

Counter Hegemony in Action: Venezuela

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Introduction

In January and February 2006, I participated in the Global Exchange Reality Tour to Venezuela in which we attended the World Social Forum in Caracas followed by visits to various social missions in the state of Lara as well as in Caracas itself. I visited and talked with many Venezuelans involved in the various government-supported social programs addressing issues of health, education, housing, land tenure, and civil and political rights with the tour as well as on my own. This brief encounter with the people involved in the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela has prompted me to write this essay reflecting on the insights I gained into the process of counter hegemony and the importance of our giving full support to the success of this process so that "another world" based on universal principles of peace, social justice, and human rights can indeed be created.

The World Social Forum slogan "Another World is Possible" is received by many people who hear it as just another utopian dream, but witnessing the dramatic structural changes being effected in Venezuela and seeing with my own eyes the energy and enthusiasm of the Venezuelans involved in actually implementing the various social justice programs of the Bolivarian Revolution instilled in me the need to share with my students at university here in Tokyo as well as family, friends, colleagues, and anyone else who will listen the fact that another world is actually being created, here and now, in Venezuela. The Venezuela experience has had a major impact on me personally as well as professionally. It was absolutely amazing for me to see with my own eyes and feel with my heart and soul the energy

and enthusiasm of the people involved in the attempt to create not only a better present for themselves but a brighter future for all.

During my first week in Venezuela, I talked with many activists from a number of countries who were participating in the World Social Forum. Although it was interesting to learn about the various activities these political activists were engaged in back home and to hear how they were, for the most part, opposed to U.S. foreign policy, I was struck, indeed alarmed, by a lack of awareness on their parts of the integral role Japan and the other members of the Group of Seven play in the maintenance of the Pax Americana. When I pointed out that Japan (where I am from) has supported every U.S. military intervention in the postwar period, helped prop up every brutal military regime created and supported by the United States, has the 2nd largest number of votes in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, hosts more than 100 U.S. military bases, has the 3rd largest military budget in the world, and is preparing to jointly intervene militarily throughout the world with the United States, they expressed astonishment and disbelief.

Thus, although the focus of this essay is what is being accomplished by the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, I feel the need to preface that discussion with a brief outline of the postwar imperial alliance system followed by a brief introduction to the concept of cultural hegemony in order to help us understand how it is that so many "politically informed" people in the North are still so uninformed.

Imperial Alliance System

Even before the carefully calculated atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, U.S. leaders envisioned a global empire under the leadership of the United States, referring to the Pacific Ocean as the "American Lake" and the world as "ours for the taking." After demonstrating to the world that the United States would not hesitate to drop nuclear bombs on civilian targets, U.S. leaders warned the world that another war between imperial powers would be the end of the "civilized" world, and that the only sensible thing to do was for the imperial powers to work together in an imperial alliance in order to maintain privileged access to the natural resources, land, cheap labor, and markets of the colonies (soon to be ex-colonies labeled the "Third World"). As George Kennan stated in a U.S. State Department study in 1948, "We have 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population. In

this situation, we cannot fail but to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships that will allow us to maintain this position of disparity. We should cease to talk about the raising of living standards, human rights, and democratization."

Consequently, U.S. leadership and the alliance framework created a secure and stable basis for the development of global military, political, and economic relations that would primarily benefit the dominant classes in the imperial countries, and peripherally benefit the colonial or ex-colonial elites created and supported by the imperial powers. The U.S. imperial alliance system has been integrated militarily by NATO in the western hemisphere and by AMPO (U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Act) in the eastern hemisphere; politically by the Trilateral Commission and the Group of Seven (which, in actuality, is the Group of One plus Six as the other imperial powers are subordinated to the dictates of the United States);

and economically by the World Bank/International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization (formerly the GATT), and the World Economic Forum. All U.S. governments in the postwar era, along with the governments of other imperial powers, by opposing democracy and supporting the creation of authoritarian rule or outright military regimes and state terrorism in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (collectively referred to as the "Third World" or more recently "the South"), have represented the interests of transnational corporations and ruling elites, facilitating their goal of maintaining their power and capacity to dominate by greatly increasing personal fortunes and corporate profits.

Entering the 21st century, the 90% of humanity that has not benefited from the excesses of empire (including many in the heart of the empire) are recognizing the need to organize and resist at a global level against the continuation of this brutal imperial alliance system. They are making the trans border links through grassroots-based organizations and social movements necessary to focus peoples' attention not only on what's wrong with the world, but on what we can do about it.

