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## **Reseña/Review**

Tariq Ali, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope*. London: Verso, 2006.

## **Chávez, Castro, Morales and the Democratization of Latin America**

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In this age of ‘disinformation,’ the neoliberal political and economic policies of the current Bush Administration and its allies, conservative global media moguls and corporations dominate the social, political and economic structures and perceptions that encompass everyday life. Renowned writer and editor of the *New Left Review* Tariq Ali envisions a revival of hope for democracy and peace in the progressive leadership of Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. The radical social, economic and political transformations implemented by Castro, Chávez and Morales systematically address historical legacy of socioeconomic inequality, political repression and neo-imperialism within Latin America. Moreover,

Ali asserts that Chávez and Morales represent a new generation of South American leaders who fully appreciate how history clarifies and enhances their comprehension of the roots of the socioeconomic, political and cultural conflicts within their respective countries. “The continent is full of echoes from past struggles and a new wave of leaders and activists are aware of its importance. History cannot be repeated but nor should it be ignored. It has to be assimilated and understood” (138-139). *Pirates of the Caribbean* is the consequence of Tariq Ali’s frequent trips to Latin America in the last few years with particular emphasis on Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba. The title is inspired by historian Marcus Rediker’s 2005 cultural history of Atlantic piracy, entitled *Villains of All Nations*, which views these eighteenth century buccaneers as defenders of social equality. Tariq Ali characterizes Castro, Chávez and Morales as “pirates’ whose revolutionary visions offer empowerment and optimism for Latin American working classes.

In *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Tariq Ali discusses the powerful influences of the Washington Consensus, hereafter referred to as the WC, upon academia, journalists, writers and politicians. In the aftermath of the collapse of European communism, any discussion related to political resistance, even within the framework of ideas, after 1991 became publicly regarded as foolish and nostalgic. Ali contends that many former socialist and liberal journalists, politicians and academicians became zealous converts to “the new order’, vigorously promoted by WC, which espouses the hegemonic ‘triumph of Capitalism’ as an inevitable and affirmative development while endorses the violation of national sovereignty in the guise of protecting human rights. He cites former Mexican secretary of foreign affairs and scholar Jorge Castañeda and journalist Philip Gunson as prime examples of recent devotees to the WC. As a consequence, Ali contends that this spirited defense of the WC worldwide led to the weakening of democratic institutions and the political party system, most notably in the West but also in India, Mexico, Brazil and South Africa. “Drained of their political differences, the parties have become empty shells, mechanisms designed to help the political elite share both power and money” (4).

Tariq Ali notes that the concentration of global media in the hands of billionaire neoconservatives such as Fox News Corporation's Rupert Murdoch and Venevisión's Gustavo Cisneros promote the WC through rigorous control of electronic and television news, most notably during the failed 2002 coup attempt against Hugo Chávez, orchestrated by the United States and the European Union with support from the Venezuelan elite and reactionary military factions. He succinctly remarks that the incompetent reportage of this failed coup against the popular Chávez government by these global media networks ignored the social reality of Venezuelan politics and immediately forecast the destruction of the Bolívarian movement and Chávez's demise. "The temporary overthrow of an elected President was so loudly cheered by the politicians and media watch-dogs of the new order that one might have been forgiven for imagining we were back in the times of colonial suppressions of native uprisings...the brief life of this particular coup froze the media operation at the overture stage; another week and the hallelujahs would have been deafening" (8). Ali comments that Latin American elites and their media propagandists despise the Bolívarian movement in South America because it directly confronts traditional 'cacique politics' through the implementation of substantive social, economic and political reforms.

Tariq Ali offers a concise and meticulous historical synthesis of the social, economic and political conditions that explain the collapse of traditional political party systems, liberal reformism and short-lived revolutionary insurgencies in Venezuela and Bolivia, from the Independence era to the early 1990s. In Bolivia, for example, he asserts that a history of bloody social and political conflicts, coupled with economic chaos, left the state divided between "those who wanted to respond positively to the upheavals and a hardline faction which favored smothering all dissent and, if necessary shedding blood" (83). Ali emphasizes that the violent suppression of guerrilla groups, culminating in the 1967 murder of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and the weakness of the Popular Assembly in Bolivia in 1971, demonstrated the dangers of poorly organized armed and socialist forces to effectively mobilize the masses to successfully challenge the status quo. For Venezuela, the great disparity of its image abroad as a

modern prosperous nation and the impoverished reality faced by eighty percent of the populace finally sparked a mass revolt against decades of corruption, repression, ineffective liberal reforms and poverty in February 1989, known as the Caracazo, which Tariq Ali describes as “the first genuine mass revolt by the poor against neo-liberal capitalism, pre-dating Seattle by a decade” (49).

