

Conflict-ridden Colombia had clearly failed.

I jump on a bus to Venezuela and the home of the 'Bolivarian Revolution'. Maybe there I will have more hope of finding the dreams of the Liberator realised?

9

OPERATION BOLÍVAR

Venezuela and revolution

The fundamental principle of our system demands that equality be immediately and exclusively established and put into practice in Venezuela . . . We have the right to expect that happiness will be the legacy Venezuela bequeaths her citizens.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR, 'THE ANGOSTURA ADDRESS'

Los Rastrojos

Lourdes has spent a lifetime of dusk-filtered evenings just watching. Several years ago, when cataracts began eating away at his sight, they packed him off to Cuba. The eighty-one-year-old was bundled onto a charter flight to Havana, hosted for a week without charge and examined by a bevy of eye surgeons dressed in creased white lab coats.

Unfortunately, his octogenarian eyes ended up being too deteriorated to operate on. Lourdes' ability to see is shrinking by the day. Yet the old man is philosophical about growing blind. He's already seen a lifetime of seasons come and go, he says. What's another springtime? He can hear the mockingbirds and smell the jacaranda blossom. Besides, he's happy to have been on an aeroplane before he dies.

Habits being what they are, Lourdes still sits out on his porch to watch the world go by. His outdoor haven constitutes a narrow strip of crumbling concrete, no wider than a pavement. A large, inverted oil drum occupies the far end. Its spherical bulk looks to be anchoring his prefabricated house to its moorings. Strawn across its surface lies a colourful collection of half-empty glass bottles. Their labels are blanché yellow by the sun. The writing suggests that the functions of the upended barrel extend to medicine closet and drinks cabinet too.

The last scarlet rays of the day glint off the face of his cheap wristwatch. The reflection catches my eye as I pass by, and I look up towards his rudimentary home. There, by the oil drum, the blind watchman is sitting in his habitual spot. He's slumped in a plastic rocking chair, his thin frame crumpled inwards as if someone's just vacuumed the air out of him. A cloud of midges is buzzing around his hairless forearms.

I wave at him from the road in front, not yet knowing about his fogged vision. The gesture is wasted, but he hears my footsteps and greets my blur with a cheerful *buenas tardes*. I respond in kind, and he beckons me over to join him. Four mucus-yellow teeth lodged into a set of mud-brown gums grin in my direction. Aside from the dental catastrophe, his smile is kind and welcoming. There's only one other chair. I take a seat.

We talk for an hour or so. Lourdes has lived in the same one-street hamlet of Los Rastrojos all his life. Down the highway is Sabaneta, a two-bit town in the third-rate province of Barinas. This is the heart of the *llanos*, Venezuela's ground zero, miles and miles of flat savannah broken up by nothing except fields of dry corn and starved-looking cattle. In Bolívar's day, bands of outlaws had ridden across these dusty grasslands. Today, it's dented pick-ups that trawl the dusty highways.

I've come for clues about Hugo Chávez, the boy from the backwaters. Little Hugo had spent his early years under these same sun-scorched skies, fighting the midges and listening to *joropo* country dances played out on a six-stringed bandiola.

After hearing all about Lourdes' cataracts and his Cuban adventure, I inquire if he'd known the president as a boy. The Los Rastrojos old-timer smiles. I suspect he'd been anticipating the question, waiting patiently for me to get round to it.

'Of course. All us oldies round here remember him well, me more than most. I was friends with his father. He was the local schoolmaster here for a while. *El Maestro*, as good a man as they get.'

The schoolhouse is long gone, replaced by a brick-built agricultural college. The Chávez family home has also ceased to be. A

roadside lot full of weeds is all that's left. *El Maestro* moved on decades ago. Shortly after his son came to power, he changed jobs too. Lourdes' former friend became governor and moved into the walled mansion in the state capital. He's since passed on the gubernatorial keys to his eldest offspring, Adán.

Falling quiet for a minute, the *llanero* retrieves a distant memory from half a century ago. He locates it and dusts it off. Like its owner, the anecdote is mottled with age.

'It must have taken place about this time in the evening. No, a little later perhaps. The sun had set. Anyway, I was sitting out on the porch when I saw a small boy tearing down the road. He was riding an oversized bicycle with no stabilisers.'

The absence of supports identified him immediately as the schoolmaster's son. Young Hugo never once used the beginners' wheels, according to Lourdes. The detail appears important to him. It's as if the future president was impatient with his youth, anxious to be done with it and on to the chapters of his adult life.

The storyteller continues.

'He was alone, pedalling hard down the bumpy street. I stepped off the porch as he approached and put my hand up for him to stop, like this.'