It is important to recognize the fact that the majority of the people in the South have been struggling against this imperial alliance system throughout the past half century while the majority of the people in the North have been asleep. It was not until the protest against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 and the protest against the World Bank/International Monetary Fund in Washington D.C. in 2000 that some people in the North became alerted to the negative effects on the environment and on living standards in general that the policies of these organizations have induced. It was not until 1998, when over 7,000 protesters gathered at the gates of the U.S. Army School of the Americas at Ft. Benning, Georgia (where more than 60,000 military

officers from 23 Latin American and Caribbean countries have received training in counterinsurgency warfare) and many were arrested, and

1999, when several thousand marched in front of the Pentagon and sixty more protesters were arrested, that some people in the North became aware of the fact that the United States trains

military elites from the South in the art of state terrorism. It is important to recognize the fact that while the majority of us in the North have been oblivious to the excesses of empire and, indeed, not even aware of the existence of the postwar imperial alliance system, hundreds of thousands of people in the South, struggling for democracy and a chance for their children to gain access to health care, education, food, and the basic necessities to

survive to adulthood, have resisted against the brutal nature of this imperial alliance that has led to an unprecedented increase in hunger, poverty, and abuses of basic human rights, and have been imprisoned, disappeared, and tortured to death.

Cultural Hegemony

The dismaying extent to which the majority of the people in the North lack political consciousness attests to the power of cultural hegemony in advanced capitalist countries. This concept, formulated by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s, allows us to understand the sophisticated manner in which ruling class ideas and interpretations of history and social phenomena are internalized and accepted as common sense by the majority of people in advanced capitalist societies. Cultural hegemony saturates the society (through the schools, media, churches, family) to such an extent that, for most people, it corresponds to the reality of social experience. It might be defined as an "organizing principle" or worldview (or combination of such worldviews) that is diffused into every area of daily life through which the dominant culture (ruling elite) is able to perpetuate its own

philosophy, culture, morality, definition of self in relation to others, and social/political assumptions and render them unchallengeable, part of the natural order of things. Hegemony mystifies power relations and social issues and encourages a sense of fatalism and passivity towards political action. In this way, people contribute to the continued dominance of the ruling class by accepting the dominant culture's values and social assumptions as their own.

Gramsci fully expected the process of creating a counter hegemony in advanced capitalist societies to proceed gradually, with the subordinated classes at first only questioning the dominant culture's values and assumptions. Other steps that lead to exposing the contradictions hidden within the

hegemonic discourse would follow this first step of skepticism and doubting about prevailing ideas in the dominant belief system, or worldview. This critical penetration into the false world of established appearances would then lead to the creation of an entirely new universe of ideas and values. Gramsci argued that the subordinated classes themselves, rather than an organized party leadership, must take the initiative in the counter hegemonic process, and it is they who must realize the potential for a social transformation based on their everyday lived experiences, creating a new consciousness embodied in everyday social processes, in thought and action, a thoroughgoing cultural revolution that sets out to transform all dimensions of everyday life. Thus, Gramsci emphasized the importance of the struggle for ideological hegemony at the grassroots level as the precondition for socialist transformation.

Keep in mind, however, that Gramsci's analysis was of the pervasive nature of hegemony and the possibilities of creating a process of counter hegemony in advanced capitalist societies and not in the colonies or ex-colonies. He pointed out that it is relatively easy for people subjected to top

down ideological control in countries such as the Soviet Union or the colonies to recognize the dominant culture's values for what they were values that represented the interests of the ruling class - but that it was very difficult for people in advanced capitalist countries to do so due to the sophisticated nature of cultural hegemony. Jean and John Comaroff, in their discussion of cultural hegemony, provide a useful contrast between hegemony and ideology (1992:29):¹

Hegemony consists of constructs and conventional practices that have come to permeate a political community; ideology originates in the assertions of a particular social group. Hegemony is beyond direct argument; ideology is more likely to be perceived as a matter of inimical opinion and interest and hence is more open to contestation. Hegemony, at its most effective, is mute; ideology invites argument. Hegemony, then, is that part of a dominant ideology that has been naturalized and, having contrived a tangible world in its image, does not appear to be ideological at all.

