



Contesting the mechanisms of disinformation, Part I. * Contemporary developments in Latin America: a South African perspective * For Part II, see *Critical Arts* 23 (3) 2009.

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Articles

Contesting the mechanisms of disinformation, Part I.*

Contemporary developments in Latin America: a South African perspective¹

Clive Kronenberg

Abstract

In the context of spiralling decay that, in recent decades, has engulfed all spheres of the human condition, this article seeks to endorse Tomaselli's essentially ethical position, advancing that the foremost contextual launching pad for cultural studies should be based on a socio-political moral framework that embraces concepts of truth, fairness, and freedom. It is argued that the rigorous questioning of – and hence, confrontation with – dominant beliefs, perceptions, norms, standards, and rules embedded in a neo-liberal, corporate-aligned 'democratic' global order will, by its very nature, contribute to the demise of human misfortune and injustice. As a viable start, cultural studies should return to the basically moral project of inquiry into injustice, oppression, and deception, and concretely undertake to have global influence in a world that has fewer and fewer margins separating truth from myth. The so-called 'industry of deception' has stringently endeavoured, and continues to endeavour, to thwart the political awakening of Latin America's erstwhile dormant masses. As mandatory foot soldiers in imperialism's battle against this process of mass radicalisation, the dominant media have sought to preside over the voiceless by putting lies across as truths. In this manner the global media industry seeks to sustain imperialism's hegemony over not only the Latin American continent with its 500 million struggling subjects, but the great majority of the world's wretched masses. Contemporary developments in a range of Latin American countries – Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Venezuela, and others – show quite demonstratively the emergence of a new, radical political ethos amongst the continent's ordinary, struggling subjects, evoking both a measure of optimism amongst oppressed subjects elsewhere and overpowering responses from reactionary agents. By looking at the Latin American continent critically

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and truthfully, and more so, by contesting the 'mechanisms of disinformation', scholars of culture hopefully could reclaim their authentic purpose in the intellectual sphere and meaningfully contribute to the invention of another world.

Keywords: contemporary Latin America, culture and ethics, global colonial policy, popular protest and politics, post-apartheid South Africa, US media and imperialist policy

Introduction: regarding justice, ethics, and culture

Set in two parts, the article critically explores what it deems are globally significant developments underway in some key Latin-American and Caribbean territories. Contemporary political developments on the Latin-American continent offer the world's oppressed masses (and rational-critical thinkers) not only some serious, cautionary lessons, but also some measure of hope and inspiration. Structured as a broad overview, Part I endeavours to draw attention to, on the one hand, the repressive role performed by the corporate establishment – particularly its media – in sustaining the status quo and, on the other hand, emancipatory responses that have emanated from a new, radical political ethos amongst the continent's struggling masses. Long overdue in South African scholarship, Part II inspects an established revolutionary political model that, in its fight for survival, has set itself the historic task of *opposing* and *contradicting* neo-capitalist/imperialist ideology, in other words, the philosophical schema that underpins those power schemes outlined in Part I. In this instance the discussion explores key aspects of revolutionary Cuba's political culture as formulated, espoused, and defended by its historic, aging leader, Fidel Castro. Inadvertently perhaps, the essays attempt to bring together a diverse range of studies, drawn from the media, historical, cultural, rhetorical, identity, and political scholarly fields. The principal reason behind this approach lies in the notion that, since 'social problems ignore disciplinary fences', 'solutions, therefore, should traverse disciplinary boundaries' (Tomaselli 2001: 53). As Tomaselli (*ibid.*) reasons, such an approach should be a '*sine qua non*' for grasping 'the multi-dimensionality of the human condition'. 'Transdisciplinarity', it is noted furthermore, recognises the potential of individual subjects to launch their 'dialectical relations across specific social issues' (Shepperson & Tomaselli 2004: 261). In the context of spiralling social, environmental, economic, and political decay globally, this deduction carries great significance and relevance.

In terms of analytical procedure, the article endeavours not only to apply a *critical social perspective*, but, as will be readily perceptible, it adopts a *definitive, principled or ethical stance*. Is such an approach deemed 'acceptable' in the modern world of professional, objective scholarly research? Originally concerned with the study of power relations and democratisation (see Shepperson & Tomaselli 2004; Tomaselli 2001), cultural studies, generally, have now become regressive procedures couched within the 'democratising imperative that was once the *raison d'être* of the field' (Tomaselli 2001: 53). Fresh demands have more and more realigned