Lourdes holds up an outstretched palm as a traffic policeman might.

The rest of the scene plays out like the final frames of a timeworn cine film.

'The little scoundrel didn't have any brakes so he jammed his heels in the mud. He pulled up just short, almost knocked me over. "Huguito, does your father know that you are out by yourself in the dark?" I ask him. He was always charging around, you see, day or night. Always had a broken bone or a wrist in a sling. Do you know what the little man said to me? Fired back with it, quick as a flash. I remember it clear as day. "Why, Don Lourdes," he replies, "I'm not alone." "And how might that be, Huguito?" I inquire. He jumps back on his bike and shouts over his shoulder: "Don Lourdes, I'm not riding by myself. God and Bolívar are at my side."'

*

Every revolution requires a sense of destiny. Yet destiny is an unfulfilled promise, a legal contract that awaits signing. Without a signature, it's as useless as a winning lottery ticket squirrelled away on a shelf. Simón Bolívar was the man to step forward. As a twenty-two-year-old tourist on the slopes of Rome's Monte Sacro, the unknown South American aristocrat put his name to paper, in the presence of his childhood tutor, Simón Rodríguez.

'I swear by the God of my fathers, I swear on their graves, I swear by my country that I will not rest body or soul until I have broken the chains binding us to the will of Spanish might!'

The oath might well have been a commandment from on high so religiously did he observe it.

It takes a special kind of man to heed the call of Providence. Many millennia before, Moses had been called upon by the same God to speak before Pharaoh. The tremulous prophet begged off as a poor public speaker.

Not so the young Venezuelan revolutionary. He jumped at the task of history-making. No power, neither in Heaven nor on Earth, could divert him from his mission. Even when an earthquake prised open the streets of Caracas and swallowed up the vestiges of the First Republic, Bolívar's confidence did not budge. He stood above the rubble and wrung his fists: 'We will fight Nature itself if it opposes us, and force it to obey.'

Loss in battle did nothing to diminish his faith. He fed his armies with the same fervour. Twice the patriot forces claimed Venezuela as theirs, and twice the Spaniards stole it back. Only confidence in the ineluctability of fate persuaded them back a third time.

Knowing he was the right man at the right time enabled Bolívar to believe in the insuperable. His legendary proclamations on independence, visionary epics in which he mapped out the future of the continent – 'The Cartagena Manifesto', 'The Jamaica Letter', 'The Angostura Address' – were all written with the ink of defeat. 'Success will crown our efforts,' the Liberator wrote after the fall of the Second Republic, 'because the destiny of America is irrevocably

fixed.' The vanquished general was holed up in a rented garret at the time, so broke he had to scrounge money to pay his landlady.

Hugo Chávez shares that spirit of destiny. He has renamed the country over which he presides as the Bolívarian Republic of Venezuela. Noam Chomsky in hand, the big shot from Barinas sees himself standing at the apex of history. Civilisations are clashing. Class wars are waging. The dawn of a second independence is awaiting its claimant. A twenty-first-century Bolívar is rising from the ashes.

Maracaibo and Coro

My first sighting of Hugo Chávez on Venezuelan soil occurs in the ground-floor room of a love hotel. It was mid-morning on a Sunday, and I'd just found the remote for the padlocked television set.

It had been an eventful Saturday night, though not one that would typically end up in a by-the-hour motel room. A long-distance bus had deposited me in the oil town of Maracaibo. It was well after dark when the Caracas-bound driver unceremoniously dumped me on an artery road miles from the centre of town. Disorientated and without a cent in my pocket, I'd flagged down the first taxi that passed.

For the next hour and a half, Diego took me on a tour of the city's cash machines. To my increasing dismay, each turned out to be empty or unwilling to recognise my foreign bank card. Eleventh time lucky, I found one that worked. By this stage, we'd lapped the city twice, and Diego's bill covered a good percentage of the extraction.

The change would see me through a night at an *económico* hotel. Diego recommended the Hotel Caribe and duly dropped me at the front door of the rundown joint. The luminous neon sign with its flashing coconuts should have alerted me. But it was 2 a.m., and I was dog-tired. I paid the grizzled rent-a-thug at the counter ('Yes, a full night please' – strange question?), crossed the hall and unlocked the door to my windowless double room. Within seconds, I was asleep.

Only the next morning, in the starkness of the bare strip light, do my suspicions about the Hotel Caribe's true credentials begin to grow. The clues are not hard to spot: the disproportionate-sized bed, the plastic under-sheet, the continual comings and goings outside the door, the faint grunting echoing through the vent pipes.