Of course Gramsci, writing in the 1920s, could not foresee the extent to which cultural hegemony in advanced capitalist societies would be strengthened in the late 20 century by the mega-mergers of mega-media corporations with their pro-corporate, pro-government bias built in, with the general public relying on these corporate media for most of their information regarding social phenomena. It has thus become more difficult than ever to overcome this all-pervasive hegemony to create a counter hegemony in advanced capitalist countries.

However, with increasing U.S. military interventions and continuing G7 support for military regimes in the Third World, many citizens in the imperial countries began questioning the legitimacy of the postwar U.S. role as the world's

policeman, and started forming grassroots-based organizations in the 1960s and 1970s as innovative responses to the frequently asked question, "What can I do?" This proliferation of grassroots-based movements has recently coalesced in a mutual search for world peace, and an end to poverty and social injustice. Connections are being made by activists worldwide between local and international struggles as well as between the movements themselves, with a focus of attention on the interdependence' of states and the power of people united at the grassroots to effect basic structural changes. These new social movements and grassroots-based organizations, moving beyond single-issue politics and armed with a transborder perspective, are one of the most promising developments of the current era. They recognize that the interests of the majority of people living in the South coincide with the interests of the

majority of the inhabitants in the North. An alternative to corporate globalization has emerged with the ever-increasing globalization of people united at the grassroots. The Internet has provided a technological tool that has enabled many people involved in the struggle to overcome the excesses of empire to make connections with each other and realize that they are not alone and what they are doing is not insignificant. The increasing flow of information is thus no longer restricted to those in positions of power. This is a major breakthrough in the effort to see the forest for the trees.

Now imagine a government coming to power that supports the effort to create a global counter hegemony - a government that opposes the dominant culture's values and social assumptions and represents the interests of the majority of its citizens. Is this in the realm of possibility grassroots-based organizations representing citizens' interests working together with a

¹Comaroff, Jean and John. *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Westview Press: Boulder. 1992.

government doing the same? Or is this some utopian fantasy? The ongoing social transformation being effected by the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela should be an inspiration and a source of empowerment for people throughout the world who demand their inclusion in the decision-making processes that affect all of humanity and indeed has a bearing on the very survival of the human species, considering the increasing pace in the destruction of the 'natural environment due to the uncontrollable greed of the rich for more wealth and power.

Before turning to an analysis of the process of counter hegemony as it is unfolding in Venezuela, it may be helpful to provide a brief outline of the achievements of the various social programs introduced by the Venezuelan government over the past several years. This will help us understand the basis of popular support for the process of counter hegemony being pursued by the protagonists of the Bolivarian Revolution and the extreme difficulty associated in any attempt to destroy this process of counter hegemony by the Venezuelan elite (currently out of power) either acting alone or working with the imperial elites of the North.

Social Programs in Venezuela: An Overview

The social missions are a series of social justice, health care, and education programs that have benefited millions of Venezuelans in just a few short years. The data below is from the Ministry of Communication and Information. There are many social missions that I do not include due to space constraints. The missions that have contributed the most, in my estimation, to the process of counter hegemony are:

* **Mission Robinson**, since its start in July 2003, with the use of 130,000 volunteers teaching basic reading, writing, and math skills, has reached more than 1.5 million Venezuelans, who

never had the opportunity before to attend school, to become functionally literate. UNESCO officially declared Venezuela to be free of illiteracy in October 2005.

* **Ribas Mission**, initiated in October 2003, provides remedial high school level classes to millions of Venezuelans who were forced, often for economic reasons, to drop out of high school.

* **Mission Sucre**, launched in September 2003, guarantees access to free higher education to all Venezuelans. 10,212 teachers work for the education programs and 1,107 "university villages" are distributed all around the country. So far, this program has registered 472,363 high school graduates and 318,381 have finished the University Introductory Program. The Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) in Caracas has opened its doors to thousands of students who began to study in classrooms that were previously restricted to the middle and upper classes.

