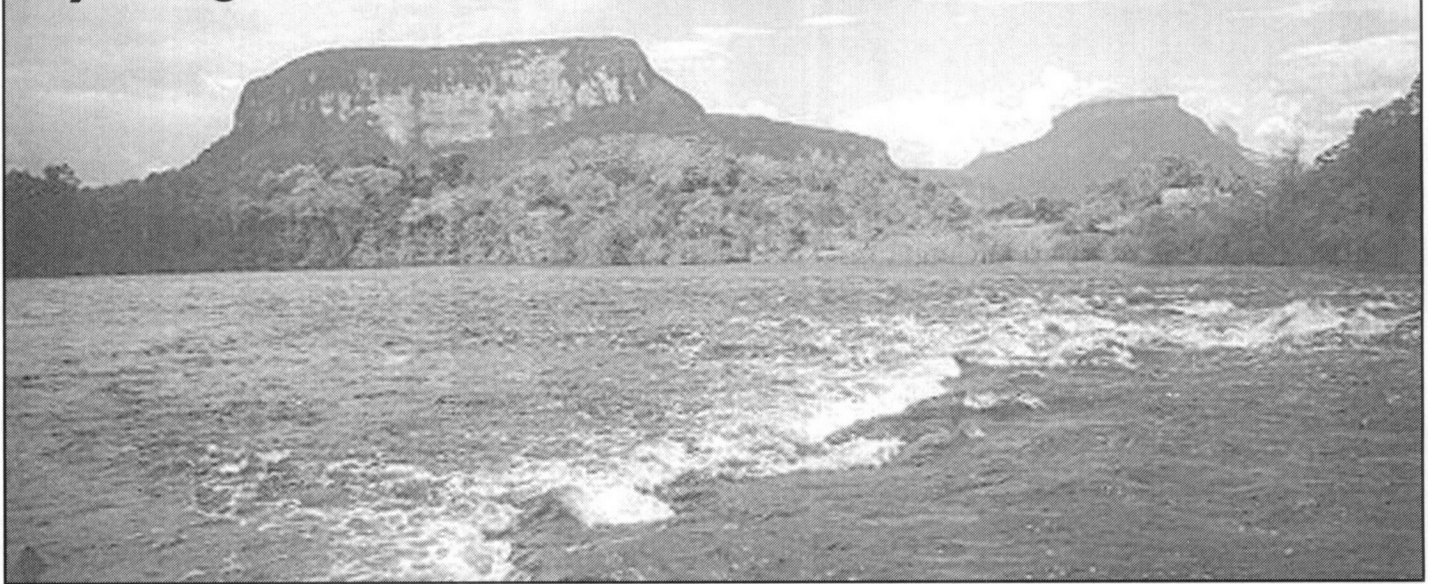


# The Call of Caracas

by Greg Albo



**T**he Left today confronts several hard realities about the political terrain that has formed over the last two decades.

The neoliberal project of liberalizing markets and trade that the New Right put forward in the early 1980s is not simply fading under the weight of its internal contradictions. The social and income polarization that has devastated the working classes and peasantries the world over has now an embedded logic that is integral to capital accumulation in all parts of the world. The organizations of the Left — particularly trade unions and socialist parties — are either at an impasse or in disarray. And the ruling classes across a complex of social formations and states keep laying the organizational framework of the world market in a way that reinforces neoliberalism and the relations of domination, of imperialism, rather than challenging them. This is a sobering accounting.

It puts into perspective the commonplace assertions of the social movements that "another world is possible." Of course, many worlds are possible. A neoliberal world was often — and still is — declared to be impossible, although it is very much a reality. But what kind of world is possible today? What organizational forms will propel a socialist project forward? Why have the "politics of chaos" argued for by more than one sage of the anti-globalization movement disappeared as quickly as they appeared? How will political and state power be struggled over, as opposed to being merely resisted? These pressing questions have been put to the side over the last decade as a politics of spontaneity has swept across what remains of the Left (although increasingly banal recitals of deepening radicalism and an impending crisis of neoliberalism are still heard from quarters of the Left that should know better).

The Caracas Encounter in Defence of Humanity of December

1 to 4, 2004, placed these issues squarely on the agenda. With over 350 delegates from 52 countries, such hard questions were being addressed across ten working tables, ranging from alternatives to liberal trade integration, to popular participation, to struggles over the media and mass communication and global inequality.