Confirmation comes at the touch of the remote. Onto the television screen flashes a graphic close-up of a copulating couple. There's no dialogue, just grinding. I flick channels. The only alternative is *Aló Presidente*, Hugo Chávez's weekly chat show. Hardcore porn or soft-core politics? I switch off the set.

My night tour with Diego and subsequent sleepover is enough to persuade me not to tarry long in Maracaibo. An unobtrusive blend of concrete gristle and industrial grime, Venezuela's second city dedicates itself to oil: to drilling it, collecting it, refining it and selling it. Beneath the Orinoco Belt sit billions of barrels of thick crude. This is the fuel for the revolution, the black gold bankroll that keeps Chávez & Co. on the road.

I shower, change and take a second cab to the bus station. Through the smudged window of the taxi, Maracaibo's flyovers and charmless streets look as uninviting by day as they did by night. The buses are all booked, and twenty minutes later I'm sitting shotgun in a loaded 1967 Ford Mustang, heading east along the coast to the colonial town of Coro.

The car's gears crunch noisily and its fan belt whines, but the road stretches straight and flat, and I'm soon asleep again. I awake three hours later to see my fellow passengers dismounting. We have arrived. Checking my accommodation listings for a hotel free of stained bedding, I choose a mid-range place near the town centre and flick on the television.

There's no more grinding, but to my surprise I find the president still on air. The man has been at it for over five hours. Picking up my notebook, I sit down to watch.

Like Bolívar, he's no looker. His forehead is too flat, his nose too pendulous, his eyes too piggy, his teeth too spaced, his cheeks too flaccid, his neck too thick, his hair too wiry. But there's a

magnetism about him that keeps me watching. Two hours later, I'm still there.

The show's format is relatively straightforward. The president is shown in close-up, usually behind a simple desk. He dresses casually, always the same shirt of revolutionary red. His style is conversational and unscripted, a rambling monologue of ideas and anecdotes, policy commitments and the occasional military threat. When the urge takes him, he's wont to break out in song as well – snippets from the *boleros* of his childhood. The spectacle is part cabinet meeting, part cabaret performance and part chat on the porch.

Each week, a loose theme runs through the show. Today's episode happens to focus on farming. As viewers, we're taken on a tour of a 'socialist' cooperative. The camera tracks slowly across a field of happy workers toiling with hoes and ploughs. An earthy folk song plays softly in the background. The voice of an off-screen narrator then starts disparaging land-snatching monopolies and 'vile estates'. We hear how the soil of Venezuela is a battleground for justice. We're told about the flag of 'Land and Free Men', an abstract ensign that's sowing sovereignty up and down the fatherland. Smiling farmhands pop up to share their thoughts on the joys of 'agrarian socialism'.

From the pre-recorded tape, we flip across to a live two-way between farm manager and president. Phone-ins, audience questions and other daytime-TV staples fill the remaining gaps.

Aló Presidente is ostensibly dedicated to nurturing the roots of the revolution. Inextricably and intentionally, it also operates as propagandist publicity for its host. The Chávez caravan appears to be everywhere. This week, we find him in a grassy meadow in Sabaneta. Next week, it could be a mountain summit or the beach. This is the president with his people.

Audiences of everyday folk are bussed in to fill the temporary studios: bakers, teachers, road sweepers, cleaners, factory workers. All are dressed in the same revolutionary red, all ready to laugh and cheer on cue. The show's front man talks their language and asks

their names. With every episode that passes, the image of *mi Presidente, 'my president'* – the leader with the people's touch, the champion of the common man – inflates a little larger.

The seven-hour marathon eventually draws to a close. Chávez's face fades from the screen and the credits roll. In homes across the nation, people get up from chairs to put on supper. Only in the Hotel Caribe do they stay in bed, televisions presumably still grinding.

Adrián Navarro's office in Coro's Town Hall is cluttered with political paraphernalia. The national pennant hangs limp from a flagpole in one corner. On the wall in front of the entrance door hangs an official photo of Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías. The president is dressed in a dark suit with a carnival queen's sash neatly slung over his right shoulder. A truncated portrait of Bolívar in dress uniform sits next to it.

A far larger painting depicting a white-haired naval officer dominates the main wall. The artist's subject cuts a swashbuckling figure in a tailcoat of gold trim. A dress sword dangles from his waist in a silver sheath. The stout Señor Navarro is ensconced proudly behind his desk in his government-branded puffa jacket and *Chavista* baseball cap.

'General Francisco de Miranda,' says the Town Hall's general director, following my eye to the painting. 'The first great liberator of Venezuela.'