this ‘once dialectical and ethically driven trans-disciplinary research engagement’ (Shepperson & Tomaselli 2004: 257) toward a singular concern with matters which, more often than not, have little bearing on the wellbeing and happiness of all humanity. Beyond the closed and battered enclaves of Marxism and socialism, cultural studies’ intrinsic alliance with peoples’ struggles has all but dissipated. Certain variations of cultural studies have thus been accused of becoming a channel for, and toward, ‘pseudoliberalism’, and of being at the forefront of ‘new fascisms clothed in politically correct left-wing slogans’ (Tomaselli in Shepperson & Tomaselli 2004: 257). The foremost contextual launching pad for cultural studies research, therefore, should be based on a socio-political moral framework that embraces concepts like truth, fairness, and freedom. Tomaselli (2001) calls this ‘dynamic justice’, an overarching moral category that incorporates ‘freedom’, as in Kant’s *Categorical imperative* (see Paton 1947), and life chances, whereby human beings ideally can develop to their full potential. ‘Dynamic justice’ thus brings into prominence the concept of human rights and the questioning of conventional beliefs, perceptions, norms, and rules. The contemporary research environment tends to ignore the full implications of ‘dynamic justice’ in a context of neo-liberal, corporate-aligned democratic governance. While critical analyses of consumer culture abound, for example, it hardly reaches into the sphere of human rights and justice. The principle that once justified the right to resist and interrogate authoritarian systems has been traded for one that asserts the irretrievable right to ‘consume, to run [up] debt, and to engage in ecstasies of conspicuous consumptions’ (Shepperson & Tomaselli 2004: 262). Inspired by the progressive tradition of the Birmingham School of the 1960s and 1970s, researchers entered into this sphere because of its basically moral foundation. In other words, it was perceived that research of this quality could hasten ‘the end of injustice or at least try to track it, understand it, and critique it’ (ibid.: 263). Rather than becoming authorisation for condoning ‘intellectual indiscipline’ (ibid.), cultural studies should return to the basically moral project of inquiry into injustice, oppression and deception, and for it to have global influence in a world that has fewer and fewer margins separating truth from myth. Though certain strident voices have asserted the right of academic freedom in institutions of higher learning, they remain silent on the need to transform the colonial type of production commonly associated with many of these institutions (see Malesela 2009). It is for this reason also that this article unequivocally aligns with Vera’s (2008) essentially ethical standpoint (see below). It is a reality that certain scholars’ premeditated evasion of the modern era’s socio-political-cultural decadence has added enormously to the burdens of the voiceless masses. It is hard to imagine that some of these thinkers once possessed the valour to analyse *and* condemn injustice publicly. As these two articles hope to show, any analysis of social systems operating within the current neo-liberal global order

must be made on the basis of the need to fight the industry of deception, presided over by lies put across as truths, the so-called freedom of the dominant press. *If justice is synonymous with ethics, let us make a just analysis of how the mechanisms of disinformation ... are developed and exist.* (Vera 2008: 15, emphasis added)

An alliance of this nature not only strengthens the course of humanity, it makes our lives and, more so, our work, more purposeful and therefore meaningful.

Insofar as culture – in all its diverse dimensions and manifestations – ultimately moulds and depicts our social beliefs, values, customs, procedures, relations, outlooks, loyalties, in other words, our *broad consciousness*, it is, therefore, of supreme importance for hegemonic power systems to maintain unlimited control over it (see Althusser 1971). As one of the most persuasive consciousness-making mechanisms in modern civilisation, the media have come to occupy a central position in both sustaining and expanding the socio-political substructure of the current world order. Hence, whereas human society itself is a ‘cultural artefact’, as Basckin (1988) professes, culture takes on a role of immense import in constructing/maintaining, deconstructing/rebuilding human ecosystems – a decidedly dialectic process. That generations of human beings have endured a long and horrible misfortune, in which ordinary men and women were preordained to a life of abject, wasted toil, has been well documented elsewhere. As Eagleton (1983) and others have argued, the capitalist mode of production disfigures and nurtures in chorus, producing new faculties and talents but in a deleterious, discriminatory fashion. The pioneering forces which allow the human race to manage its environment, stamp out illness, deprivation and natural disaster, also permit it to tear itself down. Thus each fresh mode of interaction concurrently is a mechanism of partition and estrangement. In this sense culture becomes instantly ‘a document of civilisation and a record of barbarism’ (ibid.: 219).

Latin America

While Latin America’s concentrated shift into the realm of popular, leftist politics may have stirred the imagination of the world’s struggling masses, it simultaneously evoked overpowering responses from US spokespersons and their media emissaries on the continent. It is not too much to conclude that US rejoinders to this process of mass radicalisation merely embody imperialism’s goal perpetually to disrupt the continent’s struggle for freedom, social justice, autonomy, and unity (see Van Auken 2008; Diaz 2008a & b; Sanabria 2008). The 2008 summit meeting of the Rio Group in Santo Domingo, for example, bolstered the alarm sounded by the US government to reclaim the political and ideological offensive and bring rebel peoples back into line. In Rosario, Argentina – place of birth of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara – the self-styled Liberty Foundation, operating under the direction of José Maria Aznar (Spain’s former neo-conservative head of state), with generous funding from the Foundation for Social Studies Analysis (FAES), sought in March 2008 to assume responsibility for what