The contributors also ranged widely among Left intellectuals like Tariq Ali, Marta Harnecker, Saul Landau and Ernesto Cardenal, prominent academics like Atilio Borón, James Petras and Mike Lebowitz, and key political leaders, notably the FSLN leadership of Nicaragua and leading figures from Cuba, like Ricardo Alarcón. Amidst all the chaos that is today's Venezuela, in the midst of a transformative project, there was overwhelming enthusiasm and energy. A few participants, however, were not yet willing to face the consolidation of neoliberalism and the reality that the Left now needs to explore new organizational forms.

The conference worked through two days of discussions at the tables, interspersed with visits to the social missions and new co-operatives that the Venezuelan government has launched, cultural events and rousing anti-imperialist speeches from Chavez (including a jaw-dropping six-hour open question period with all the delegates — the starkest of contrasts to the 30-minute scripted press conferences that Bush and Martin give us in North America). Argentinian Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel read the final Caracas Declaration, which urges a global front of resistance to neoliberalism and imperialism, and in particular the unilateralism of the United States and the global economic institutions that have doggedly implemented neoliberalism around the world. Who can name another place in the world and another political leader today that would have supported such a gathering?

The Encounter, however, entailed a great deal more than the for-

mal signing by intellectuals and artists of a declaration of their outrage at neoliberalism. At a global level, the agenda of the Chavez government has been to assemble a grouping of countries united against American hegemony and neoliberalism. This is necessarily a messy business of dealing with the devil that is the inter-state system and the structures of power at the global level. It has involved both the Venezuelan efforts to bolster OPEC and their diplomatic missions to a scattering of countries like Iran, Russia, China, Libya and India (not all of which has been well calibrated by the Venezuelans for the forces on the Left struggling in those regions). It also includes efforts to re-spark Latin American solidarity networks across Europe and North America, following their virtual disintegration through the 1990s.

More proximately, the encounter was a public statement of a Cuban-Venezuelan political pole in Latin American politics against American imperialism and, with hardly a word being said, a challenge to the centre-left governments of the southern cone regarding their political accommodation to neoliberalism. This could be seen as an effort to re-form a revolutionary tendency across Latin America (albeit with none of the markings of the singular strategic centre of the years of armed struggle), and a development that would be the real sign of a resurgence of the Latin American Left. The Encounter was immediately followed by a Bolivarian Congress of the Peoples, drawing together many revolutionary and community organizations from across Latin America. But these last hopes may be reading far too much into what is still a very fluid set of social forces operating in an unforgiving political conjuncture.

The Caracas Encounter also placed on the table more immediate challenges. This was made clear in the centrepiece debate that emerged in the final plenary reviewing the Declaration. Would the global social-justice movement and the social-forum process organizationally move beyond holding annual social-justice fairs and build new organizations capable of leading and linking struggles? This pitted — although not uniformly or dogmatically — Cuban and Venezuelan delegates against Ignacio Ramonet and Bernard Cassen of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, both key figures behind the World Social Forum. In the discussion, even the latter two conceded that processes like the WSF were at an impasse and deeper organizational developments and political focus were necessary (especially with the relationship of Lula's Workers Party (PT) in Brazil to these processes becoming more unclear by the day). Chavez proposed to fund a permanent structure to keep building such a "network of networks" and to push for national organizations and agreements of action.

Can the Bolivarian revolution Chavez is leading move from forming Bolivarian Circles of defence and support to building wider national organizations of political struggle against neoliberalism linked across the international state system? In his closing words to the Encounter, Chavez remarked: "Let's put the ideas concluded at this forum to work, let's make it a reality." The call of Caracas seems to meld precisely with the challenges the Left can no longer avoid in Canada and North America.

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**"Capitalism must be transcended!"**



**"Every day I become more convinced, there is no doubt in my mind, and, as many intellectuals have said, that it is necessary to transcend capitalism. But capitalism can't be transcended from within capitalism itself, but through socialism, true socialism, with equality and justice. But I'm also convinced that it is possible to do it under democracy, but not in the type of democracy being imposed from Washington.**

**"It is impossible, within the framework of the capitalist system, to solve the grave problems of poverty of the majority of the world's population. We must transcend capitalism. But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion of the Soviet Union. We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans, and not machines or the state, ahead of everything. That's the debate we must promote around the world, and the WSF is a good place to do it."**

**—Hugo Chavez speaking at the World Social Forum, January 30, 2005**