of independence. However it was to be expected that with the progress of the

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<sup>2</sup> Economist The. "The Return of Populism." *The Economist* Apr 12th 2006: p.02.

<sup>3</sup> Ramos Jimenez, Alfredo. "Populismo del Siglo XXI." *El Nacional* (Caracas), 11 junio 06 2006, 02.

institutionalization process and the recovery, at least formally, of the democratic institutions, after the wave of military government of the 60's and 70's that the institutions would consolidate on something other than the charismatic "Messiah".

In the XX century, not a few of those charismatic leaders have been military officers. That goes for Getulio Vargas, Perón or Lázaro Cardenas, Mexico's president from 1934 to 1940, who nationalized foreign oil companies and handed land to peasants. Mr. Chávez and Mr. Humala are retired lieutenant-colonels. Part of their appeal is that of the military caudillo, or strongman, who promises to deliver justice for the "people" by firm measures against the "exploiters".

### **POPULISM IN A NUTSHELL**

There seem to be six relevant traits, although these are not all, to Latin American populisms and we can sum them up this way:

**First**, the existence of an anti-politics lexicon, where rejection of traditional political participation appears as one of the key issues, this discourse find fertile soil in those societies where political parties and participation are regarded poorly by a large part of the population. Chavez and Fujimori came to power in their respective countries after deep social disillusionment with politicians, who were accused of being inept and corrupt.

The "*piqueteros*" mobilization which brought about the fall of De la Rúa in Argentina (2001), even though it was induced, was done under the slogan "get them all out".

**Second**, current populism has a clear inclination for mass media politics. The regular forms of interaction are set aside and are perceived as inefficient, to establish a sort of dialogue between the leader and his supporters. Being in the government, this preference becomes more apparent due to the resources available and the ease with which the media

can be reached. This is the base of what Norberto Ceresole will denominate as "post-democracy".<sup>4</sup>

From outside the government, the coverage that the media, especially T.V. and the internet, give to populist demands or anti-systemic arguments from their spokesman noticeably increases the power potential of those actors.<sup>5</sup>

For the "mass media" populism is a good business, it produces high impact images that attract the viewer. For the populist leader the secret seems to be in refraining from any and all abstract concepts and concentrating his speech on the "distribution", which is what they come to ask for this time, food, money, blankets, home appliances, and so on. They are always tangible things, very visible which require no analysis.

**Third**, there is a strong "mobilizing" will. Important sectors of the population are required to give social backing to the populist actions. When they are in the government, the discretionary use of public resources – with the accompanying macroeconomic disregard – has as a result the support of social groups that become very visible in the streets, giving voice to their support for the caudillo, or to the leaders of the protest as it happened with the "peronist" masses in the past and as it happens today with the permanent "chavist" mobilizations.

To this is also added the violence generate by the average delinquent; which in the populist thinking must not be punished because his actions are due to on "social injustice".

**Fourth**, there is also nationalistic rhetoric. Be it from the government or from the radical populist opposition, the appeal to nationalistic sentiments is one of the emotional links that populist leaders establish with the people. Hugo Chavez seeks to legitimate himself through historical references, naming himself the reincarnation of Simón Bolívar. Also, and far more common, populism always looks for external enemies which are stereotyped

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<sup>4</sup> Ceresole, Norberto. *Caudillo Ejército Pueblo El Modelo Venezolano o la Posdemocracia*. Caracas: Sin pie de imprenta, 06/07/14, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Cfrs: Eco Umberto. "El Régimen del Populismo Mediático." *El Comercio* (Lima), mayo 2005.

as such before the masses so that the confrontation with them are seen as a sort of epic struggle which justifies the sacrifice of democratic practices such as pluralism. Some such enemies have been "imperialism" as a generic enemy or "capitalist globalization", and more specifically the International Monetary Fund and the US are presented as one of the main reasons for the financial crisis in the region.

