

Binary visions of a complex leader or: What I learned from Hugo Chavez (1954-2013) | openDemocracy

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All commentators with whom I had the pleasure to spar - I in the red corner, they in the blue - had three essential messages to transmit: beginning with the statement that Hugo Chávez was a tyrant - albeit - and said without the slightest irony - an elected one.



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Not a few times has Gabriel Garcia Marquez's famous piece, "The Enigma of Chavez" [1] been mentioned in the plethora of obituaries and articles published since the Venezuelan leader's death from cancer last March 5, 2013[2]. Originally titled in Spanish as "El Enigma de Los Dos Chavez" – "the Enigma of the Two Chavezes" – the article is based on a conversation held between Chavez and Garcia Marquez during an aeroplane trip in Venezuela, shortly after the former assumed the presidency of Venezuela for the first time in January, 1999. In it the author relates events from Chavez's earlier life, as we assume it is related to him by Chavez himself, famously ending with this much quoted observation:

While he moved off among his military escort and old friends, I shuddered at the thrill of having gladly travelled and talked with two contrary men. One to whom inveterate luck has offered the opportunity to save his country. And the other, a conjurer who could go down in history as one more despot.

As someone who has erratically spent the last 11 years or so studying Venezuela and its magnetic leader, I was brought into the media frenzy - so quick to arise, even quicker to subside - as one of the inevitable commentators asked to pass judgement on the man and his works. Few radio outlets I appeared on deviated from variations of the simplistic autocrat-saviour dichotomy as the lens through which to analyze President Chavez's legacy - pale echoes of Garcia Marquez's eloquent summation. One of the more snappy formulae I was offered, for example, was to choose between a "modern Che

Guevara or a despotic crackpot?” Needless to say, as someone who could not summarize the man in such simplistic terms, I was apportioned the role of advocate for the first incarnation – the man who saved his country. But inevitably and depressingly, as anyone who paid the slightest attention to the media coverage of Chavez’s passing can attest, the final judgement firmly and unsurprisingly emphasised the “despotic” conclusion, despite the pretence at “balanced” debate.

Throughout my years studying Chavez, such simplistic dichotomizations have been everyday fare, often framed, however, in much more fearsomely sophisticated and complex manners. And from this experience I believe I have garnered three important lessons for my work: the value of comparison, the need for context, and the irrepressible persistence of complexity despite all our attempts to simplify. It is these which I hope to illustrate here, using Garcia Marquez’s article as an intellectual springboard for further reflection, and in lieu of a more conventional obituary.

On closer reading of “The Enigma of Chavez” it could be argued that the Colombian author was not summarizing the man himself, but rather *impressions* or *images* of the man. Early on, for example, Garcia Marquez writes:

As he recounted his life, I was discovering a personality which had absolutely no relation to the idea of a despot we had formed from the news media.

The image of Chavez as “despot”, then, is one created by the media. The oft-quoted citation above could in that light be read not as a saviour/despot dichotomy of Chavez, but as a clash between the media-formed image and the author’s direct impression of Chavez from having spent a few hours with the flesh-and-blood man. It could be argued then that Garcia Marquez, an old journalist himself, is alerting us to how media images – of people, of places, of times - have little to do with their reality and how instead we need to use our critical judgement to pierce through the media fog in our search for truth.

Little has changed in the fourteen years since Garcia Marquez wrote the piece and Chávez’s premature death last week at the age of 58. The image of despot formed around Chavez by the media – Venezuelan, Latin American and international – since he first came to power has been relentlessly repeated, shaping most public discourse around him. Yet the image is there to confuse – as it did even an old hand like Garcia Marquez – throwing more heat than light over the subject, occluding and obscuring the real issues. More depressingly still, it does so *en masse*, each media outfit following the pack in the same direction in its rush to (negative) judgement. One cannot but echo Tariq Ali’s recent observation in the *Guardian*, lamenting the waste of resources of media organizations sending multitudes of foreign correspondents to Caracas on Chavez gaining power, only to only file identical reports, all emphasizing his “despotic” nature^[3]. Similarly, one broadcast would have been enough to record his death, saving us all the frustration of having to listen to this same theme *ad nauseum*.

In reality, as is so often the case, this simplistic polarisation speaks more of our societies than it does of Venezuela’s departed leader, or any Latin American leader for that matter. All commentators with whom I had the pleasure to spar - I in the red corner, they in the blue - had three essential messages to transmit: that Chávez was a tyrant - albeit - and said without the slightest irony - an elected one; that he single-mindedly destroyed Venezuelan institutionalism and its separation of powers; and, that he also destroyed the Venezuelan economy - all this, of course, just so that he could stay in power^[4]. I will not try to refute these charges here, especially as others have already done so^[5]. Rather what is striking is the presence of two implicit contentions inherent in these positions.

First, such positions implicitly contend that before Chavez, Venezuela had a liberal democracy, with strong institutions, the fabled separation of powers and a thriving economy. Second, that if Venezuela just followed “sound” political and economic advice it could return to that golden era and be just like any other “normal” democracy. If only life were so simple! In the first case, as [Buxton succinctly points out](#),

Venezuela never had a functioning liberal democracy[6], nor indeed a particularly successful economy at least in its latter years[7]. And in the second case, to paraphrase Beasley-Murray, Cameron and Hershberg[8], liberalism and neoliberal capitalism in reality are the alternatives being offered - although they are rarely explicitly referred to.