* **Mission Barrio Adentro**, initiated in April 2003, provides free health care services to the people living in the barrios (squatter settlements) of the cities of Venezuela. The doctors, dentists, and optometrists are Cuban and they are in charge of training Venezuelan assistants. More than 8,000 medical centers have been constructed in the

barrios and provide emergency, basic, and preventative medical assistance on a 24- hour basis to 16 million, dental assistance to 14 million, and optical assistance to 4 million residents. Phase 11 was launched in June 2005

with the opening of 30 Integral Diagnostic Centers and 30 Integral Rehabilitation Centers spread throughout the country. These centers have performed 3,936,874 lab tests, 535,631 emergency surgeries, 775,690 ultrasounds, 285,415 X-Rays, 324,936 electrocardiograms, 108 operations, 55,499 endoscopies, and 1,064,339 rehabilitation treatments. Within several months, an additional 200 Integral

Diagnostic Centers and Integral Rehabilitation Centers opened and another 700 are under construction. Phase III involves the strengthening of the hospital networks throughout the nation in order to meet the increasing demands of the centers associated with Phase II. The last phase of Mission Barrio Adentro is the creation of "Peoples' Hospitals" staffed by professionals committed to social justice and equipped with the most modern medical equipment and technology available. In all three phases, the incorporation of alternative and traditional medical techniques alongside modern techniques is an essential component of the holistic approach to medical care.

* **Mission Vuelvan Caras** provides vocational training for people graduating from the various missions so they can become productive members of society. Since January 2004, 264,740 people have graduated from the vocational training programs. Many have entered the private labor force and others have participated in the establishment of 6,814 cooperatives and 130 community-based Endogenous Development Centers throughout the country.

* **Mission Mercal** is a program created to trade and sell food and other essential products such as medicines at affordable prices. The Ministry of Food's goal for 2005 was to set up 6,000 sale points, giving easy access to 15 million participants who benefit from this program on a daily basis. In addition, 6,004 nutrition centers (similar to soup kitchens) have been established to provide approximately 1 million people with nutritious lunches and dinners. The Cuban

doctors and their assistants determine who is eligible for this program and monitor their progress through regular medical checkups. People shopping at Mercal markets can save from 30% to 50% of the cost of the same or

similar product at market prices.

* **Mission Zamora's** main goal is to gain land

titles for farmers so that they can have the assurance that the fruits of their labor will belong to them. The farmers are encouraged to use environmentally sustainable farming techniques and sell their products at fair prices to Mission Mercal. The ultimate goal is for Venezuela to achieve food sovereignty. By the end of 2004, an estimated 140,000 families had been given plots of land, concluding a transfer of 3.8 million acres, for an average of 25 acres per family. And by January 2005, the government had granted 168,528 land titles (accompanied by technical and financial assistance) to small farm families representing an area of 7,222,880 acres.

* **Urban Land Committees (CTUs)** have grown to number more than 5,200 nationwide (each representing an average of 150 families) since February 4, 2002 when Chavez issued a Presidential Decree stating that any family living in squatter settlements that could prove they had built their own house could apply to become the legal owner. CTUs have proliferated in the barrios, where the majority of Venezuelans live in crowded and unsanitary conditions, often without access to basic utilities and many built on precarious hillsides prone to landslides during heavy rains. CTUs represent about 6 million people out of a total Venezuelan population of 25 million. Self organization is the defining feature of CTUs and members must decide collectively on what actions should be taken. In what order to address the various

concerns that affect their daily lives - from sewage, garbage disposal, and access to a clean water supply to technical aspects related to infrastructural improvements or housing renovation. The CTUs are responsible for drawing up maps specifying the exact location of each house in their barrios for land registration purposes and writing up the proposals for the various improvements before submitting them to government officials in the

Ministry of Housing and Habitat. In October 2005, the government allocated \$142.5 million to fund the CTU projects in urban renewal. Contractors and suppliers are paid so CTUs are also responsible for obtaining bids or cost estimates from builders, engineers, and suppliers of building materials. The government does not pay for administrative costs so those involved in the CTUs volunteer their time for free.

Encounters

Although the period of time I spent in Venezuela was relatively short, especially by anthropological standards which usually involve a long-term commitment to participant-observation research, I feel that the information I obtained is important to the analysis of the process of counter hegemony in that country and thus warrants careful examination. I base my analysis on field notes and informal open-ended interviews. Unless otherwise noted, the interviews were with Venezuelans who spoke excellent English.

