



## ***The Discourse and Counter-Discourse of Hugo Chavez***

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ROBERT DE BEAUGRANDE

beaugrande@beaugrande.com

### **Abstract**

*Deconstructing discourse by means of counter-discourse is proposed as one method for critical discourse analysis. The case study concerns Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's controversial president with a massive presence in public discourse and the media. Apparently for the first time, samples of the discourse from his '49 laws' are presented in English.*

### **1. Critical Discourse Analysis via Counter-discourse**

Recent discussions, notably those on Internet websites such as *CRITICS* and *Language in the New Capitalism*, indicate that 'critical discourse analysis' (hereafter CDA) is attracting much attention, both favorable and unfavorable. In my opinion, these developments should be seen in context of the spiraling polarization of societies around the world, which has severely eroded the middle ground of neutrality and detachment. Even the 'middle class' is under threat of evaporating as much of it is forced by layoffs, wage cuts, and outsourcing into what would qualify as the 'lower class', whilst a tiny faction soar upwards into vast wealth.

A distinguished colleague told me one must *never* allow politics to influence one's academic career. But then she was a phonologist at a time when the great Dwight Bolinger described phonology as 'the last refuge of the faint-hearted'. His *Language – The Loaded Weapon* anticipated current CDA, and is even more relevant today than it was in 1980.

Moreover, academic programs in 'literary studies' (in German in fact called 'Literaturwissenschaft', 'literature science') and 'linguistics' have been beset by stagnation and turmoil, most effectively aggravated by the increasing scarcity of jobs for holders of their degrees, an amenity once taken for granted. The only remaining growth sector within business as usual is in 'applied linguistics', which is mainly the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. A survey I performed in October 2001 using the Modern Language Association (MLA) *Job Information List* found 788 academic positions posted in 'English'. Of these, 70 (8.8%) at least mention 'linguistics' as one among other 'desired areas'. But just 5 positions are in what might be called 'linguistics proper', with its standard roster of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics. Of these,

phonology is named as the special area in three, syntax in just one, and morphology and semantics in none at all. All of the other 65 are in applied linguistics, at least in terms of the expected duties. I also noted that the MLA has flatly stopped publishing its separate *Job List* for 'linguistics' altogether.

The reaction of programs in 'literary studies' has been to open up the 'canon', especially to minority literatures, and to sponsor a wave of approaches in 'literary studies' which might be at least partly reckoned as CDA, whether or not this term is announced: post-modernism, feminism, deconstruction, and so forth. In any case, it would be a mistake at this point to single out any one approach as 'real or 'genuine' CDA, not merely because the field thrives on diversity but also because it is in a phase of galloping evolution, which constitutes one of its main attractions. Whereas in other language-related areas, journals are losing their readership or closing down altogether, CDA is generating new journals, such as *Discourse Studies*, *Discurso y sociedad*, *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, and *Studies in Language and Capitalism*. – mostly on-line and hence available to anyone.

Partly out of envy, perhaps, a motley crowd of enemies have set out to attack CDA as a menace to such values as objectivity, scientific rigour, or fairness, if not indeed an outright fraud. However, when I compiled two book-length analyses of major discourses in literary studies and linguistics, respectively (Beaugrande 1988, 1991), I confirmed that those same values have not prevailed in the business as usual, either. I see nothing objective in the ostensibly scientific lucubrations of say, the 'new criticism' or 'generative grammar', which make literature and language itself out to be something patently different than the linguistic, cognitive, and social resources and events that constitute them. It is surely no accident that such approaches share the implicit move of freeing the analyst from such responsibilities as admitting that *any* approach to literature or language involves active participation in activating and actualising it. CDA openly and frankly admits this participation, and qualifies that it will be in 'critical' terms.

The uncertainty or confusion enshrouding CDA is only partly due to such attacks. Diversity prevails not merely among our approaches but among the types of discourse we choose to analyse. Whereas some of CDA is heavily theory-based, my own approach is heavily data-based. As demonstrated by the two book-length analyses cited above, a strategic selection and arrangement of data can achieve a deal of 'discursive' work the analyst would otherwise have to perform, for example, by juxtaposing contradictions, especially those between a false public statement and a factual one, for example:

(1)  
The California crunch really is the result of not enough power-generating plants and then not enough power to power the power of generating plants. (George W. Bush)

(1a)  
[At] Duke Power, its managers simply threw away the spare parts needed to keep the plants running [and] ordered them to shut down a plant during a shortage (Greg Palast, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*)