Hence, what these commentators are commenting on is not Hugo Chávez, nor the socio-economic and political results of his various administrations in Venezuela over the last fourteen years. If that were the case, their positions would have to be much more nuanced. Rather, it is Venezuela seen in our image – the imagined image of our societies of course, not their realities. It is in effect, a projection of an ideal type image of western society onto the canvas of Venezuela – a western society of liberal democracies, with separation of powers, and functioning “sustainable” economies. It is an image, of course, which many of us living in western democracies would question, especially now that ordinary people in their millions, in countries such as Spain, Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Cyprus and yes even the UK, are force-fed their daily doses of “sound” economic policies to noxious effect. But it also is an image which serves western foreign policy requirements remarkably well.

The first lesson learnt then, is that comparisons are almost always used, but rarely acknowledged, by most analysts of contemporary politics, but for many they rarely are comparing reality at all, but ideal type visions of the world from their own particular cultural, social and ideological perspectives and requirements. What we need instead are wide-ranging comparative lenses where positions are explicit rather than obfuscated, as Buxton notes in her recent piece on Venezuela for these (virtual) pages[9] .

One of the great charms of the Garcia Marquez piece is the cultural and historical sensitivity of the writer’s gaze; unsurprising since the writer, from neighbouring Colombia of course, is deeply imbued with the imprint of both. He refers to Chavez’s “easy cordiality and the native grace of a pure-blooded Venezuelan”, and notes that he is “a natural storyteller” a talent native to “Venezuelan popular culture”. Later, he relates the story of the failed 1992 coup which Chavez led, pointing out that, rather than proof of his authoritarianism it was in fact part of a noble Venezuelan tradition, which resulted in the pre-Chavez Punto Fijo regime – that paragon of democratic virtue!

During the campaign, the harshest argument against him had been his recent past as a conspirator and coup commander. But Venezuelan history has digested four other coups. Beginning with Rómulo Betancourt, rightly or wrongly remembered as the father of Venezuelan democracy, who overthrew Isaías Medina Angarita, a democratic veteran military man who had tried to purge his country of the 36 years of Juan Vicente Gómez. His successor, the novelist Rómulo Gallegos, was overthrown by General Marcos Pérez Jimenez, who would stay almost 11 years in power. He, in turn, was overthrown by a generation of young democrats who inaugurated the longest period of elected presidents.

Again, further on in his piece, Garcia Marquez relates a charming tale of the young rookie Chavez’s encounter with a Colombian army captain. While researching the activities of his warrior great-grandfather, Maisanta, he accidentally strays over the Colombian border, eventually being apprehended by the army captain who accuses him of being a spy. This encounter results in hours of tense discussion which is eventually resolved when Chavez refers to the picture of the Liberator, Simon Bolivar, behind the captain’s desk and the brief early unification of the two countries as Gran Colombia. These cultural and historical references unite both men in their common heritage and love for the spirit of Bolivar and they end the night sharing their national beers. No doubt, many of us who have spent time on field research in Venezuela, or similar parts of Latin America, will recognize the authenticity of such a tale. A second lesson which can be drawn from studying Hugo Chávez therefore is the impossibility of fairly judging any political phenomenon without understanding the culture and historical background from which it emerged, as indeed [Rovira Kaltwasser suggests](#) in a piece he recently wrote for [Open Democracy](#)[10].

Chávez was many things, as Garcia Marquez attests throughout his piece: historian, baseball player, budding artist, soldier, Catholic, son of a poor family, mestizo, altar boy, musician, singer, politician, revolutionary, leftist, student, conspirator, comrade... Above all Garcia Marquez shows us that he was a man, just like any other, but with particular gifts and experiences which led him to leadership rather than the star baseball player he desperately wanted to be. And yes it is true that Chavez held within him a bit of the democrat and some of the despot - what are we humans after all, leaders included, but walking contradictions?

But few of us can be reduced to one thing, or even two, and so the last lesson I learnt from Hugo Chávez is: Beware of journalists and political analysts bearing false dichotomies. Everyone - Hugo Chávez, Venezuela and those who seek to understand the world - deserves better than that!

[1] An English language version can be [read here](#). A retitled Spanish version, 'El Sol de tu Bravura' can be [read here](#).

[3] Tariq Ali, 'Hugo Chavez and me', in the *Guardian* Wed 6 March, 2013. [Available here](#).

[4] A good example of such positions can be found in Javier Corrales, 'The House that Chavez Built' in *Foreign Policy* 7 March, 2013. [Available here](#).

[5] See for example [Julia Buxton](#), 'From Bust to Boom: Chavez's Economic Legacy', 7 March, 2013.

[6] Julia Buxton, 2011, 'Foreword: Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy' in David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger, 2011, *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: Participation, Politics, and Culture under Chávez* Durham and London: Duke University Press, pps. ix-xxii, p. xv.

[7] Julia Buxton, 'From Bust to Boom: Chavez's Economic Legacy'.

[8] John Beasley Murray, Maxwell A. Cameron and Eric Hershberg, 'Latin America's Left Turns: A Tour d'Horizon' in Maxwell A. Cameron and Eric Hershberg (eds.), *Latin America's Left Turns: Politics, Policies and Trajectories of Change*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, pps. 1-23, p.10.

[9] Julia Buxton, 'From Bust to Boom: Chavez's Economic Legacy'

[10] Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, '[Chavismo without Chávez: A Populist Conundrum](#)', 9 March, 2013.