One day, I had a chance encounter with a medical doctor in his mid-40s who was spending the day with his family at a beautiful park and zoo in the middle-class suburb of Parque del Este in Caracas. While his wife watched over their two children (aged three and five) as they played with other children in the playground area, we sat on a bench and talked about life in Tokyo and life in Caracas. He told me that he became a pediatrician because he loved children and wanted to be involved in the prevention and treatment of children's diseases. He admitted that some of the social reform programs instituted under the Chavez government have benefited some people, but he was very concerned about the possibility of Venezuela becoming a totalitarian state:

I practice in a private hospital in Altimira and also in a private clinic with three other doctors. Many of the doctors

I work at the hospital with feel that not only is their way of life being threatened by the government programs that are attempting to redistribute the nation's wealth, but also that their ethical standards and moral integrity are being questioned. Of course many of us entered the medical professions because of the high status and the excellent monetary reward and not just for altruistic purposes. But what's wrong with that? What's wrong with trying to improve your family's standard of living? What's wrong with trying to get ahead in life? The Cuban doctors working with the poor in the barrios are only there because their government is forcing them to come here. I'm sure they don't want to be here in Venezuela; they want to be at home with their own families and communities. They'll be lucky if they don't get robbed or killed working in those neighborhoods full of gangsters and criminals.

I think Chavez intends to turn Venezuela into a totalitarian state like Cuba. He sounds like he favors democratic reform and implements some social reform programs but I think it's all for show. It's only a matter of time before he shows his true colors and totally dismantles democratic institutions. The democratic media in this country, for example, are fighting to survive. The business class is in a state of panic. If the traditional landed oligarchy and business elite decide to withdraw their wealth from Venezuela, the entire economy will instantly collapse. Then what will become of those of us in the middle class? We will lose everything with nowhere to go. The very rich, with their offshore banking accounts and villas in foreign countries, will be long gone. And the middle class will have to face the hatred and violence of the disenfranchised. This is the type of nation Chavez hopes to create in order to be able to rule with an iron fist, just like his friend and mentor Castro. I hope our friend and neighbor to the north, the United States, will step in to save our democracy and way of life.

This doctor was willing to express his feelings to me, a total stranger, because I had given him my

business card identifying me as a university professor from Tokyo. He assumed that we had similar class interests and that I would lend an sympathetic ear. He was surprised when over the course of our hour-long conversation he discovered that I was supportive of the Bolivarian Revolution under Chavez. He asked me to return his business card to him (which I did) and asked me to not reveal his identity if I were to write anything about what he said. He told me that if the Chavez government security forces were able to identify him, they could very well arrest him and destroy his family.

There is no doubt that this man believed what he was saying to be true. He appeared to be a caring, loving, intelligent, decent human being. So what can account for his seemingly distorted interpretation of social reality? His statement clearly reveals the power of cultural hegemony to inculcate in the minds of intelligent individuals the dominant culture's values and interpretations of social phenomena. He admitted to me in a matter-of-fact manner that most of the information he obtains regarding social and political issues come from mainstream media (both broadcast and print) and from conversations with colleagues, friends, and neighbors, all of whom are what he identified as middle class. He said that the only working class people he has had any contact with are those who work at the hospital and the family housekeeper and gardener. He said that he has never met a Chavez supporter let alone engaged in a conversation with one.

Another chance encounter I had was with a man in his mid-30s who works for the Ministry of Housing and Habitat. He talked with me for about an hour in front of the tent set up to display the ministry's urban and rural housing programs. Many government ministries had displays set up in tents lined up along a major boulevard in Bellas Artes (in the city center) that day, and many

Venezuelans were lined up to fill out application forms for the various government programs that had been introduced. This ministry spokesperson came up to assist me as I was looking through the brochures, and after finding that I didn't speak Spanish, told me that he had attended university in London so he could explain about his ministry's programs to me in English. He explained that the interest rate for government housing loans varies from 5.16% to 10.32% depending on annual household income, and that the government subsidizes up to about 50% of the cost of housing for lower income families. He went on to explain that the Ministry of Housing and Habitat office in Caracas accepts many applications from families living in the squatter settlements surrounding the city:

A lot of the people living on the hillsides are worried that with the next heavy rains their house will be buried in a mudslide and they'll all be killed. They've seen this happen too many times to too many of their friends and neighbors to believe that it couldn't happen to them. I know I'd be scared for my family if we lived where they do! We are replacing about 8,000 poorly built homes in the barrios of Caracas, but many of those who apply for houses want to be relocated to the rural areas where their families originally migrated from. In each case, before finalizing the housing loan we help them find jobs or job training programs in the communities they're going to be moving to; without a secure income, they wouldn't be able to keep up with their payments for the housing loan and they would end up having to abandon their house and migrate to the city again. This past year, we only built around 43,000 new houses and since the goal was to build 120,000 President Chavez expressed disappointment in our progress. The government is investing more than \$3 billion dollars per year to create affordable housing for all, so it's only a matter of time before we will be able to meet the urgent demand for decent housing. The problem is that many families need housing right now!