(2)  
There is no conclusive evidence that nicotine is addictive; [...] and the same thing with cigarettes causing emphysema, lung cancer, heart disease (Rush Limbaugh on Premiere Radio Networks)

(2a)  
More than 1,000 Americans die each day from smoking-related causes. (*LifeClinic*)

(3)  
The US gives far and away more tax money to foreign countries than anyone. (Bill O'Reilly on Fox News Channel)

(3a)  
The US gives a smaller fraction of its gross national product than any other developed country (Institute for Policy Studies)

(4)  
There are 100,000 abductions of children by strangers every year in the United States. (Bill O'Reilly again)

(4a)  
In point of fact, according to the FBI, the number is about 100. (Prof. Barry Glassner in the *Wall Street Journal*)

(5)  
Conceptions from rape occur with the same frequency as snowfall in Miami. (Bush nominee Judge Leon Holmes on denying abortion to rape victims)

(5a)  
Each year in America over 30,000 women become pregnant from rape or incest; snow falls in Miami roughly once every 100 years. (*American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*)

In my recent book *Introduction to the Study of Text and Discourse*, I have termed this strategy *critical analysis of discourse via counter-discourse*. The latter can of course be supplied by the analyst – such seems to be fairly common in CDA – but I hold it more effective to confront data with data. If I am not being objective, I am certainly being intersubjective, and investing my own subjectivity in the selection and arrangement of data I have not produced myself. The gap between discourse and counter-discourse tends to exert some deconstructive leverage.

Particularly since the 1980s, the mass media have fallen heavily under the domination of extremist right-wing groups. Often backed by the 'foundations' of rich patrons like John M. Olin, Lynde and Harry Bradley, and Richard Scaife, heir to the Mellon fortune – besides Rupert Murdoch, who ruthlessly intervenes in the process of reporting – all of whom fervently believe their money confers the power to dictate the social and political agenda of the whole society if not the whole world. 'Media personalities', editorialists, corporate executives, and politicians have, as we can see from the data like those I have just quoted, thrown off all restraint or shame about what they say in public for massive 'disinformation campaigns'. Racism, sexism, and abuse of the poor, the jobless, and the homeless are all back with a vengeance, and

unabashedly out in the open.

The public is bombarded with discourses of hatred and violence which some years ago one could hardly have imagined possible:

(6)

We need [...] to physically intimidate liberals, by making them realize that they can be killed too. Otherwise they will turn out to be outright traitors. (Ann Coulter demanding the execution of John Walker Lindh, an American who joined the Taliban back when they were still 'friends' with the US)

(7)

We should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity. We weren't punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. [...] We killed civilians. (Ann Coulter on Muslims)

The role of CDA needs to adapt accordingly. Our objective can no longer be just to tease out cleverly disguised attacks on human and citizens' rights when these attacks are no longer really disguised. Many are, however, kept secret, and without the Internet and investigative reporters like Greg Palast, Michael Moore, and Carl Jensen's *Censored News* project, along with alternative websites, the general population would have no access to the unpleasant truths. See for yourself: how many of these horrendous stories can you say you really knew about?

(8)

Potentially 44,000 to 98,000 people die each year as a result of medical errors in hospitals. (Harvard Institute of Medicine) Physicians and hospitals are suddenly viewed in this report as more deadly than combined deaths from highway accidents, breast cancer and AIDS. (William C. Deskin and Robert E. Hoye on the website of the American Medical Association)

(9)

Some 500,000 people, the majority in Third World countries, are poisoned yearly by banned pesticides and drugs (*Rolling Stone*). Pesticides and chemical exports are suspected of causing birth defects, reduced fertility, genetic mutations, cancer, and bone marrow, blood, and respiratory changes [...] The FDA allows US drug manufacturers to export banned drugs, stale out-dated drugs, and unapproved new drugs (*Mother Jones*).

(10)

When you pull into a gas station, you could be filling your tank with a deadly mixture of toxic waste solvents, and gasoline. (*Common Cause*). In 1990, a Tacoma recycling firm was caught [...] selling fuel oil mixed with pesticide and other toxic chemicals (*Seattle Times*).