**Fifth**, populism uses, as it was already explained, the notion of leader or caudillo, who embodies the desires of "the people." The discourse of the caudillo is not that of a statesman in the sense of being one who rules and directs in a democratic fashion; the caudillo demands unconditional support, party discipline, the names vary from country to country but the concept remains the same, follow blindly and unconditionally, the populace is exhorted to follow the leader in the achievement of objectives that are not always coherent. It is his charisma, a key element in the conformation of a populist regime, and that holds true both for those groups already in power and those that work in opposition.

**Sixth**, mistrust of institutions, which means that they no longer function as mediation channels. Populism may gain adepts from those places where the institutions have lost prestige, for example, the National Congress and the political parties. The vacuum that this leaves, is filled with what Antonio Negri, calls the "multitude", people and movements of a populist tint that substitute for the institutional channels of representation and political mediation.<sup>6</sup>

## POPULISM AND VIOLENCE

"There is an undeclared war in Latin America that is changing the everyday lives of both rich and poor alike. In the "villas" (shanty towns) in Argentina, the "favelas" in Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo, the "cerros" in Caracas, and the "lost cities" in Mexico, there are legions of youths raised in

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<sup>6</sup> Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio . *Multitud*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2004.

poverty, with no family structures, who live within the informal economy and have no hope of inserting themselves in productive society..."<sup>7</sup>

We note with growing concern the silent establishment of a sort of "acceptable social violence" which is what toppled governments in Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador faced by the general indifference, if not outright acceptance, of the rest of the countries in the region.

This violence is substantially different from that which bloodied the region three decades ago; now it's not about armed clandestine organizations willing to confront the state militarily. On the contrary, a characteristic of the actual violence is having found "how to become acceptable". First it is based on the use of the crowd (it can be 20 people, it need not be large number); second, they rarely use fire arms, they inspire terror through the use of blunt objects (bats, clubs, pipes, stones) which, tolerated by the authorities, are more than enough to confront any citizen who may dare to oppose them.

This tactic is complemented with the active participation of women that carry children with them; they are always at the head of any kind of activity so as to discourage any counter move by police forces.

The other sort of violence that becomes generalized is the common delinquency that operates from the "**Urban Areas out of Control**" such as those that exist in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, or Caracas. These are the bases of operation of gangs dedicate to arms and drug trafficking, armed robbery, and kidnappings.

Of all these cases of "sub-state" violence the comment of national security analyst Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters writes that American soldiers "are brilliantly prepared to defeat other soldiers. Unfortunately;" he goes on, "the enemies we are likely to face ... will not be 'soldiers,' " with the discipline and professionalism which that word implies in the West, but "warriors" erratic primitives of shifting allegiance, habituated to violence with no stake in civil order"

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<sup>7</sup> Oppenheimer, Andres. *Cuentos Chinos*, p.21/22. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2005.

"There have always been warriors who, in Homer's words, "call up the wild joy of war".

"But the collapse of Cold War empires and the disorder it engendered- along with the advance of technology and low-end urbanization-has provoked the breakdown of families and the renewal of cults and blood ties, including a more militant Islam and Hinduism. . The result is the birth of a warrior class as cruel as ever, and better armed. It embraces armies of murderous teenagers in West Africa, Russian and Albanian mafiosi, Latin American drug kingpins, west bank suicide bombers and associates of Osama bin Laden who communicate by e-mail.. Like Achilles and the ancient Greeks harassing Troy, the thrill of violence substitutes for the joys of domesticity and feasting. Achilles exclaims..."<sup>8</sup>

This violence contributes to generate a sort of panic / paralysis in the society which becomes a functional state of being for the populist leaders.

In what way? They start off by utilizing a chorus – of reasonable people – who constantly condemn violence in relative terms and explain it by means of social causality as an absolute, where the attacker becomes the victim of society and the victim is, prima facie, guilty of being among the "haves"; this framework is completed by attributing the state of things as being a direct consequence of neo-liberalism and its politics during the nineties.

"The leader" is going to solve all of this – although he clarify that it will take time - by attacking the "social causes" of these delinquent activities; when a society of perfect equity is reached (a utopian world) where there will be no more violence, only satisfied followers of the leader.