A full and thorough biography of the chivalrous revolutionary is accorded to all Coro newcomers. Señor Navarro does the honours. A veteran of the French and American Revolutions, a friend of William Pitt and lover of Catherine the Great, Francisco de Miranda lived a romantic life in a romantic age. Liberating South America constituted the last of his great adventures.

Miranda landed on the shores of Coro in 1806 at the head of a voluntary force of five hundred would-be liberators. The scheme did not go quite to plan. He freed the town, but few residents rallied to his call. Meanwhile, the Spanish mustered their garrison at

the city gates and sent for reinforcements. Playing the odds, Miranda set sail before his ships were scuttled. The occupation was a fiasco, but the ball of independence was set in motion.

Five years later, the revolutionary chancer would be back, this time with an inexperienced Bolívar at his side. The two had met several years earlier at the older man's Georgian town house in London's Bloomsbury district. A meeting place for South America's political exiles, it was there that Bolívar is reputed to have first heard the idea of a continental confederation, a sort of European Union of the former Spanish colonies.

Failure again marked Miranda's steps. For persistence if not success, the pony-tailed poseur is heralded as the precursor of Venezuelan's independence. The municipality of Coro today carries his name and the town centre his statue.

The ring of the telephone breaks off the history lesson: '*Hola?* Yes, good thanks, *Coronel*. Here in the office, fighting the good fight.'

From the jovial tone of the conversation, I wonder if it's a real colonel on the other end of the phone. Using military terms has become the vogue ever since Chávez, an ex-paratrooper, entered the Presidential Palace.

During his early years in power, the Venezuelan head of state was fond of dressing up in his military fatigues for the cameras. Viewers were reminded of the young Chávez, the idealist army officer who once headed a bold, but bungled, *coup d'état*. The image also fits well with his idol Bolívar, the wartime general and peacetime president. But too much boot polish also dredged up memories of the murderous military juntas of South America's recent past. The public-relations people hinted at a change of outfit. Today, the bomber boots and jumpsuits are kept mostly in the closet.

The man can be taken out of the army, but not the army out of the man. Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution is run like a military operation. The president's office in Miraflores Palace acts as Command HQ, a war bunker from which executive communiqués are dispatched and political strategy devised. Paintings of Bolívar in

wrecked sailor). No aspect of the Liberator's life is too insignificant for the marketing-minded missions. Mission Negra Hipólita, for example, a meals-on-wheels service for the hungry and destitute, takes its name from Bolívar's wet nurse.

Señor Navarro puts down the receiver, turning his mind from his- tory of the revolution to its paperwork, towers of which pile precip- itously on the edge of his desk.

Sensing he wants to get on with his day, I cut to the purpose of my visit and explain that I'm interested in visiting some of the missions.

From under a stack of papers, he retrieves a directory. Only mar- ginally thinner than a copy of the Yellow Pages, he drops it on the desk with a thud: 'Where do you want to start?'

I leave the Town Hall five minutes later with an abbreviated list of suggestions and a map of the grid-marked town. In Bolivarian terms, I have in my hand the coordinates of the revolution's infra- structure: its supply depots, its field hospitals and, above all, its training grounds.

My first appointment behind allied lines takes me downtown to the grubby market district. Unlicensed vendors hawk week-old vegetables and stale-looking meat from stalls along the roadsides. Set back from the street are the headquarters of Mission Mercal, the poor man's supermarket. Its subsidised goods are stacked up along the aisles of a characterless warehouse.

There's no car park, no shopping trolleys and no automatic slid- ing door to facilitate entrance. Instead, there's an iron-grille gate and a uniformed guard. Each waiting shopper is handed a num- bered chit. Mercal works on a one-in, one-out system. The guard monitors the barred door, shouting out a number every few minutes like a bingo caller and allowing the next in line to scuttle through. The heavy metal door clangs shut behind them. It reminds me of visiting day at Asunción's Tacumbú prison.

Once inside, the supermarket sweep begins. Consumers have no special two-for-one deals to tempt them. Everything in Mercal is on permanent rock-bottom offer. Products are packaged in simple, nondescript containers. Some aren't wrapped at all. Shoppers come

his general's garb spread across the walls. The Liberator's protégé is even said to have kept a chair empty for the military mastermind's wandering spirit.

No war for independence, figurative or otherwise, can go with- out an army. The Bolivarian Revolution keeps the rule. During the Chávez administration, the armed forces have been stockpiling their arsenals and training their troops. *El Comandante*, as the president likes to be named, once warned the 'Venezuelan oli- garchy' not to fool themselves into thinking that a 'peaceful revo- lution is an unarmed revolution'. Sabre-rattling against his neighbours in Colombia and the forces of Yankee imperialism are also commonplace. Larent, but lurking, is the military threat in Venezuela.