(11)

In July 1979, the largest radioactive spill on US history took place at United Nuclear Mill at Church Rock, New Mexico. 100,000,000 gallons of radioactive water contaminated the drinking water of more than 1700 Navajo. The company refused to supply emergency food and water. (*Irish Times*) Samples of the river water indicated radioactivity 6,600 times the maximum standard. [The rivers eventually empty] into Lake Mead, which supplies the drinking water for Los Angeles and Southern California. (*Greenpeace Chronicles*)

(12)

Theoretically, one pound of plutonium, uniformly distributed, has the potential to give everyone on the planet a fatal case of lung cancer (Helen Caldicott, Founder of the Physicians for Social Responsibility, in *The Nation*). NASA is scheduled to launch the Cassini space probe to Saturn in October 1997 with 72.3 pounds of plutonium. [...] The probe will be launched on top of a Lockheed-Martin-built Titan IV rocket – a number of which have exploded in the atmosphere. (*Progressive Media Network*)

(13)

From the 1940s until the 1970s, federal agencies conducted heinous radiation exposure experiments on hundreds of human being around the country. [...] In Oregon, 14 subjects were immersed in radioactive water, or given the material to drink. (*New York Times*) [...] In August 1986, the Veteran's Administration was caught red-handed shredding thousands of case records of contested radiation injury claims (*VVA Veteran*)

These too are counter-discourses, but in the expanded sense that they speak out against expedient, widespread, but tacit assumptions that such things cannot happen, that human lives cannot be so callously endangered or destroyed on such scales.

The full leverage of CDA, I would submit, would be exerted not merely by adducing counter-discourses, but by convincing interested people to track these down and propagate them. In educational and social terms, the foundation would be laid by *critical literacy* (cf. Lankshear 1993; Weil 1998; Ramirez and Gallardo 2001), working in an energetic alliance with CDA, viz.:

Literacy [...] is as much about ideologies, identities and values as about codes and skills. Critical literacy provides us with ways of thinking that uncover social inequalities and injustices. It enables us to become agents of social change. [...] As we examine the underlying values and consider the ways in which we, as readers and viewers, are positioned to view the world, we are able to develop opposing interpretations. (*Tasmanian Statement on English*)

This too may count as a reaction against the polarisation of society and to the discourses of power designed to make it seem either invisible or inevitable.

## **2. Hugo Chávez as a Discursive Construct**

My title has an intentionally dual meaning: 'the discourse and counter-discourse of Hugo Chávez' being both from him and about him. He can be designated as a 'discursive construct' because of his massive presence, both favourable and unfavourable, in public discourse of the media. The remark of Gregory Wilpert, a sociologist living in Caracas, that 'Chávez is an individual who raises the passions of people, pro or con, unlike anyone else; it almost seems that Venezuelans either love him or hate him' might well be extended to discourses about him everywhere. In Russia, the daily newspaper *Trud* called him an 'extraordinary and controversial leader' with 'a messianic quality, not uncommon in politicians with spice in their blood.' In the US, then Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld compared him to Adolf Hitler, a man who, Chávez retorted, 'would be like a suckling baby next to George W Bush'. This dualism

may reflect the perplexity of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, the distinguished Colombian novelist now returned to being a journalist, facing ‘the enigma of the two Chávезes’. (All English translations from the Spanish are my own.)

Tenía la cordialidad inmediata, y la gracia criolla de un venezolano puro. [...] A medida que me contaba su vida iba yo descubriendo una personalidad que no correspondía para nada con la imagen de déspota que teníamos formada a través de los medios. Era otro Chávез. ¿Cuál de los dos era el real?

He had the immediate cordiality and the Creole grace of a pure Venezuelan. [...] By means of his telling me his life I was discovering a personality which in no way corresponded to the image of despot that we had formed from the media. He was another Chávез. Which of the two is the real one?

Yet the discourse data I have collected suggest that the discursive construct called ‘Hugo Chávез’ is or has been far more than just two people: tyrant, autocrat, army officer, coup leader, patriot, demagogue, populist, democrat, socialist, anti-imperialist, orator, benefactor for poor countries, father figure for children, baseball player (catcher), student of history and political science, story-teller, poet, prize-winning painter, and popular singer formerly ‘indispensable for birthdays and serenades’ (Garcia Márquez).

Which of these might be the ‘real’ Chávез is an exitless question, the more so if, as my data suggest, each of them may be or may have been ‘real’ at least part of the time. I heard or read about some of them myself whilst I was lecturing at the Universidad Central de Venezuela in 2002. My colleagues and students were uniformly from the light-skinned middle class (the ‘Spaniards’); to judge from the figures I was given (and the pay I received), university salaries in Venezuela are amazingly high by Latin American standards. I was regaled with complaints and condemnations against Chávез, who comes from, and represents, the dark-skinned lower class (the ‘Indians’). (As a boy he wheeled a cart through the streets of his village selling candy and fruit to help out his struggling parents, both low-paid elementary school teachers.) I later came to appreciate their ulterior motives and realised how precious little they knew about the man himself (or themselves?).