some consider 'is the dirty work in Latin America as directed by the Bush regime' (Diaz 2008b). Propping up this imperialist initiative are the right-wing US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment of Democracy (NED), the Heritage Foundation, the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, and the Cato Institute, all of which represent instruments of US conservatism. It is no accident that the City of Rosario features prominently in the broader scheme of US global policy: not only is it the bedrock of a 'sacred' and increasingly revered emancipatory philosophy, but the transformation in the Argentinean political realm has witnessed, likewise, an upsurge in social consciousness amongst broad layers of the masses. As the *Corriente Socialista El Militante* (2007)² reports: 'The Argentine working class expressed in the [October 2007] presidential elections their profound contempt for the right and all those politicians identified with the most repressive and anti-labour policies.' As a direct outcome, leftist organisations and social movements confront censure from the ranks of the oligarchy, the corporate mass media, and right-wing political forces – the Republican International Institute (IRA), the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF), the German Social Christian Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF), and more. These self-styled organisations of 'human liberty and development' sought also to garner the patronage of a number of Latin-American officials of high standing, favouring US foreign policy, including Vicente Fox and Manuel Espino of Mexico, Jorge Quiroga of Bolivia, Luis Alberto Lacalle of Uruguay, and Francisco Flores of El Salvador (ibid.). Reacting to these measures, and largely ignored by the global media apparatus, were the tens of thousands of Rosario citizens who rose up to reject the presence of these foreign visitors, companies, and institutions on their soil. Their objectives were seen as essentially manipulative, and thus directly tied to the broader pro-capitalistic campaign against socialist-oriented projects underway in Venezuela, Paraguay, Nicaragua, and Bolivia, amongst others.

With strong roots in the national peasant movement, Bolivia's ruling party, led by Evo Morales, similarly has taken significant steps towards counteracting pervasive indigence, homelessness, illiteracy, ill health and disease, and redundancy (see Martin, J 2008a, c, d & e; *In defense of Marxism* 2008a).³ In May 2008, the big telecommunications company ENTEL, together with several oil corporations, officially became nationalised (IDM 2008a). These 'radical measures' were, nonetheless, soon to be followed by an enormous increase in propaganda from the oligarchy. The residents of Santa Cruz, Bolivia's economic capital, found themselves entangled in an illegitimate referendum,⁴ the outcome of which resulted in traditional landlords regaining control over that region's agrarian and forestation policies, including its natural resources and protected areas. Due to the 'autonomy statutes' embedded in the poll, big business corporations gained legal decision-making powers over that area's working conditions, together with the right not to recognise trade unions. In response, the corporate media hailed the 'people's approval' of the return to dictatorial, neo-liberal autonomy, while the well-heeled celebrated through the night (Martin, J 2008c; *International Marxist tendency*

2008). And once again the global media chose to close its eyes and ears to the hundreds of thousands of Santa Cruz citizens who either boycotted or abstained from this poll, marked by huge electoral fraud and the absence of international observers. Also ignored were commonplace citizens' rationalisation for demolishing voting centres and confronting head-on a rising fascist movement which, to date, has resulted in several deaths and scores being seriously impaired. Widely overlooked, too, is the mushrooming of giant *Cabildos* (assemblies or popular demonstrations) which aim to voice the people's aggravation and anger at the recuperation of the corporate elite: while some 100 000 Bolivians gathered in La Paz to register their resentment at this illicit, retrogressive 'democratic process', the towns of El Alto and Cochabamba each witnessed 500 000 or so of their townsfolk engaging in mass protests. As a result the bourgeois press presented the situation as one where the country is now divided, with an eastern part which 'opposes' Morales's rule. In effect, at face value, very little has been reported in the global media about the real state of affairs of Bolivia's ordinary, struggling masses.

The one-sided, if not outright deceptive portrayal of the Bolivian people's objective situation merely duplicates what transpired in many other Latin-American states. In this regard, Chile, during the reign of the Pinochet dictatorship, stands out prominently (see Woods 1979). Soon after seizing power through a military coup on 11 September 1973, the global media 'praised' the new order for 'bringing stability to the country' and for 'saving' the region from the 'threat of social revolution' (Weston 2006). With little or no condemnation from the prevailing media emissaries, the new regime received open support from the US administration. In time, the neo-liberal media establishment 'glossed over the brutal record of the Pinochet command', building instead an elaborate picture of the man who had saved Chile from anarchy, stabilised the country, and laid the foundation of the country's economic expansion. It would not be long before word went around the globe that Pinochet had transformed Chile into 'South America's most stable economy' (ibid.). In reality, for Chile's ordinary people things were rather different from this fabrication.

As Weston (ibid.) reasons, 'when the moment comes for the ruling classes to let the mask of democracy fall and reveal its true, ugly side, it always finds a loyal servant to do the butcher's job for them.' The dictatorship performed the work of such a servant, clamping down on Chilean workers and youth, and massacring thousands in the process. Left-wing youth, trade union activists, and rank-and-file members of communist and socialist organisations were arrested, tortured, and callously slaughtered, driving thousands more into exile (Woods 1979). When Pinochet took power unemployment was just over 4% and within a decade it had reached 22%. During his time wages decreased by 40%. In the 1970s the percentage of Chileans living below the poverty line was in the region of 20%, and by the time the dictatorship folded, the figure had climbed to 40%. Under totalitarian rule, trade union rights, trade union organisation, political organisation, the right

to strike, free speech, etc., were all abolished. In the years 1982 to 1983 the GDP collapsed by 19% (Weston 2006). And despite all this, the myth continued to be peddled around the world that the Chilean dictatorship had produced an economic miracle, a venerable prototype that called for its institution in the continent's already unstable and troubled lands.

In recent years the spectre of inflation and unemployment likewise has come to haunt the Chilean masses, despite the coming to power of Michelle Bachelet, leader of Chile's ruling Socialist Party. A series of strikes has resulted in the shutdown of copper mines, trucking and other industries as workers, like their counterparts in neighbouring states and elsewhere across the globe, are driven to desperation by the high cost of living and the danger of economic ruin (Silva 2008).