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<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, Robert D. *Warrior Politics*, 118. New York: Random House, 06/07/22, 2002.

## HUGO CHAVEZ, IS JUAN PERON WITH OIL

Hugo Chavez Frias from his first triumphant election (February 2 of 1998) launched a series of reforms designed, initially, to consolidate and insure his power in Venezuela; this way the so called Plan Bolivar 2000 began with an increasing militarization of political life in the country, and a politization of the armed forces. The movement "*Quinta Republica*" would draw its leaders from the military (and it still does today).

Toward the end of 1999 a constitutional reform opened the way for consecutive re-elections, and the caudillo could now perpetuate himself using a legal umbrella. All of this happens before the indifference and curiosity of the region and its multinational organisms, paying great mind to the fact that Hugo Chavez, handles the shield of non-intervencion and democratic rituals very ably.

Strikes and an ill attempted coup appear to have had no effect. Toward the end of 2003 in the middle of generalized discontent Chavez – counseled by Fidel Castro – created the so called "missions" (*misiones*), which are social programs of various kinds aimed at the more forsaken sectors of society, in a country that floats on oil. The missions ended – for the time being – the possibility of an atomized opposition without any ideas on obtaining the votes from the lower classes of the population.

"...the missions, converted into the most powerful political weapon of the chavismo, had a direct effect on the high participation level of those sectors in the referendum of last August, which confirmed Chavez's power. The "*Mision Merca*"l, for example, is a network of food markets with prices that are heavily subsidized by the government; they benefit some ten million people in the whole country. Even middle class women, that often oppose Chavez, do their shopping there".

"The alphabetization "*Misión Robinson*", which reduce the number of illiterate people by 1.5 million. The "*Misión Rivas*", which promotes returning to school to finish high school degrees in exchange for a monthly allowance,

reached 800,000 people. And a similar number of people have benefited from the "Misión Sucre" for higher studies".

"Medical attention: "*Barrio Adentro*" (*inside the neighborhood*), one of the most popular programs, has 20,000 to 30,000 (the number vary), Cuban doctors who offer free services in the most poor sector of the city, in the small hexagonal constructions where they live".

"To this end Chavez has created a parallel bureaucracy, that answers to no one and that has a "black box" of unknown proportions. It is from there, from that lack of transparency, that the suspicions of corruption arise and haunt the presidency as never before..."<sup>9</sup>

The missions will take intelligent advantage of real needs (health, education, and infrastructure) to do "something" and promise more; simultaneously becoming the visible face of the Bolivarian revolution. Not a few political entities in the region and Europe have "bought" into this enthusiastically. If this phenomenon is seen from the perspective of those that benefit from it, the missions, including their failings, have come to solve problems that the traditional political parties cared very little about and this explains why the lower classes are so committed with the Bolivarian revolution and why the opposing candidates have such a difficult time recapturing those votes.

This is how victory was achieved at the referendum last August, which signals an internal consolidation (fraudulent or not) and the beginning of an international projection that two years later is starting to pay off; today it can be said that Hugo Chavez has irrevocable altered the political map of Venezuela and the Continent.

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<sup>9</sup> Seminario, Francisco. "*Un País en Que Cada Ciudadano es un Soldado al Servicio de la Revolución*". *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 23 mayo 2005, p. 2.

## CHAVES' "WORLDWIDE REVOLUTION"

Almost since he came to power it was made clear that the Bolivarian Revolution had no intentions of remaining within Venezuela's borders and that the "revolutionary fraternity" professed by Fidel Castro was also insufficient to contain it. With the United States as the "official enemy" of the new revolution, it was only a matter of taking advantage of a favorable moment which has three key factors:

1. The almost permanent rise of the price of oil in the world market, which puts in the hands of the Caudillo the economic means to make his projects into reality.
2. An administration in Washington which is completely focused on other issues and areas of the planet and that concludes with no clear proposals, with a difficult dialogue and no substantial budget to deal with its closest neighbors. An administration incapable of generating ideas or appealing concepts so it resorts, without much conviction, to more or less standard worldwide prescriptions that generate little support and sometimes outright hostility.
3. A political crisis that extends through the south and center of the Continent, with more than enough energy to question and debate, but with almost no capacity to generate realistic options. It is within this framework of ideological orphanage is where the "*Socialismo para el Siglo XXI*" (*Socialism for the XXI Century*) can be sold through the media as something new, when in reality it is the same old authoritarian populism wisely sprinkled with oil, and captive votes.