Venezuelans are given to staging outdoor demonstrations, where they customarily beat pots and pans. (When I was trying to straighten out a bent saucepan on my balcony railing, my neighbours asked what I was protesting.) My own colleagues helped to organize a demonstration of (so they said) 120,000 people representing the middle class, which got extensive media coverage. No coverage at all was granted to the pro-Chávез, lower-class counter-demonstration of some 300,000. Greg Palast reported on one such light-skinned assemblage:

One edible-oils executive, in high heels, designer glasses and push-up bra had turned out, she said, ‘to fight for democracy’. She added: ‘we’ll try to do it institutionally’, a phrase that meant nothing to me until a banker in pale pink lipstick explained that to remove Chávез, ‘we can’t wait until the next election’.

What *that* meant became clear after the media began circulating a report that Chávез supporters had opened fire upon a crowd of unarmed protestors, killing a dozen or so people. Only much later was it discovered that

the media edited the video footage of the shootings in such a way as to avoid showing where the Chávez supporters were shooting – namely, as eyewitnesses reported, at police and individuals who were shooting back while hidden in doorways. (Wilpert)

Using the incident as a pretext, soldiers backed by the business leadership of Venezuela removed Chávez from the Presidential Palace, whereupon the mainstream media instantly banded about another big lie: Chávez had resigned and had dismissed his cabinet.

Pedro Carmona, the chief of Fedecamaras, the nation's confederation of business and industry, declared himself President. This coup, one might say, was the ultimate in corporate lobbying. (Palast)

The middle class, and the so-called 'Bush administration', were jubilant, and even a fair share of the military were supportive. But despite so much public discourse about Chávez being a 'dictator', the nation awoke to the fact that they now had the genuine article. The new 'government'

dissolved the legislature, the Supreme Court, the attorney general's office, the national electoral commission, and the state governorships [and] decreed that the 1999 constitution [...] was to be suspended. (Wilpert)

Resistance swiftly mounted; a huge crowd surrounded the Palace; and hundreds of loyal troops emerged from the secret corridors below the Palace. The newly 'inaugurated President' *did* resign and dismiss his cabinet, and Chávez came back into his office.

Apparently, the plotters fell victims to the discourse public discourse they themselves had sponsored:

The media and the opposition movement tried to create the impression that Chávez was completely isolated and that no one supported him any longer; [...] an extremely unpopular leader. [But] Chávez's movement has its roots in a long history of Venezuelan community and leftist organizing. (Wilpert)

Not a day passes without anti-Chávez calumny covering almost every front page. Both print and broadcast outlets routinely fabricate stories about impending martial law, economic collapse or new medical evidence that Chávez is psychotic, 'vulgar' and 'uncultured' [...] referring to his African and indigenous origins and working-class mannerisms. (John Marshall and Christian Parenti)

They might have known better if they had been following the counter-discourse of the man himself as he regularly appeared on radio or television's popular show 'Aló Presidente', intended to inspire his followers and call attention to social projects, such as the 'Enterprise of Socialist Production' in Apure, a volatile border province reportedly riddled with violent paramilitaries. As of this writing, 285 installments of the show have been transmitted; 81 are accessible in pdf transcription on the Internet at [www.alopresidente.gob.ve](http://www.alopresidente.gob.ve). He casually chats with ordinary people, especially children, about such things as making impromptu trips, hiking along the river Arauca, having a cold and bronchitis, planning to run for re-election in 2012, and even still sings quite presentably. But at times he sounds rather

statesmanlike and idealistic:

(14)

Bueno, somos todos los venezolandos que sentimos esta Patria y que como ellos tienen la conciencia despierta de su presente, de su futuro y de sus sueños. (18.05.2006)

(14a)

Well, we are all Venezuelans with a sense of our native land, and like all of the awakened consciousness of its present, of its future, and of its dreams

(15)

Estamos creando el nuevo Estado social – como manda la Constitución – para construir la república socialista, la sociedad socialista. (07.06.2007)

(15a)

We are creating the new social state – as mandated by the Constitution – to construct the socialist republic, the socialist society.