Currently ruled by President Alvaro Uribe, Colombia is the location of an entrenched tradition of social hostility, economic inequality, land theft, political corruption, drug trafficking, and ultra-right terrorism employing paramilitary methods (see Sanabria 2008; IDM 2008b & c; Montoya 2008). Under a 'semi-dictatorial regime', the country has become 'a military camp for the US' in its 'war against drug traffic' (Montoya 2008). As Montoya (*ibid.*) sums up the situation: 'Colombia has become the principal bulwark of US imperialism in South America.' The country's deep levels of political fraud and deception surfaced quite prominently in 2001. During this time the country's Supreme Court of Justice passed a ruling not to call into evidence politicians and legislators possibly involved in the alliance between paramilitarism and the political sector – a decision that generated widespread condemnation nationally. Colombia's so-called 'parapolitics' has exposed the culpability of a number of sitting Congress members, governors, mayors and councillors, some of whom also occupy seats in the Senate (*ibid.*; see Sanabria 2008). The country's political culture, prevalent over the last few decades, is amply illustrated in the nature and dire implications of Nicaragua's culture of 'paramilitarism'. As Carlos Fazio explains,

[paramilitarism] is not an independent actor in the manner of a third force operating with its own autonomy. Paramilitarism is a systematic state strategy based on the doctrine of classical counterinsurgency ... supported by landowners and political power, funded by drug trafficking and wide sectors of Colombian and foreign business. (Fazio in Diaz 2007: 8, emphasis added)

Sanabria (2008) and others argue that this phenomenon was deliberately created and financed in order to confront any existing and prospective 'threats' to a system that marginalised and impoverished vast sectors of the Colombian people and devastated the country's sovereignty for decades. In geo-political terms, Colombia is very strategically positioned for both insiders and outsiders to impede the continent's rescue of natural resources and the construction of a new model of democracy. As can effortlessly be deduced, the country's ingrained paramilitary tradition suits those – in- and outside of Colombia – who are prepared to turn the state into a Trojan horse against its neighbours (see Graham 2006).

In spite of this, in recent years a revitalisation of the workers' and popular struggle in Colombia has emerged. There have been several general strikes, as well as massive mobilisations against the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the US (see Ruiz 2006), an economic pact that has only further weakened the country's economy (Montoya 2008; Sanabria 2008). Yet, rising popular dissent has seen the indigenous people, the rural poor, and students joining in mass protest action. Faced with a rising workers' movement and the surfacing of a political alternative left, the media envoys of the Colombian oligarchy have elevated the 'guerrilla problem' to justify the restriction of democratic rights, indiscriminate detentions, and the assassination of popular leaders (Montoya 2008).

Latin America's political renovation is further reflected in developments that have taken shape in Nicaragua, a country that has seen the re-emergence and official return to governance of Daniel Ortega's socialist-oriented Sandinista Movement, previously violently overthrown with the help of the CIA (see Diaz 2008d & e). Responding to this country's 'radicalisation', Washington issued a demand to Ortega to dismantle and destroy Soviet-made arms, in order to secure and sustain international monetary aid. The Ortega government, in turn, has reacted decisively, noting that it is the territory's right to keep these arms; that 'no country can demand unilateral disarmament from another' (Diaz 2008d). Highlighting the US's tradition of double standards, Ortega maintains that these stipulations should equally be applied to other Central American countries. In full recollection of what transpired in the past, Ortega reasons, if there were no military aviation in Central America, the country would have no reason to possess missiles, but given that there are, that obliges them to keep them and to defend the country in case an act of aggression were to occur (see Diaz 2008d & e).

It must be borne in mind that Honduras, a military partner of the US, has the capability to attack Nicaragua within less than 25 minutes of such an order being issued, while the forces of Costa Rica are already engaged in joint manoeuvres with US navy patrols. The situation of Nicaragua shows quite demonstratively a common sentiment that exists across most of the continent, including the Caribbean: the principle of sovereignty, self-determination, and defense of national integrity, is deemed crucial to the continent's future wellbeing.

Recent multilateral undertakings with fellow states have seen a substantial increase in the country's budget. In addition, the Nicaraguan government has cut the salaries of senior government officials by more than 50%, in support of its social development programme (ibid.).

In the second quarter of 2008, Paraguay similarly underwent a shift to the political left. This development is historic in the sense that newly elected Fernando Lugo's Patriotic Alliance for Change (APC) brought to an end decades of governance by the Colorado Party, the political home of the former dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled Paraguay for some 35 years.