When George W. Bush got down from Air Force One in Mar del Plata (Buenos Aires, Argentina) toward the end of 2005 for the Summit Conference of the hemisphere, his idea to push forward with Free Trade Area for the Americas was dead before the meeting begun, he just didn't know it.

At that time Lula could still see his move: the South American Community of Nations (which has been signed by 10 presidents in Cuzco

that last December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004) which had chances of coming to being as a local version of the European Union under the cautious guidance of Brazil and with former Argentine president Eduardo Duhalde at the helm. It has been six months from these events, and nobody even speaks of the South American Community of Nations. There are tensions that arise from an intrinsically violent populism, which in spite nice words and professed faith in democracy, tend more toward the authoritarian "*caudillismo*" than to republican values.

Their critics like to toy with the idea of a Chavez trapped between Caracas and the Havana with no other space in which to maneuver. The truth is that both his oil reserves and ready cash serve as a presentation card that very few can refuse. This without forgetting that – political and ideological differences aside - the U.S. continues to be the main buyer of Venezuelan oil and that CITGO, the American subsidiaries of PDVSA, continues to operate in the States without any obstacles.

It remains to be seen what course the idea of a sort of "Confederation" between Venezuela and Cuba will take, union that would also serve to guarantee the survival of the Cuban Revolution even if Castro and his brother Raul (who has some health problems though these were not enough to stop him from assuming command of the government last August when Fidel underwent surgery which forced him to delegate his functions temporarily) were to be removed from the picture.

It was also toward the end of 2004 that Chavez launched a strong international projection: One toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, complemented with a trip to Syria; two trips already to the People's Republic of China and very discreet contacts with North Korea. All of these with different degrees and intensity but today they are all working. And let's not forget the generous arms purchases to Russia.

At the same time he attacks any and all proposals having to do with the Free Trade Area of the Americas; approaches the Caribbean countries with seductive promises of oil and investments, he withdraws from the *Comunidad Andina de Naciones* (CAN), self invites himself (with

Argentina's blessing) into MERCOSUR, and at the same time manages to delay Mexico's participation. The oil "weapon" becomes one of the most important pillars for his international projection strategy. "...Chavez has been working on a continental scale ever since he assumed the reigns of the state, with audacity and a clear vision of the fundamental weakness of his strategic enemy (the United States), on a diplomacy based on the power of oil. This "oil diplomacy" allowed him to set in motion a plan to break the oil interdependency with the United States (Petroamerica), in the Caribbean (Petrocaribe) and in the south of the continent with (Petrosur), finding also a lynch-pin in Colombia to shape the Andean region project (Petroandina) (...)"

"The "oil diplomacy", cemented on top of bilateral energy agreements with almost all the countries in the continent and a strategic alliance with Brasil allowed him to block Washington's initiatives in the OAS (an intention to indirectly apply the Democratic Charter). The State's Department mistake in assessing his power and time frame allowed Chavez to progress with his Plan Andino, while he worked on the foundation of the Community of Southern Nations, the embryo of the Patria Grande Bolivariana..."<sup>10</sup>

All of this was accomplished in less than two years. This being said, it does not mean that there haven't been set backs (in Peru the failure of Ollanta Humala; Mexico which is in a relatively unstable situation but where his candidate was narrowly defeated), rejections and progress, his movements are neither linear nor uniform. This however must be highlighted: Behind Hugo Chavez there is a Messianic conception of politics and he has both the means and will to attempt to carry it out.