Or, they might have taken better note of Chávez's presidential acceptance speech ('Discurso de toma de posesión'):

Chávez's speech is gregarious and dynamic, and underscores his optimistic populism. [...] Alongside Whitman, [and] the spirit of Bolívar, Chávez invokes Galileo, José Martí, Miguel Angel Asturias, Pablo Neruda, Pedro Mir, Pope John Paul II, Gabriel García Márquez, and Chinese Proverbs. [He] negotiates a discourse of crisis, of Venezuela being the victim of a catastrophe ('Our homeland is wounded in the heart, we are in a kind of human grave'); and a providential discourse of renewal, in which Venezuela faces a glorious and epic struggle to reinvent itself. ('this day [...] is the first passing of the torch to a new epoch, [...] the opening of a door onto a new national existence.') (Christopher Conway *The Cult of Bolívar in Latin American Literatures*)

Most importantly, one ought to seek out and digest the reports so studiously kept out of the hostile mass media, viz.:

Chávez has reined in inflation, boosted growth rates, beefed up social spending, launched a massive public works program, and clamped down on tax evasion. (Marshall and Parenti)

The government also has quadrupled spending on health care, is constructing rural clinics, and now provides free emergency care in Venezuela's public hospitals. The state funds a nationwide chain of subsidized pharmacies called SUMED, where drugs sell for 30 to 40 percent below market prices. (Ibid.)

Since taking office, the administration has cut inflation from around 40 percent to a projected 12 percent; [...] the Venezuelan economy is expected to grow by a healthy 4 percent this year, according to Credit Suisse First Boston (Ibid.)

Most impressive is an 18.2 percent decline in the infant mortality rate during Chávez's term of office, according to the latest health ministry data. School enrolment has increased by 1.3 million children, helped by the provision of free breakfast and lunches to poor children, and the elimination of fees. (Mark Weisbrot, Director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, in Washington, DC)



Juxtaposed with such data, the abject ignorance or malevolence and unwitting irony of US discourses like this stands utterly deconstructed:

(16)

The growing influence of Venezuela's leftist president, Hugo Chávez, is casting a dark shadow over the region. Some countries – Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica, for example – remain committed to progressive growth-oriented and democratic regimes. (Kenneth Rogoff in *Economist's View*)

But the US is grimly determined not to see or acknowledge positive achievements; and one influential figure (Pat Robertson) has openly called for the assassination of Chávez by US operatives.

### **3. The '49 Laws'**

After his landslide election in 1998, Chávez was granted special powers of decree by an 'Enabling Law' from November 2001 onward:

en ejercicio de la atribución que le confiere el numeral 8 del artículo 236 de la Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela [...] que autoriza al Presidente de la República para dictar decretos con fuerza de ley en las materias que se delegan, en Consejo de Ministros.

in the exercise of the attribution conferred by section 8 of article 236 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, [...] which authorises the President of the Republic to dictate decrees with the force of law in delegated matters, in the Council of Ministers.

I hold it essential to bear in mind that all of Chávez's legislative maneuvers were fully sanctioned by prevailing laws – something the discourse of mass media takes care not to mention.

He assembled a team of loyal legal experts, who produced those '49 laws' that were the most plausible and urgent motive for the coup attempt I have briefly recorded. Within mere hours of his 'inauguration', the new 'President Carmona' 'voided the 49 Chávez laws that had so annoyed the captains of industry, executives of the foreign oil companies and latifundistas, the big plantation owners' (Palast). (I sensed a spooky resemblance to George W. Bush, who, on his own very first day 'in office', launched his long machete attack upon the workers' rights and the environment, the more so as Bush also took the office by theft.)

Soon we could read discourse and counter-discourse to the effect that

Venezuela's largest business association, Fedecamaras, called the strike last week in protest against 49 laws that Mr. Chávez passed by decree under powers given to him by the Congress. Fedecamaras objects to the laws, because it says they will give the government too great a role in industries ranging from agriculture to oil. (BBC)

Efforts to amend a raft of laws decreed late last year could reverse advances in coastal-zone and marine-life protection, environmental advocates say. At issue are 49 laws that President Hugo Chávez approved last November by presidential decree under special powers conferred on him by Venezuela's new

constitution. Several of the measures seek to benefit campesinos and so-called artisanal or subsistence fishermen by protecting resources on which these groups depend. But business groups and opposition political parties are pressing for changes, charging the laws would do economic harm and violate property rights. (EcoAmérica)

After repeated fruitless questioning, I found my academic colleagues in Venezuela patently so unable to explain what was *actually said* in those ‘laws’ that I had to conclude that none of them had actually read them. To be sure, when I was downloading them and reading them myself, I had to concede they are voluminous and circumstantiated, composed in somewhat ponderous legal Spanish. Besides, the light-skinned middle classes seem to have a proverbially short attention span, and their minds were already set against anything Chávez did or said, rightly perceiving that his administration would not easily respect the elite privileges they had so long taken for granted.