A devoted Catholic bishop and advocate of liberation theology, 61-year-old Lugo was formerly expelled from the country because of the ‘subversive nature’ of his sermons. Under the former dictatorship his father was imprisoned several times and his brothers were tortured while close friends and relatives were barred, like him, from the country of their birth (see Calloni 2008; Diaz 2008a). Here is an extract from Lugo’s political programme and goals which, at the same time, offer some indication of the country’s current state of affairs:

- The creation of jobs for 100 000 unemployed families, and
- The annual creation of 50 000 new jobs
- Pensions for 200 000 senior citizens
- The construction of 40 000 homes per year
- Contracts for 30 000 teachers to improve education
- The building of 20 000 new classrooms per year
- Support for research and cultural development
- Significant investment in hospitals and medicines
- Prioritising primary health care and free access to those services
- Agrarian reform
- Reduced electricity and water rates
- Improvement of roads, highways, sanitation and infrastructural works. (Diaz 2008a)

Underlying these objectives is a deep-seated humanistic ethic, as Lugo proclaimed in his victory speech:

Today we can affirm that the little ones are also qualified to win We have completed one stage and today we begin another one, that of commitment to transforming Paraguay. This is the Paraguay of which I dream, with many colors, with many faces, the Paraguay of everyone. (ibid.)

Devoid of fanatical militancy, Lugo’s rhetoric emulates the feelings and hopes of millions of ordinary Latin Americans; a concern for the commonality and wellbeing of ordinary beings, including the forging of bonds of equality and solidarity. Encapsulating the goals and aspirations of many other nation states, Lugo argues that these ambitions can only be attained on the following basis:

- The defence of sovereignty
- Respect for self-determination
- To operate within a plurality of positions

- The control and recovery of natural resources as a means of sustaining economic and social transformation
- The institution of social justice
- Regional cooperation, aid, and integration. (ibid.)

The desire to build a cooperative solidarity has seen a greater measure of collaboration developing among a number of Latin-American states. This objective is deemed strategically important, as many states hope to diminish their dependency on manipulative economic power houses, often located abroad. For this reason the incoming Paraguayan government intends to renegotiate the hydroelectric agreements with Brazil and Argentina which, for several decades, played a major role in the people's material impoverishment (see Calloni 2008; Diaz 2008a, b & c). Becoming more and more disconcerting for both the empire and its global benefactors, however, is the reality of Latin Americans' intertwined histories and cultures, and above all, their newly shared experiences and developments. Under the Bush administration, especially, there has been a concerted challenge to obstruct efforts aimed at establishing economic and political unity among the countries of Latin America. It has sought to eliminate Europe and the industrialised countries of Asia from trade competitions and investments in the region, imposing a Free Trade Agreement that could possibly result in the 'annexation' of Latin America and the Caribbean to the US (see Allard 2008a & b; Ruiz 2006; Diaz 2008b; Cuban Council of State 2001). But in spite of this, recent years have witnessed the expansion of social provision in a number of states, especially free education and health care – notable features of revolutionary Cuba for several decades already.

In the lead of this progressive course to reclaim the continent's historical 'culture of humanism' – initially brought to the forefront by Simón Bolívar and later taken up by José Martí (see Kronenberg 2007) – is Venezuela, if one momentarily omits Cuba from the equation. British writer, leader of the *International Marxist tendency*, and renowned Marxist theoretician, Alan Woods, views the country's profound changes as 'a great inspiration to the world' (*Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias* 2008).⁵ In philosophical/ ideological terms, and in the context of prevailing anti-socialist hysteria, Venezuela has shown that 'another world is possible', or rather, that *alternate routes to constructing a new world* – in the neo-capitalistic epoch, that is – do not only exist conjecturally, but that they can be enacted in concrete terms. As Woods explains:

After the fall of Stalinism, of the Soviet Union, when there was an avalanche of slanders against socialism, against Marxism, against communism, finally there was a man, like Hugo Chávez, who had the necessary courage to raise again the need for socialism as the only solution to the problems of society, with the participation of the rank and file. (*ABN* 2008)

Of import is the fact that, in taking this route, Chávez reopened the socialist debate, not only in the confines of intellectual circles but at all social levels, with the participation of citizens from a diversity of backgrounds (see *Corriente Marxista Revolucionaria* 2008a, b, c & d; Martin, Moreno & Sanabria 2008; Martin, J 2008b; Larsen 2008).⁶ For the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to endure and be victorious, Woods (*ABN* 2008) warns that this can only be realised with the full participation of the people, the peasants, the workers, the rank and file; a basic theory deemed crucially important in international socialist circles (see *CMR* 2008a & b; Van Auken 2007). In accordance with this, in early 2008 the Chávez government organised a two-month-long discussion period involving all national PSUV delegates. Since 2006, already, the government has sought to build its strength from the massive mobilisation and support of the masses of workers and peasants organised in thousands of different organisations – land reform committees, revolutionary trade unions, and neighbourhood and street bodies. In early 2007, 5.6 million Venezuelans – women, youth, workers, peasants, and the unemployed – registered to join the PSUV, with large numbers meeting weekly at local level (Martin, J 2008b). New, radical governmental measures have seen the nationalisation of sectors of the country's key industries, including oil refineries, dairy plants, slaughterhouses, the cement industry, steel mills, etc. In return, the government has taken concrete steps to improve ordinary citizens' access to health facilities, education, and housing (*ibid.*).