For years the issue of future Latin American unity was included in speeches, summits and declarations, but no one spent much effort in explaining on which political-philosophical bases this could be achieved. For some the issue was rather pragmatic, thinking of the union in

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<sup>10</sup> Garrido, Alberto. "El Tablero Internacional de Chávez." *Analítica* 21 abril 2006. *PoliticaExterior*. <<http://www.analitica.com/va/internacionales/opinion/>>

common economic interests of its members, foregoing a political framework or using one so loose and generic that it amounted to nothing.

Others argued that solid sub-regional treaties would be the bricks for this unity, la *Comunidad Andina de Naciones* and MERCOSUR are –or rather used to be- sited as the most promising.

Within this framework Bolivia has come to occupy a pivotal role, not only for its geographic location but also because it's socio-economic conditions make a part of the population very receptive to the bolivarian arguments, and due to its insertion in the “energy map” of the region and of Sao Paulo in particular, which is the same as saying the soft belly of a potentially unstable Brazil.

Up until 2002 Evo Morales' party the *Movimiento al Socialismo* – MAS – had about 4% of the electoral votes; in the elections of June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002 that number rose to 20.94% and on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2005 (after toppling two democratically elected presidents) he rose to power with 53.98% of the votes.

December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005 found him in Cuba and on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006 in Caracas; after these events Chavez and Fidel accelerated as much as possible the process of making Bolivia into a satellite country. The whole point is to make the “alliance” as irreversible as possible and have the means to make use of force if necessary.

For Evo, who is under constant pressure from his electorate to produce visible results, the fresh money that Venezuela can provide becomes more necessary with each passing day that sees his popularity lessened and with policies that are driving investors away.

Let us set aside all the folktales (planes, helicopters, bodyguards, and varied counselors) and concentrate on the main points of the process of making Bolivia a satellite:

The system for the manufacturing of national identity documents was provided by Chavez (the system was enlarged after the electronic voting machines allow identification of the political preference of each citizen).

*Yacimientos Petroliferos Bolivianos* – YPFB - (Bolivia's national oil company) and its Venezuelan counterpart PDVSA plan the construction of a gas refinery and petrochemical plant.

The construction of 30 rural radio stations at a total cost of 1.5 million dollars.

Construction of an airport at the city of Sucre, cost 100 million dollars.

Purchase of two banks.

Joint construction of an asphalt production plant.

Exchange of diesel fuel for soybean.

Program for vaccination and alphabetization in collaboration with Cuba.<sup>11</sup>

## **TOGETHER, BUT NOT THAT CLOSE**

On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Hugo Chavez announced that he was withdrawing from the *Comunidad Andina de Naciones* – CAN – (formed by Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia) in spite the fact that his ally Evo Morales was about to assume the pro-tempora presidency; the reason cited was the fact that Colombia and Peru had signed free trade agreements with the United States; a weak argument if the oil business between Venezuela and the U.S. are kept in mind.

On April 29<sup>th</sup> in an ad-hoc meeting Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales and Fidel Castro signed in Havana the Free Trade Treaty of the People (*Tratado de Libre Comercio de los Pueblos*).

At this meeting Chavez said that Venezuela would supply all the oil that Bolivia could need to speed up its development. The agreement establishes a set of "compensation mechanisms" so that Bolivia can pay its oil bill with regional products, such as the soybean that will be acquired by Caracas and Havana.

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<sup>11</sup> Cfrs. Tyler Bridges: *Some are worrying Bolivia has sold soul to Venezuela*. Miami Herald, Mayo 26,2006.

Bolivia used to sell its soybean to Colombia, but with this country entering into a Free Trade Area treaty it is expected that this same product sold by the U.S. but with preferential or no tariff will take over the Colombian market for soybean.

Chavez also said that Venezuelan counsel would be provided for the creation of a petrochemical industrial complex in Bolivia and would also offer this country legal and technical aid in the mining of hydrocarbons so as to rebuild the whole sector.<sup>12</sup>

Just 36 hours after this summit Evo Morales announced a "supreme decree" which nationalized the gas industry, this accompanied by the deployment of troops which affected primarily the Brazilian company Petrobras. After this he traveled, always accompanied by Chavez, to meet with presidents Lula and Kirchner.