So here I offer an (unfortunately rare) opportunity to see some representative excerpts from three of those ‘49 laws’ which were singled out for attack, along with translations into English; I omit the complicated citations of ‘titles’ and ‘articles’. How ‘dictatorial’ or ‘autocratic’ are they? Again, judge for yourselves.

First, I cited the ‘Ley de Pesca y Acuicultura’ (‘Law of Fishing and Aquaculture’) that ‘business groups’ are, as we saw, ‘pressing to change’:

(17)

Las pesquerías se han expandido aceleradamente presentándose situaciones de crisis en diversas regiones ante el colapso de algunos recursos hidrobiológicos que han sustentado explotaciones durante años. [...] ‘Se han destruido muchos hábitat y por ende eliminado especies debido al uso de tecnologías de alto impacto ambiental’ (Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales). [...] Se establece [...] la protección de los caladeros de la pesca artesanal, marítimos y fluviales, así como la protección de los asentamientos y comunidades pesqueras. También se garantiza los plenos beneficios económicos y sociales del pescador artesanal así como el mejoramiento en la calidad de vida. Se promueve, así mismo, la participación genuina y directa de los pescadores artesanales en las decisiones del Estado en materia de pesca. [...] Se crearán las condiciones apropiadas para realizar una gestión eficaz y de gran estímulo para el desarrollo responsable del subsector pesquero nacional. [...] Se protege el ambiente, la diversidad biológica y los procesos ecológicos, [...] en beneficio de [...] las generaciones futuras.

(17a)

Fisheries have expanded with acceleration, presenting situations of crisis in diverse regions prior to the collapse of some hydro-biological resources that have been exploited for years. [...] ‘Much habitat has been destroyed and species have been ultimately eliminated, due to use of technologies of high environmental impact’ (Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources). [...] This establishes the protection of qualified fishing grounds in oceans and rivers, and of fishing settlements and communities. This also guarantees the full economic and social benefits to qualified fishermen as well as improvement in their quality of life. This also promotes their genuine and direct participation in decisions by the State in matters of fishing. [...] There will be created appropriate conditions to realise the efficient management and great stimulation of the responsible development of the national fishing subsector.

[...] The environment, biological diversity, and ecological processes will be protected [...] to benefit [...] future generations.

Also topping the list of ‘controversial’ laws the business community and the ‘latifundistas’ (‘large landowners’) detest is the ‘Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario’ (‘Law of Lands and Agrarian Development’) – according to the ‘Asociación de Ganaderos’ (‘Cattle-raisers Association’), a wing of Fedecámaras, it is ‘totalitarian’ and ‘communist’ (*Última Hora*). In fact, ‘representatives of the landowners tore up the law in a public demonstration broadcast live by the media’ (Maurice Lemoine in the *Pandemonium Midnight Sun*). At the time it was passed, one percent of the Venezuelans owned more than 60 percent of the country’s arable land, much of it illegally seized, and held under the protection of hired paramilitaries and ‘sicarios’ (contract killers); the Flora Compañía Anónima ‘owned’ 14,000 acres; the Boulton family, one of the richest in the country, 20,000; and the Branger family a massive 120,000. And only a tiny fraction of such huge ‘latifundios’ (‘large estates’) was actually used for agriculture.

(18)

El presente Decreto Ley tiene por objeto establecer las bases del desarrollo rural integral y sustentable, [...] el medio fundamental para el desarrollo humano y crecimiento económico del sector agrario dentro de una justa distribución de la riqueza y una planificación estratégica, democrática y participativa, eliminando el latifundio como sistema contrario a la justicia, al interés general y a la paz social en el campo, asegurando la biodiversidad, [...] y la vigencia efectiva de los derechos de protección ambiental [...] de la presente y futuras generaciones. [...] Se entiende por latifundio, toda porción de terreno rural, ociosa o inculta, que exceda de cinco mil hectáreas (5.000 ha). [...] El Instituto Nacional de Tierras [...] podrá rescatar toda tierra de su propiedad que se encuentre ociosa o inculta. [...] El Estado organizará el servicio eficiente del crédito agrario incorporando a las instituciones bancarias y financieras públicas o privadas. [...] Son sujetos beneficiarios [...] todos los venezolanos y venezolanas que hayan optado por el trabajo rural y, especialmente, la producción agraria como oficio u ocupación principal. [...] Este Decreto Ley, garantizará [...] el acceso a los germoplasmas necesarios para establecer las plantaciones; un seguro de producción contra catástrofes naturales; [...] el derecho fundamental a perseguir su progreso material y desarrollo humano en libertad, con dignidad e igualdad de oportunidades; [...] la protección de la cultura, el folclore, la artesanía, las técnicas ancestrales de cultivo, las costumbres, usos y tradición oral campesinos; [...] un subsidio especial alimentario pre- y post-natal.