Within the framework of prevailing global politics, Venezuela's political transformation can be considered of great historical significance. This is thoroughly reflected in President Chávez's frank defense, adoption, and public espousal of socialist philosophy (see Chávez 2005), including, and especially, his open admiration of Trotskyist theory (see *CMR* 2008d), a revolutionary Marxist current generally disregarded, evaded, or slandered by both Stalinists and the radical petty bourgeoisie. In a speech delivered on 30 April 2008 in the capital Caracas, to some 4 000 representatives drawn from the country's labour force, Chávez again evoked the images of some key historic revolutionary luminaries, including Rosa Luxemburg, Che Guevara, V I Lenin and Antonio Gramsci (see Martin, J 2008b; Larsen 2008). In this speech he referred to, for example, the import of May Day (which was to be celebrated nationally the following day), tracing its roots to the 'Chicago Martyrs', as well as 'the heroic role played by the Russian workers and peasants in the Red Army in the war against Hitler' (*ibid.*). Crowning his address was the signing of two momentous decrees: a 30% increase in the minimum wage, and the official nationalisation of SIDOR, formerly controlled by the Argentine-based multinational company Techint. As an act of solidarity, on May Day (2008) millions of Venezuelans demonstrated their support for the Evo Morales government's concentrated conflict with the so-called 'independence referendum' organised by the Bolivian oligarchy and propped up by various media schemes (*ibid.*).

Equally, and perhaps more so here, Venezuela's pioneering labours to radically transform into a more equal and just social order habitually go unnoticed in the corporate media. As has become the norm, the latter favours rather the spawning of damaging, often questionable reports of the country's governing system.⁷ Loaded expressions like 'dictatorial rule' routinely tower above and tarnish Hugo Chávez's humanitarian undertakings, despite the fact that his national community in large measure endorses his visions and goals.⁸ Pro-establishment media commentators habitually refer to 'the government's engagement in politically motivated and systematic human rights violations against anti-revolutionary oppositionists' (see Gunson 2006a & b; White 2006; Preston 2007). In counteracting this allegation, Roldan's in-depth analysis (2007) of the country's current situation highlights the following fundamental matter, ordinarily ignored by the dominant media establishment:

[we] do not pretend that there are no human rights violations in Venezuela. That would be a most ridiculous claim. There is no country in the world where there are no human rights violations. For instance, concerning the UK, the 2006 Amnesty International Report highlights that: 'The British government continued to erode fundamental human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, including by persisting with attempts to undermine the ban on torture at home and abroad, and by enacting and seeking to enact legislation inconsistent with domestic and international human rights. Measures purporting to counter terrorism led to serious human rights violations.' (ibid.)

Concerning Venezuela itself, Roldan (ibid.) concludes that, contrary to Western/neo-liberal media reports, the Chávez government 'does not sanction nor encourage human rights violations'. In effect, its actions have been directed at strengthening those institutions that, according to the Venezuelan Constitution, must uphold the defence and reparation of victims of human rights abuses. The Venezuelan Constitution, its institutional and legal framework, and some political and legislative initiatives contain important areas of progress concerning human rights, such as the Violence against Women and Family Law, the Land and Development Law, the Protection of Indigenous Languages, the National Plan for Women's Equality, and the Women's Development Bank, amongst others. These new measures have effectively been welcomed and approved by the UN Committee against Torture, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (see Matsura 2006; Amnesty International 2006 Report). In those cases where the political leanings of the victims of human rights violations were identified, they often are political, community, or human rights activists operating in the orbit of revolutionary politics: '[t]hey are the ones most likely to have suffered human rights violations at the hands of paramilitary groups of security forces under the control of municipal and regional authorities governed by [anti-Chávez] opposition parties' (Roldan 2007).

Causing widespread alarm amongst global media analysts (especially those who purport to uphold and defend the principles of ‘freedom and democracy’) was, however, the government’s decision in 2006 not to renew the broadcasting licence of RCTV, an independent TV station with strong ties to the Venezuelan oligarchy. Representing the interests of global capital, White (2006), for instance, regarded the judgment as ‘a catastrophe for pluralism and social rights’. The hypocritical nature of this stance becomes more evident if one considers that prior to this, when rightwing forces attempted to overthrow Chávez through a military coup, the independent TV channels had planned to offer special coverage of illusory schemes devised by the anti-Chávez military establishment – an act that basically amounts to treason in terms of international regulation pertaining to national sovereignty (see Cuban Council of State 2001). Furthermore, when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets and risked their lives to demand the return of the democratically elected president, ‘no news was aired in any private media – press, TV or radio’ (Roldan 2007). During this most crucial time in Venezuela’s modern history, independent TV channels broadcast old films, cartoons, and contests. Once the presidential palace had been retaken by the faithful presidential guard, and multitudes of people came out to safeguard it, the corporate media claimed that the country was under the control of those who had attempted to seize power (ibid.).

In complete disregard for the real situation on the ground, newspapers published editorials and headlines ‘celebrating the ousting of Chávez’. Moreover, when Venezuela’s president reassumed office after the coup attempt, ‘most newspapers decided not to publish anything and tried to maintain the most deafening silence about the popular mobilisation that had defeated the coup’ (ibid.). Quite interestingly, on occasion the same media machinery had this to say about press freedom: ‘*Censorship of information by media owners constitutes a breach of the trust that must exist between the public and media if democracy, pluralism and press freedom are to survive*’ (ibid., emphasis added).