And it's asking a lot of people living in poverty and misery to wait another year or two. Although my job is rewarding in many ways, at times it's very frustrating because of the red tape and slow pace of government bureaucracy. You have to understand that not everyone in government service supports Chavez.

I asked him how his family feels about his working for the Ministry of Housing and Habitat and his response was very revealing:

My wife and I are very enthusiastic about the social changes that are being realized through the Bolivarian Revolution, but our parents have typical middle class values and can't understand why we support such radical political change. Our mothers both watch the same soap operas on television every day and are always phoning us to tell us how dangerous it is for us to continue to support the government under Chavez. I've watched a couple of their favorite daytime soap operas with my wife and its comical how they portray the day-today anxieties and stress being experienced by the middle-class families who are the protagonists in these dramas. One episode showed how the family maid was found to be a spy for the "pro-Chavez terrorists" and was gathering information on how to break the security system protecting their gated community. After that episode, my mother phoned to say, "One of these days, they're going to launch an attack and invade our communities, killing us all and occupying our homes. Of course the United States will send in troops to rescue us, but it'll be too late for many of us. After Chavez is overthrown, it won't be safe for you in this country so you have to take your wife and baby girl to England or the United States while there's still time." I just can't believe how she swallows everything she hears on TV! It's really created stress in family relations! And my wife's father blames me for having a negative influence on his daughter! No matter how hard we try, we can't get through to them and that makes us sad.

When I expressed the opinion that it would be

very difficult for the United States to launch a military invasion of Venezuela because it's so involved in the occupation of Iraq and its plans for more wars in the Middle East, and because there are so many people involved in grassroots-based organizations working for progressive social change throughout the world who support the social changes being brought about by the Bolivarian Revolution, he responded by saying:

My mother thinks that the United States will intervene militarily, but I don't think that will happen myself. I fear a military coup. The US military had their headquarters in the same building as the Venezuelan military headquarters here in Caracas until just last year. And it wasn't until just last year that the Chavez government was able to kick the US military out of our country and end the sending of our elite-track military officers to the School of the Americas in Georgia. There are still a lot of military officers who have close ties with American military officers who are just waiting for the chance to overthrow Chavez. In addition to the military, a lot of the officers in the police force are opposed to the government. Caracas, for example, is basically divided into five boroughs and while the police forces in two of them are pro- Chavez, in two others they're anti- Chavez while the fifth is uncommitted as far as I know. That's how the police were used in Caracas to legitimate the coup of 2002.

I later contacted the 45-based organization SOA Watch that has been responsible for bringing attention to the undemocratic nature of the School of the Americas to the general public and asked for information about the Venezuelan military and its ties to the SOA and received the following response:

SOA Watch activists have visited Venezuela and met with Hugo Chavez and Vice-President Rangel in 2004 after it became clear that the School of the Americas (SOA) has played a strong role in the U.S. attempts to bring the Venezuelan government down. In April

2002, two SOA grads - Army Commander in Chief Eftain Vasquez and General Ramirez Poveda - helped lead a failed coup in Venezuela. The leadership of SOA graduates in the 2002 coup attempt against Chavez is placing that event in a long list of SOA-bolstered U.S. anti-democracy efforts: At least 11 Latin American military officers became military dictators after being trained at the SOA. SOA trained soldiers were cited for embassy bombings in Caracas in February 2003, intended to destabilize the Chavez government. Venezuela has ceased all training of Venezuelan soldiers at the School of the Americas. This decision came after meetings between Venezuelan government representatives and human rights activists with the encouragement of social justice and Latin American solidarity groups from throughout the U.S. (personal communication: SOA Watch e-mail message, March 1, 2006).

According to the Pentagon, part of the mission of the SOA is to foster cooperation among multinational military forces and to expand the trainees' knowledge of United States customs and traditions. Often, the graduates of the school establish close ties with their counterparts in the US military and long-term friendships develop. Thus, the concerns raised by the Ministry of Housing and Habitat representative above are reasonable and I assume that President Chavez is similarly concerned and is taking appropriate precautions.