(18a)

The present decree law has as its object to establish the basis for integral and sustainable development, [...] the fundamental means for human development and economic growth within a just distribution of wealth and a democratic and participatory strategic planning, eliminating the ‘latifundio’ as a system contrary to justice, the general interest, and social peace in the countryside, ensuring biodiversity [...] and effective vigilance over the rights of environmental protection [...] of the present and future generations. [...] ‘Latifundio’ is understood to be every of portion of idle or uncultivated rural land that exceeds 5,000 acres. [...] The National Institute of Lands [...] will be able to recover all land as its property which is found to be idle or uncultivated. [...] The State will organise the efficient service for agrarian credit,

incorporating banking institutions and public or private financiers [...] The beneficiaries will be all Venezuelans who have opted for rural work and especially agrarian production as an office and principal occupation. [...] The law will guarantee [...] access to the seed cells necessary for establishing plantations; a production insurance against natural catastrophes; [...] the fundamental right to pursue one's material progress and human development in liberty, with dignity and equality of opportunity; [...] la protection the culture, the folklore, the artisanship, the ancestral techniques of cultivation, and the customs, uses, and oral tradition of the 'campesinos'; [and] a special alimentary pre- and post-natal subsidy.

By August 2003, 1,340,000 hectares had been handed over to 62,800 families. But 74 'campesinos' ('peasants') had been killed by 'sicarios' since the passage of the law, and many more had seen their perfectly legal new homes and farms burnt or destroyed by hired outlaws.

The law with the greatest economic impact of all bears the rather arcane title of 'Ley Organica de Hidrocarburos' ('Organic Law of Hydrocarbons'). Whereas the term 'hidrocarburos' occurs 52 times (always in the plural), the more accurate noun 'petróleo' is never used instead, and occurs at all only in the name 'Petróleos de Venezuela', a state-owned company. Actually, of course, hydrocarbons are a whole class of substances, including, say, benzene and methane; but here I think the government may have deliberately avoided referring to 'petroleum' or 'oil' in order not to produce material for unfavourable quotations in the hostile media, including ones in English.

(19)

Los yacimientos de hidrocarburos, cualquiera que sea su naturaleza, existentes en el territorio nacional, incluidos aquellos que se encuentren bajo el lecho del mar territorial, en la plataforma continental, en la zona económica exclusiva y dentro de las fronteras patrias, pertenecen a la República, son bienes del dominio público y por tanto, inalienables. [...] Quienes realicen las actividades [...] deberán hacerlo [...] conforme a las mejores prácticas científicas y técnicas disponibles sobre seguridad e higiene, protección ambiental y aprovechamiento y uso racional de los hidrocarburos. [...] Corresponde al Ministerio de Energía y Minas [...] el análisis y fijación de precios de los hidrocarburos y de sus productos. [...] La constitución de empresas mixtas [...] requerirá la aprobación previa de la Asamblea Nacional [y tendrá una] duración máxima de veinticinco años. Las tierras y obras permanentes, incluyendo las instalaciones, accesorios y equipos [...] deberán ser conservadas en buen estado para ser entregados en propiedad a la República, libre de gravámenes y sin indemnización alguna. [...] Los productos obtenidos por la actividad de nuevas refinerías estarán destinados primordialmente a la exportación. No obstante. [...] el Ministerio de Energía y Minas [...] podrá establecer que un porcentaje de dichos productos sea destinado al mercado interno.

(19a)

The deposits of hydrocarbons, whatever their nature may be, existing in national territory, including those that are found beneath the floor of the territorial ocean, in the continental shelf, in the exclusive economic zone, and within national boundaries, belong to the Republic, are properties of public domain, and as such, inalienable. [...] Whoever carries out the activities [...] must do so [...] in conformity with the best available scientific practices and techniques regarding security and hygiene, environmental protection, and rational application and use of hydrocarbons. [...] The fixing of prices of

hydrocarbons and of its products [...] belongs to the Ministry of Energy and Mines. [...] Setting up mixed [i.e. national and foreign] companies requires the previous approval of the National Assembly [and will have a] maximal duration of twenty-five years. The permanent lands and works, including installations, accessories, and equipment [...] must be conserved in good condition to be delivered to the property of the Republic, free of taxes and with no indemnity whatsoever. [...] The products obtained from the activity of new refineries will be primarily destined for export, Nonetheless, [...] the Ministry [...] will be able to establish a percentage of said products to be destined for the internal market.