So far the only one to have visibly profited from this is the Venezuelan PDVSA which just a few months before had no activities in Bolivia and today not only has offices and technicians there but they also help YPF and counsel the Bolivian authorities, these would all appear to precede a preferential tariff agreement. At the same time Venezuela positioned itself to get involved in the negotiations regarding El Mutum, the largest iron reserve in Bolivia, which was in the process of having put for public bids.

One example of the peculiar "regional unity" was the Latin American – European summit which took place in Vienna (May 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006) and which gathered the not unremarkable number of 60 heads of state, regrettably rather than become the opportunity to overcome obstacles for bilateral trade it served rather for the Europeans to be both amused and surprised by the invectives bandied among the different Latin American presidents.

This may have been the reason why the European Union manifested that the negotiations would be undertaken with the "blocks" (be it

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<sup>12</sup> Cfrs Gonzalez, Angel Tomás . "*Castro, Chávez y Morales pactan una alianza*". El Mundo, Madrid, España, 29 de abril 2006.

MERCOSUR or CAN) and not with individual countries. It was also made very clear that there was no expectation for a change in the agricultural subsidies policies lead by France and although it is true that some of the countries would like to be considered by European investors, attitudes like those of Argentina, Bolivia or Venezuela makes this both scarce and limited.

They would all be seen together again (Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro, Evo Morales, Nestor Kirchner, amongst others) at the summit meeting of MERCOSUR, which took place last July in the Province of Cordoba, Argentina. There Fidel Castro, without any of the participants feeling the need to point out that his country was the only non democratic one, made very inconvenient for the MERCOSUR the agreement that it was signing. Not only that but he was allowed to speak at a members meeting at the same time that the acceptance of Venezuela in the treaty was agreed on (acceptance that was given without it meeting the tariff requisites).

## **AS A SORT OF CONCLUSION**

It is almost impossible to formulate a lasting conclusion for a process that is practically changing from one minute to the next. In the beginning of September (2006) Chavez ended a sort of world tour which carried him through a large part of the Islamic world, Asia and Africa with the evident intention of securing a seat at the Security Council of the U.N. (as a non-permanent member). He has a fairly good chance of getting it too, and although the United States backs Guatemala as a regional candidate; the small Central American country seems to be making very little effort to achieve that position. Venezuela's eventual arrival to the Security Council, without overestimating it, would be a hard blow for the United States' international prestige and the possibility that increasing reluctance of the Security Council to support U.S. initiatives become more evident.

Another aspect of Chavez (and his allies) populism is the idea of staying in power indefinitely, but keeping a democratic façade. An

example of this is the Constituent Assembly taking place in Bolivia these days. It's purpose is to elaborate a new Constitution, but due to some political maneuvering Evo Morales may do it with a simple majority instead of the required  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the assembly. Simultaneously Evo Morale's government is finalizing an agreement with Chavez for the construction of military bases and updating of current equipment.

Meanwhile, Saturday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Chavez expressed his intention of remaining in power until the year 2021, with the use of plebiscite to be undertaken in the year 2010, he has already assumed his victory on the coming elections of December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006. At this plebiscite he would ask the population if they wish for Hugo Chavez to remain in power, if they say yes, the Constitution would have to be reformed to allow his indefinite re-election, something similar to what Nestor Kirchner did when he was the governor of the Province of Santa Cruz.

Throughout the Hemisphere there is a debate regarding the continuance of democracy, it seems that more and more this word is empty of meaning and we should start thinking if our concern is only with "democracy" as a system where one votes but it's not very clear what is chosen; or should we rather concern ourselves with defending a **republican system of government** with all that this implies in terms of checks and balances, multi party system, independence of the judicial system, freedom for the press, respect for human rights, a free economy and security for all its citizens.

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