In March 2008, US imperialist policy reached new heights when it ‘threatened’ to add Venezuela to its list of ‘nations that support terrorism’ (see Martin, J 2008b). As was pointed out, within Venezuela itself, there remain some serious elements endangering its social transformation: an exploitative capitalist state apparatus that, with the support of US imperial power, aims to ‘sabotage’ the revolution, an economy controlled by the oligarchy, and a reformist, bureaucratic right with immense power vested in the global media industry (ibid.).

The expansive liberties, resources, and capacities of the dominant press in sustaining imperialist hegemony – over not only the Latin-American continent with its 500 million struggling subjects, but the great majority of the world’s wretched masses – according to Cuban writer, Ernesto Vera (2008: 15), is as ‘criminal as ... acts of terrorism, and as deceitful as the transnational media and its national sections’.

Conclusion

Comparable power schemes have become, and remain, firmly entrenched across the modern, neo-liberal globalised world. It is today of little value to wide-reaching public knowledge systems, it appears, that the 'war on terror' has, in a relatively short space of time, transformed Middle-Eastern regions into disaster areas of catastrophic proportions, despite the non-discovery of the dreaded weapons of mass destruction (see Editorial Board Report of the *WSWS* 2007). As this article was nearing completion, the US Supreme Court, by a 5-to-4 vote ruled that so-called 'enemy combatants' held in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, have the right to challenge their detention. Many of the inmates have been incarcerated for some six years under barbaric conditions. Further, at the time of this writing none of them had appeared in a court of law and thus been found guilty of a crime. While the Supreme Court judgement received widespread attention, the conventional media made no effort to condemn, or at least critically evaluate, the objectives and implications of the right-wing component of the court. As Walsh analyses the situation:

While the [*New York*] *Times* recognises that Bush has denied the protection of justice, democracy and plain human decency to the hundreds of men that he decided to label 'unlawful enemy combatants' and throw into never-ending detention, and that the Supreme Court 'turned back the most recent effort to subvert justice only by the narrowest of margins', *its editors draw no far-reaching political conclusions from these extraordinary and alarming facts.* (2008, emphasis added)

And as the *Times*' headlines perceived the episode, '[i]t was disturbing that four justices dissented from this eminently reasonable decision,' thus putting a fairly placid interpretation on the event. The report failed to engage with the great socio-political significance of the fact that *habeas corpus* 'hangs by a single vote in the Supreme Court of the United States' (ibid.). For Walsh (ibid.), on the other hand, this simply means, 'one vote separates the American political machinery from an open endorsement of police-state rule.'

On a mere foreground level, rational-critical, legitimate challenges to, or entirely justifiable substitutes for, *the system* based upon unfettered material expropriation and brazen human exploitation, are scarcely disclosed in the all-embracing, capitalist-fortified media. It makes basic sense, therefore, that such information channels hardly subject the philosophies and subsequent triumphs of anti-capitalist-imperialist communities to meticulous, reliable, and fair scrutiny. To these 'conscious-making' agencies it is of little consequence that the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly, and yet again, censured the US blockade of a small, destitute Caribbean island nation (see Kronenberg 2006). In this regard, the Cuban Council of State (2001) draws attention to the legal standing of this brazen disregard for international regulation:

The blockade of food and medicine constitutes a crime of genocide even in times of war, as is clearly stipulated in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 and the Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 1949, both of which were signed and ratified by both Cuba and the United States, along with the vast majority of states. (Cuban Council of State 2001: 9)

With this as background, Part II explores imperialist spokespersons' perceptions of, pronouncements on, and reactions to, revolutionary Cuba and, following this, it considers Fidel Castro's own depiction, rationalisation, and defense of key aspects of the island's social system.

POST-SCRIPT: the culture industry and the 'New South Africa'

Without a firm grasp on its own peculiar 'culture industry', the apartheid order would never have survived for as long as it did. As scholars of culture have shown, the local media played no small part in upholding the apartheid system, often contributing to the direct violation of people's basic human rights (see Tomaselli 1988). And while the apartheid state pressurised the commercial press, restricted cultural festivals, films and cultural workers, reporting in 'unrest' areas was ruthlessly dealt with (ibid.: 8). Prior to this, the British colonial mission likewise sought outright supremacy, over both victim (the indigenous people) *and* its fellow traveller (the erstwhile settler-turned-Afrikaner). It tolerated basic erudition for native children as their languages and cultures were diminished and reviled (Alexander 1989: 20). For the colonist a 'typical colonised mind or slave mentality became one of the most potent weapons of colonial policy', ensuring that the status quo was accepted as 'good and just' (ibid.). Accordingly, it also sought to lampoon the Boer culture as 'degraded, debased and uncivilised' (De Reuck 1996: 145). In a similar manner, Australia's colonisation witnessed not only an invasion and stealing of land, but the imposition of a 'singular European reality': the positioning of Australia's First People as 'primitive, pagan and savage' (Mudrooroo 1996: 2). And at the far end of the world, Imperial China's social, economic, and political systems were condemned by occupying forces for their 'conservatism, for being immobilised by the weight of tradition and history' (Souchou 1996: 47), a judgement which, Souchou argues, was charted by important 'economic contingencies' (ibid.). Likewise, India's Empire Marketing Board of the British Raj era produced and disseminated outright 'propagandist literature and films' (Muraleedharan 1996: 91). This phenomenon also became elevated in British social circles during the 1970s, when invading 'alien cultures' were perceived as a 'fatal threat to British civilisation' (ibid.: 91–92). In line with this, Cuban scholar Martínez Furé (1970/1993: 110) records that the Spanish colonial conquest not only marginalised but obliterated the island's historic cultures, since they were seen as 'incapable of contributing anything of value'. In accordance with Eagleton, Furé

(ibid.) concludes that in the modern era such cultural subjugation is only possible 'within the framework of capitalist Western culture'.