The process set in motion by this law is still in progress now:

Venezuela has continued its nationalisation drive by taking control of privately run crude oil installations in the Orinoco basin that together account for one-fifth of the country's production. Hugo Chávez told thousands of workers from *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)* on Tuesday that 'This is the true nationalisation of our natural resources'. (*al-Jazeera*, 02/05/2007)

Not at all surprisingly, this move comes across in some discourse of US media as follows:

**Chávez Putting the Criminally Incompetent in Charge of Stolen Oil Facilities** [...] Communist thugs will always manage to strangle the goose that lays the golden eggs. Food shortages have already begun, but when Chávez and cronies have destroyed Venezuela's oil industry through corruption and incompetence, the real hunger will set in. No doubt America will be expected to send aid. (*Moonbattery*, calling itself 'a proud member of the vast right-wing conspiracy', 11/09/2007):

I should remark that those 'food shortages' were caused by the enemies of Chávez stockpiling staples like meat and milk to drive up prices above the government controls; and that the oil industry was painfully crippled when those enemies staged a sixty-four-day oil strike. 'American aid' would surely be forthcoming only if Chávez had been deposed or assassinated.

I hold these 'laws' to constitute the most conclusive counter-discourse against the sort of ruthless anti-Chávez calumny of which I have just adduced one more sample. They provide the fullest and fairest account of what the 'Bolivarian revolution' is actually about. Unfortunately, they are not easy to access or read in the original Spanish; and as far as I can discover, the only English translations to be posted are the selective samples I have presented here.

How far Chávez himself participated in formulating them is a speculative issue which he only stands to lose by airing in public. The thematic references to the 'future' signal to my mind his hopes of long-range benefits and his anxieties about leaving office while the democratic reforms are still very much hanging in the balance, with continuing resistance and sabotage from the 'opposition', for example:

Although the government has raised wages across the board, it also has tried to eliminate thousands of government jobs – which the Chavistas insist are sinecures. [...] One steel mill in Ciudad Guyana is said to have as many 6,000

people on the payroll who don't exist. But attempts to eliminate this sort of bloat have caused a massive backlash from the country's unions, which have staged scores of strikes in every sector of the economy. [Still,] 'in all these strikes not a single person has been killed, there are no political prisoners' (Gilberto Buenano, Vice Minister of Regional Planning) (Marshall and Parenti)

Yet another hurdle for the Chavistas is a quiet 'human capital strike' among the professional classes. There is an internal brain drain: engineers, accountants and agronomists – hopped-up on anti-Chavez propaganda – refuse to participate in alternative development projects, while local doctors prefer to focus on plastic surgery for the country's legendary beauty queens rather than tend to the needs of the rural poor. (Ibid.)

The tone and import of the laws certainly resemble those of his own discourses, and without his leadership and powers of decree such laws would certainly not have been promulgated.

*Der Spiegel*, the premiere German newsmagazine whose website I frequent, has remarked that a few decades ago, the things Chávez does and says about the US would have promptly led to a CIA-sponsored military coup along the lines of Brazil and Chile (to name just two). They did of course try:

The April 11, 2002 military coup in Venezuela was supported by the United States government. As early as last June [2001], American military attaches had been in touch with members of the Venezuelan military to examine the possibility of a coup. During the coup, U.S. military were stationed at the Colombia-Venezuela border to provide support. According to intelligence analyst, Wayne Madsen, [...] 'The CIA provided Special Operations Group personnel, headed by a lieutenant colonel on loan from the U.S. Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to help organize the coup against Chavez'. (composite report at *Project Censored* from *The London Guardian*, *Global Outlook*, *People's Weekly World*, and *The Nacla Report On The Americas*) But the far more immediate and direct US dependency on Venezuela oil than on Iraqi oil, the costly military overextension in Iraq, and the massive popularity of the man, have plausibly saved Chávez from the same fate as the late Saddam Hussein, who was also a constant target of public discourses ruthless calumny.

The basis of the power of Hugo Chávez lies above all in his mastery of discourse strategies – the diametrical opposite of 'President' Bush. Yet arguably of greater importance in the long run is the discourse of the 'laws' he hopes will benefit the farmers, the workers, and the environment, and will be bequeathed to 'future generations'

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