One evening in the Bellas Artes section of downtown Caracas as I was watching the intricate dance steps of the couples dancing to Venezuelan music at an outdoor terrace bar, I became involved in a conversation with a Venezuelan university student whose English was excellent. He was with a group of other university students who were all involved in some aspect of the Bolivarian Revolution. He told me that he was graduating this year and that he would enter graduate school to study medicine. After hearing that I was in

Caracas to attend the World Social Forum and to learn as much as I could in the short time that I had about the changes being brought about by the Bolivarian Revolution, he invited me to attend an all-day event the next day that he helped to organize in the La Vega barrio. He explained that he was with a government-funded organization called "*Cordinadora Popular de Caracas*" and that he would be able to introduce me to many people involved in the revolution. I readily agreed to meet him the next day.

The next day, I went to La Vega and met up with this university student, and with the help of his simultaneous interpretation skills I was able to talk with a number of people involved in the various social missions there. After having a bowl of homemade vegetable and meat stew and some other local dishes, I asked the people sitting near me how their lives have changed since Chavez became president of Venezuela. The first person who spoke up was a woman in her mid-50s who was one of the leaders of the Urban Land Committees (CTUs) in the barrio. She said that although initially many barrio residents were reluctant to become involved in the program to apply for land titles and improvements in their living conditions because of a deep and long-held mistrust of government agencies, now almost everyone supports the CTUs as well as the other social missions run, for the most part, by the residents themselves. She was convinced that many La Vega residents have begun to feel a sense of pride in the achievements realized in their community over the past two or three years:

What we are experiencing here is participatory democracy - we are making the decisions as a community on issues that affect our day-to-day lives. We pass on our proposals for community improvement projects to the government, and if they approve, we receive government support in materials and funds. The government allows us to

make the decisions concerning what we think is best for the community as a whole and trusts us to do the work. This is something we never dreamed would be possible.

We have people involved in various committees ranging from improving the water supply and the infrastructure to improving the health and education of barrio residents of all ages. In our CTUs, it doesn't matter if you're pro-Chavez or anti-Chavez; political affiliation is not what matters -- what matters is having a sense of belonging to the community. I find myself looking forward to what each new day will bring.

At this point a woman in her late-30s interjected:

It's true that many people identify themselves as either pro-Chavez or anti-Chavez these days, but I remember the days when most people were just plain disgusted by politics; politicians and government officials were all seen as corrupt and looking out for their own interests. I myself wasn't interested in politics before and I never bothered to vote because no matter who won in the elections, the rich just got richer and those of us living in the barrios continued to be neglected. Chavez brought hope for many of us who have always been neglected by the politicians so I decided to vote for him in 1998. And I've supported him ever since!

This woman's husband was seated next to her and added:

And now we're interested in politics because now it means something to us it's about participation and democracy. It's about creating a better life for our children.

A woman in her late-50s added:

Chavez told us we have to start reading and educating ourselves so some of us started a weekly reading class where we read the new constitution and talk about what it means to us and how it applies to our daily lives. Three of my friends couldn't even read or write before they

attended the community high school completion classes held over there [pointing to a small, one-story building] at Mission Ribas and now they can participate in our constitution discussion group. I get emotional [tears started to well up in her eyes at that moment] whenever I think about how our lives have turned around in the last few years.

A man in his mid-40s who had been quietly listening to the others suddenly broke in and expressed his opinion about Chavez and the changes taking place:

Since you said at the beginning that you're planning to write about your experience here in Venezuela and that you wouldn't use our real names and would hide our identities, I want you to listen to what I have to say about all this. First of all, I agree that there have been a lot of positive changes around here with the local health clinics, literacy classes, free nutritious lunches and dinners for the homeless and malnourished, and the granting of land titles for many families.

The problem I see is with Chavez himself - he's created a devout following of believers who are convinced he can do no wrong. I don't trust him myself and everyone around here knows how I feel about him. He sees himself as a military messiah and he's going to establish a military dictatorship just like Castro has done in Cuba. He's into "one man rule" - and he'll never give up his power now that he thinks he has it. I'm not going to be duped into believing he has our interests at heart. And once he goes too far, the opposition will crush him and then we'll be back to where we started - probably worse. Once the opposition comes back into power they'll round up all the known Chavez supporters and either kill them or throw them into prison. Then all these social missions will be closed down - and you know the first mission to go will be the health missions because they're run by all those communist Cuban doctors and dentists.

He cut himself short and gave us all a big smile,