

Free Speech and the Chavez' Project in Venezuela: A Response to Chuck's
August 2 E-mail on Closing Radio Stations in Venezuela
September 17, 2009

Wanting to have my cake and eat it too, my paper on participatory democracy for the Nicaragua Network's July *Monitor* made a brief for aspects of formal democracy like free speech. Then the Venezuelan Government revoked the licenses of 34 radio stations. Non-compliance with broadcasting requirements was cited, but an aide to Chavez spoke about the presumably real reason for this action — most stations are owned by the elite and needed to be democratized. Other Chavez supporters, such as well-known sociologist and government advisor Marta Harnecker, have long noted the obstacles to the Bolivarian Revolution posed by the media, the bureaucracy and other institutional holdovers.

The Venezuelan Government's restriction of the airwaves raises questions about the relationship between political rights and political revolution. In this connection, Chuck's e-mail pointed out that "we [solidarity activists] didn't have any objection in July 1979 when the Sandinistas took over Somoza's newspaper, *Novedades*, and turned it into *Barricada*." So why should we blanch at a similar action, albeit under different circumstances, in Venezuela. He noted that when free expression is curtailed, whether in a violent or peaceful and gradual revolution, the effects are the same: "18th century liberal values that we take for granted as absolutes" are subordinated to other objectives. And he went on to say that "when we witness the sausage-making process one sausage at a time," as is

the case with the gradually implemented revolution in Venezuela, that can be more unsettling to our old assumptions than “when the whole pig is ground up immediately and the sausages distributed. It’s a shock, and then we move on to celebrating positive things that result from it.”

For some time now, I have thought that the process of sausage-making change in Latin America could include the best of both worlds. Since the abandonment of armed struggle and vanguardist politics, together with the election of so many progressive governments in the region, I shared the belief with many on the Left social justice and political freedoms could and should co-exist without effort or strain. I balked at Orlando Nuñez’s suggestion that in Nicaragua and elsewhere, economic equality and political liberty might not always be compatible or even reconcilable. Holding out for both was an easy position for me to take because I felt that I was in good company: not just, to me politically dubious, social democrats but socialists of almost all stripes shared this dual commitment. But it turns out that we on the Left have strange bedfellows.

Let me back-track here. I fear that I haven’t paid enough attention to what my political enemies are saying. If I had, I would have known better the degree to which human rights and democracy have come to be the reigning orthodoxy of the U. S. liberal establishment. Beginning with Jimmy Carter, for whom a commitment to human rights — “the soul of American foreign policy” — was a way to rehabilitate our reputation after Vietnam, human rights, including non-negotiable political rights, have come to be one legitimizing cover for American hegemony and globalizing capitalism. In this discourse, opponents are left-leaning and ex-colonial powers and third world autocracies. These are the “new Hitlers.” (The term “totalitarian” was

even used by opponents to describe Honduran President Zelaya — perhaps because of his unforgivable ties to Chavez.)

The interventionist thrust operates in the case of many foreign-funded NGOs that permeate the developing world. Between 2003 and 2005, those NGOs provided pro-democratic forces and parties with the help they needed to overthrow governments in Haiti, Lebanon and most recently, Honduras. And they supported failed coups in Venezuela in 2002 and Bolivia in 2007. USAID and the NED continue to support opposition NGOs in Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua.

This pattern raises problems for solidarity activists. If we say that we are committed to political freedom, why should we sound the alarm when civil society — whatever the source of funding — savages the governments we support for undemocratic behavior? On the other hand, foreign financial support is a debatable issue when the ability to pursue sovereign aims is at stake.

But it is not only liberal democracies that promote a human rights ideology. If it were, the Left could more easily pick apart its claims, especially as it pertains to intervention in the affairs of other countries. But human rights have also been taken up by progressive movements, as if it were the only morally defensible position to take on the world stage. It is a measure of how dominant this discourse has become that few can find fault with it, as persuasively argued by Jean Bricmont in *Humanitarian Imperialism*. But faults there are. Not the least is privileging political rights above all others. You would hardly know that the U. N. Declaration of 1948 considered economic and social rights as important as free speech. The prevailing line on the Left is that there is no legitimate reason, ever, — not

hunger, not poverty — for the suppression of political rights. Never mind that it is most often those whose material needs have been met who are most able to exercise those rights, as Gregory Wilpert remarks in connection with Human Rights Watch’s negative 2008 report on Venezuela. “Drawing on the lesson of the disastrous history of leftist apologetics over crimes of Stalinism and Maoism,” the Anglo-American Euston Manifesto of 2006 concluded that “leftists who make common cause with anti-democratic forces should be criticized in clear and forthright terms.” Period. No excuses. Where is such an unequivocal defense of such rights as health care and education? (One way to finesse the argument is to say that economic development in a country like Venezuela is, however laudable its aims, misguided and non-sustainable. Or is it too paltry to count, as in Nicaragua’s Zero Hunger program. Either way, economic rights can be dismissed. As if political rights were perfectly implemented in the North.)

The upshot of human rights ideology is to make the primacy of social justice, whether socialist or not, look like a mildewed throwback to the vanguardist politics of a bye-gone era. In this connection, socialism is seen in academia as unsophisticated and vulgar. One could shrug this off except that it is a view that is widely shared, in one form or another, in the wider culture.

This is not to suggest that political rights are not important. The issue is, do they always and in every circumstance trump everything else.

Comments welcome.