Following the negotiated pact between the petty bourgeoisie and agents of global capital, South Africa's political system came to embrace Western-style parliamentary rule structured on a neo-liberal, capitalist framework. Even though isolated groups of honest, critical analysts warned of the perfidious nature of the economic aspect (especially) of this accord – the large-scale surrendering of one of the most fundamental and most important conditions for human emancipation – the media machinery locally and across the world hailed the product 'a miracle' (see Taylor 1996: 164–165), a unique and inimitable model to be emulated in the remaining trouble spots of the world. As Tomaselli viewed the situation, 'the new Government of National Unity ... adopt[ed] ... solutions already put in place by an information-ordered globalizing world in which capital now reigned supreme' (2000: 377). Despite this, in South Africa, the *Sunday Times* (8 May 1994) announced: 'We have wrought a miracle, we have made a democracy', while in the US, *The New Republic* (23 May 1994), *The New York Times* (29 April 1994), and *Ebony* 'all talked of South Africa's political miracle'. Simultaneously, leading US TV channels like ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC hosted talks around 'the miracle of South Africa's multiracial elections' (in Taylor 1996: 165). Away from this cacophony, and in its own way, *Critical Arts* sounded a warning, the great import of which either could not be fathomed, or was egoistically ignored by the newly proclaimed intelligentsia:

Critical Arts' partial shift from resistance to policy studies ... does not mean that its critical edge is being vitiated in any significant way. Romantic notions of democracy and the benignness of the current political terrain dominated by the African National Congress (ANC) ... are not part of our assumptions The often romantic idealist political assumptions espoused by South African students from disadvantaged communities who have yet to understand that struggle never ends, *that the new class of apparatchiks may well fall into temptation and embourgeoisification as did the one they have replaced, is cautioned by other African post-colonial experiences.* (Tomaselli, Muller & Shepperson 1996: xiii; emphasis added)

How is it rationally possible, one *must* ask today, that, given the country's historical realities, a 'miracle', even of such sweeping magnitude, could so rapidly replace hundreds of years of unadulterated brutality and mental abuse? While all the 'soppy admirers', especially the BBC, gave the new South Africa a free pass some 15 years ago, now the liberal media barely mention the 'terrifying crime', 'the pestilence of corruption', 'the absurd purchase of needless submarines', or HIV and AIDS, the 'violent xenophobic rage', or the 'unstoppable spread of shanty towns' (Hitchens 2009). As Taylor remarked: 'To see the transition as a "miracle" is to believe in magical theories of the social world' (1996: 166). But as time moves on, people mature. As rational, accountable professionals, we are compelled to confront life's

basic truths, especially when they stare us in the face. As Tomaselli affirms, ‘as intellectual professionals, it is ethically incumbent on media and policy researchers to monitor both the procedural validity and the value-consistency of those who assume the business of legislating the transition to, and entrenchment of, a more just ... dispensation’ (2001: 47–48).

It gives me no comfort to say that, today the myth of the miracle invented by the macro media ruse has finally been dealt a hammer blow. This is seen in the smoke and rage that, after years of subdued dormancy, once again have engulfed the lives of the disfavoured. In the scholarly domain, likewise, prior analyses ‘oriented towards the past and aware of the pitfalls of history and naïve optimism, have drifted into political inactivity’ (Tomaselli 2000: 377). While some honest critics hoped to make their mark in parliamentary and governmental structures, others got onto the ‘lucrative gravy train’ (ibid.). It was not long after the eruption of ‘the miracle’ that the ‘romantic grand narrative of “the left” began to fade’ (Tomaselli 2001: 53). Fortunately today, many have begun to look beyond the existing neo-liberal fallacy in the hope that the real forces of social emancipation sometime will reconvene – if only they can overcome self-extrication, intellectual alienation, social seclusion, and political subjugation. Failure in this regard will simply sustain the scandalous tradition of the mechanisms of disinformation.

Notes

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2 Hereafter referred to as *CSEM*.

3 Hereafter referred to as *IDM*.

4 Bolivia’s National Electoral Council declared the referendum illegal (*IDM* 2008a)

5 Hereafter referred to as *ABN*.

6 *Corriente Marxista Revolucionaria*, hereafter referred to as *CMR*.

7 This perception is based on obvious discrepancies that emerge from commentators working for the Western, neo-liberal media, on the one hand, and on the other, the variety of reports by scholars, labour activists and political analysts personally operating in these countries (see especially *In Defense of Marxism* reports).

8 On occasion Chávez thought it necessary to demonstrate his nation’s support of his rule by holding referendums on key policy shifts. See *IMT* 2008; *IDM* 2008a; Martin, Moreno & Sanabria 2008; Martin, J 2008d; Van Auken 2007.

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