

Book Review: Hugo Chávez: Socialist for the Twenty-First Century by Mike Gonzalez

Released one year after Hugo Chávez's unexpected death, this biography traces the former President of Venezuela's life from an impoverished rural family to the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas. **Mike Gonzalez** aims to detail Chávez's close connection to the masses and how he enraged wealthy elites by declaring his support for 21st century socialism. **Francesco Di Bernardo** finds this an accessible but rigorous work directed to both an academic and general audience. It is a useful and compelling read for those interested in discovering and understanding the role of Chávez and contemporary history of Venezuela and Latin America. It is a book that unveils an historical reality often unknown outside Latin America.



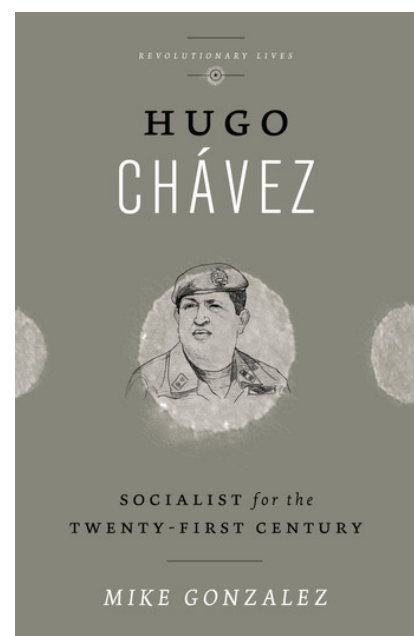
Hugo Chávez: Socialist for the Twenty-First Century. Mike Gonzalez. Pluto Press. February 2014.

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[Mike Gonzalez's](#) *Hugo Chavez* is a seminal work on the ideological and political formation of the former Venezuelan President and leading figure of twenty-first century socialism. Although the historical and political events narrated are often inevitably intermingled with Chávez's life events, the book is not a biographical account, but rather it aims to discuss Chávez's political action and to frame the development of the Bolivarian revolution in the context of Venezuelan and Latin American contemporary history.

The publication of this book is undoubtedly timely. The book has been released one year after Chávez's death and at a time when Venezuela's political scene is back at the centre of international media attention due to the [opposition protests against President Nicolás Maduro](#), elected in 2013 following Chávez's death.

Gonzalez is one of Britain's leading scholars in Latin American studies. He has written extensively on Latin American politics and culture, social movements, and revolutionary figures. He is author of volumes on Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, the Nicaraguan revolution, on the situation in Chile in the 1970s, and has recently written articles for the magazine *Jacobin* in which he analyses the current [political turmoil](#) in Venezuela.



The book's introductory sentence captures the essence of Gonzalez's work: 'Hugo Chávez was nothing if not controversial. In Venezuela, his presidency exposed divisions that already existed' (p.1). Gonzalez's account of the origins and developments of the Bolivarian revolution starts precisely from these divisions. The first chapter, in fact, along with fascinating anecdotes about Chávez's youth and the beginning of his military career in 1971 (p.11), delineates Venezuela's history since the first oil drills in 1912. Gonzalez contextualises the historical figure of Chávez in broader Venezuelan history and in the country's social and political conformation. The author rightly identifies the decisive moment of Venezuelan political history in the *Punto Fijo* pact signed in 1958 by the main Venezuelan political parties: Acción Democrática (AD), the Christian Democratic COPEI, and the Democratic Republic Union. Gonzalez affirms that '[e]ssentially, the Punto Fijo Accord was a power-sharing agreement' that would 'determine the shape of Venezuelan politics for the next 40 years' (p.19). Gonzalez further explains the nature of *puntofijismo* affirming that AD 'was a machinery of power, patronage and social and political control. [...] Once in the state it became the state' (p.19).

Subsequently the author describes how the country's most precious source of wealth was exploited by the Venezuelan establishment for personal gains: 'the political parties acted [...] as a 'kind of holding company', containing and controlling every aspect of social and economic life [...] administering and distributing wealth and power without any regard to its equitable allocation across the whole society' (p.24). In this context, Gonzalez says, the first revolutionary movements started their activities and Chávez 'made his cautious way' (p.23). The chapter reaches its best with this cogent contextualisation of Chávez within Venezuelan political history to trace the roots of the rupture that his revolution signified.

The third chapter is one of the most compelling of the book. Gonzalez points out that the origins of Chávez's rise and the beginning of the Bolivarian revolution should be traced in the 1989 *Caracazo* protests, the 'explosion of rage and frustration' as 'reaction to the imposition of a neo-liberal package of emergency economic measures called euphemistically 'structural adjustment'' (p.2). The chapter's title, 'From Insurrection to Election', specifically acknowledges the connection between the 1989 popular uprisings and the rise of Chávez.

The 'extravagant spending plans' of the president Carlos Andrés Pérez in the 1970s and a general mismanagement of the country's finance by the puntofijista establishment led to an enormous public debt by the 1980s (p.45). Andrés Pérez returned to power in 1989 promising to abandon neoliberal economic solutions 'pressed [...] by the IMF' and adopted by the preceding governments of Luis Herrera Campins and Jaime Lusinchi (p.45). When instead he imposed again austerity measures, 'Caracas exploded in rage and frustration' (p.46).

Gonzalez's account of the *Caracazo* – which started when a woman refused to pay the increased fare for the bus ticket and was forcibly removed by the driver triggering the indignation and the anger of the other passengers – is compelling and detailed. The author affirms that the *Caracazo* 'was a milestone in the history of Hugo Chávez and the movement that would carry him to the presidency, and beyond' (p.46). Indeed, the connections that Gonzalez makes between these events, Chávez's 1992 failed coup, and his election in 1998 are the most interesting parts of the book. As Gonzalez puts it: 'Chávez came to present and embody a general rejection of both neo-liberalism and puntofijismo' (p.63).

In chapter five Gonzalez describes Chávez's achievements, such as [the foundation of Misiones](#) and the use of oil revenues to promote social programmes (p.101), improvements made to the health system (p.103), increasing literacy among the population (p.104), and fostering direct democracy in the workplace (p.107). Another interesting point raised in this chapter is Chávez's theorisation of twenty-first century socialism as an alternative to neoliberalism, discussed in a speech at the 2005 World Social Forum of Porto Alegre. This episode helps to contextualise Chávez's ideology within changing Latin American political realities.

Gonzalez also provides a critique of the Bolivarian revolution in the last two chapters of the book. He affirms that the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), far from being representative of the grassroots democracy, by increasingly centralising power (p.130) has become a political machine plagued by 'networks of favouritism and clientelism', and 'bureaucratic method' (p.126).

Gonzalez's book is an accessible but rigorous work directed to both an academic and general audience. It is a useful and compelling read for those interested in discovering and understanding the role of Chávez and contemporary history of Venezuela and Latin America. It is a book that unveils an historical reality often unknown outside Latin America.

Francesco Di Bernardo is completing a PhD in Modern and Contemporary Literature, Culture and Thought at the [University of Sussex](#). He is interested in the relationship between literature and history, economics, sociology and politics and the thesis he is currently finishing focuses on the representation of British history from the seventies to the post 2007-2008 financial crisis in the works of Jonathan Coe and other contemporary British authors. He is Associate Tutor at the School of English of the University of Sussex and has worked as Research Support Assistant for the School of Media, Film and Music at Sussex. [Read more reviews by Francesco.](#)

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