For Cuba, however, Tariq Ali presents a brief historical overview of the island’s tense relationship with the United States, the influence of the reactionary exiles on US/Cuban relations after 1959, Cuban foreign policy in Angola and the significant legacy of the Cuban Revolution for the current Bolivarian movements. Ali quotes extensively from the 1962 Second Declaration of Havana in which the Cuban leadership emphasized the continental nature of the revolutionary struggle through understanding Cuban history in relation to the history of exploitation and imperialism in Africa, Asia and Oceania. While generally supportive of the Revolution, Ali remains critical of the Cuban government’s harsh treatment of the poet Herberto Padilla in 1971 and the execution of General Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez in 1989 on charges of treason and drug smuggling. Furthermore, he discusses how the most important contribution of the Cuban Revolution remains its socialist commitment to providing good quality healthcare to all its citizens as well as abroad. “Cuban medicine is the envy of most continents now and the best advertisement for what can be achieved under different social conditions” (113).

Throughout his historical examination of recent Venezuelan, Bolivian and Cuban history, Ali studies the impact of the Bolivarian movement on these three nations. Within the context of Cuba and Venezuela, he stresses the unique relationship between Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, who first met at the University of Havana in 1994 during Chávez’s lecture on Bolívar, eventually created a lasting bond between the two extraordinary leaders. Soon after their initial meeting, “Castro told his colleagues that he appreciated the uniqueness and complexity of the Venezuelan” (56). Moreover, the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia restored Castro’s conviction in a rebirth of progressive Latin American leadership. According to Ali, Castro supposedly “jumped up with joy like an adolescent

at a baseball match” (123) when the election results from La Paz arrived in February 2005. While Ali recognizes that the United States and its allies brutally suppressed the early hope offered by the Cuban Revolution to Latin America, he notes that the radical political movements in Venezuela and Bolivia broke the isolation of Cuban Revolution but “one can only hope that this will help Cuba survive its leader” (123).

In *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Tariq Ali’s astute historical analysis incorporates critical academic scholarship on the evolution of modern Latin American history and political economy from Fernando Coronil, David Hellinger, James Dunkerley, Pietro Gleijeses, Robin Blackburn and Richard Gott. Moreover, he also includes literary references from Nicolás Guillén, Jaime Saenz, William Burroughs and Gabriel García Marquez into his commentary on the social structure and popular cultures in Latin America. In addition, in his six appendices, Ali provides various primary documents which range from letters, interviews, excerpts from autobiographies and reprints of public speeches by Chávez and Morales that underscore his study of the impact of the Washington Consensus and the Bolivarian Movement on Latin America. These include the following: a candid 2003 exchange between former guerrilla turned WC convert Tedoro Petkoff, the editor of the anti-Chávez magazine *Tal Cual* (As It Is) and Maximillen Arvelaiz, a member of Chávez’s political staff, interviews with Chávez confidantes Luis Reyes Reyes, governor of the Lara State, and General Jorge Luis García Carneiro, Chief of Defense Staff with particular references to 2003 coup against Chávez, and a satirical deconstruction of Le Monde’s ‘anonymous’ August 2004 editorial, entitled “Chávez’s Victory” which brands the Chávez government as a form of “tropical national socialism.” While some of the material presented in the Appendices is incorporated in the main text, these primary sources enhance the reader’s understanding of Ali’s sharp critique of the WC and the socio-political and economic context for popular movements against neoliberalism and imperialism in Venezuela and Bolivia.

Throughout *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Tariq Ali integrates his own insightful personal observations gleaned from his numerous trips to Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil; he visited Cuba for the first time in 2005.

In regards to the future of the Cuban Revolution and the Bolívarian movement for Latin America, Ali emphasizes that these must preserve their social, political and economic gains by creating an “effective internal mechanism that makes the leadership and politics accountable to the people” (122). He admits that such a process does not occur immediately but its achievement is worthwhile. In the end, Tariq Ali calls attention to the Bolívarian movement’s goal for the unification of the continent against the imperialist and neoliberal agenda of the United States. Tariq Ali compares the historical impact of the leadership of Simón Bolívar and Hugo Chávez upon the evolution of modern Latin American polity and society. “Bolívar envisioned a larger and more positive role for the state than classical liberalism allowed and to this extent he showed his awareness of the particular problems of underdevelopment. In this light, Bolívar and Chávez appear to be closer, as Chávez grapples with the same problems two centuries later” (137). Through a blend of an acerbic prose style and keen historical analysis, *Pirates of the Caribbean* represents a noteworthy contribution to the current progressive scholarship on democratization in contemporary Latin America for general and academic readers interested in expanding their understanding of the historical impact of the Bolívarian movements in Venezuela and Cuba and their relationship to the Cuban Revolution.