So far, the fight has kept to the ballot boxes. Even so, soldiers are in the streets. The ex-military strongman believes in putting the army to work. Not that yesteryear's dictators kept their armies idle. Running death squads and meeting arbitrary arrest quotas all took time. But Venezuela's restyled National Bolivarian Army sees its civic duties differently. Toolkits, not torture techniques, are its new- found speciality.

Under 'Plan Bolívar', the country's soldiers are educated to become caring combatants. When they're not on military exercise, they're out in the community fixing potholes and manning market stalls. The tactic of 'civic-military union' went down so well with the public that *El Comandante* effectively militarised the rest of government too.

Public services are now planned and plotted like battleground manoeuvres. The main vehicle for attack are the missions, a sort of multi-insurgent offensive against Venezuela's prevailing ills.

One of the earliest assaults set out to annihilate illiteracy. Reinforced by a battalion of Cuban teachers, Mission Robinson dispatched crack education detachments to root out those in need of their ABCs. The coded title owes its origins to Bolívar's eccentric tutor, Simón Rodríguez (who later changed his surname to Robinson after reading the adventures of Daniel Defoe's ship-

to buy the larger essentials: meat, flour, milk, sugar, cheese, salt, rice, cooking oil. These are the rations of the revolution.

I conduct a spot of market research in the queue outside. Mercal's customers all seem elated with the bargain-basement store. The women I speak with (there are only women in the queue) have no word of complaint. The chicken might come with a few feathers, one young mum concedes, but she can pull those off. Fresh milk is sometimes scarce, an older lady comments, but her husband prefers the powdered stuff anyway. No one moans about the three-hour wait outside or about the total absence of customer service. Thanks to *El Presidente*, they can now put food on the family table. If it means standing in the scorching sun all afternoon, so be it.

Out at the Barrio Adentro clinic on Avenida Ramón Antonio, a similar satisfaction reigns. Waiting by the entrance door, I come across twenty-nine-year-old Migales. An unemployed single mum, she is waiting to see a doctor with her energetic four-year-old, Juan. She came by this morning, but the queue was too long and the attending nurse told her to come back later. The reception desk is temporarily empty.

Migales unsuccessfully grabs at her young son, who has slipped onto the floor and is now crawling under the waiting room's row of cupped plastic chairs: 'They think he might be suffering from a pelvis problem. We're here to get some X-rays.'

Tacked onto the wall beside us, behind transparent plastic sheeting, read the various services available at the clinic: ophthalmology, electrocardiography, radiography, intensive therapy, ultrasounds, endoscopies. Staffed by Cuban medics, the clinic forms part of a network of smaller Barrio Adentro health centres dotted around the town's poorer neighbourhoods.

'Before, the health services were pathetic,' Migales says in response to my question about the impact of Barrio Adentro, the Government's flagship medical mission.

'You used to have to pay for operations and medicines up front, and the doctors were always very unfriendly. In the normal public hospitals, it's still like that.'

Juan delivers a heavy kick to the bottom of his mother's chair. I have a hunch his pelvis is fine, but Migales wants the doctor's assurance. Like the ladies at Mission Mercal, she doesn't mind the wait. Besides, as with everything else at the clinic, the X-rays are free of charge.

In addition to the social work of the missions, Señor Navarro had thought it worth adding an educational element to my tour as well.

Class is out when I climb the stone stairs of Cecilio Acosta High School. The crest on the door dates the institution back to 1833. Coro's oldest school has seen more changes in recent years than the rest of its history put together: class hours and teaching days have been extended to maximise learning opportunities; competitive rankings are off limits; entrance fees have been abolished; exams can be re-sat until the student passes; group work is replacing individual study; and the tuck shop has been replaced by free, healthy lunches in the canteen.

The most substantive changes are in the curriculum, Iván Primera, the school's coordinator, tells me. 'Trans-disciplinary' is the new buzzword for Venezuela's educationalists. The laws of gravity and the periodic table now sit side by side in one homogenised subject called 'science'. French and English, meanwhile, are merged together in one Esperanto-esque 'language' class.

Bolívar's own ideas on teaching had their quirks. In a letter about the education of his twelve-year-old nephew, he specified the subject areas he judged worthy of study. The list includes classes in good manners, botany, dance, civil engineering (optional) and 'the enjoyment of cultivated society where the fairer sex exerts its beneficial influence'.

By the same token, the Liberator also decreed that primary schools be established with public funds, a visionary measure for the time. His appetite for innovation is often credited to Simón Rodríguez, whose edict on life Bolívar learned by rote as a boy: 'Either we invent or we err.' In recognition, Venezuela's new Bolivarian kindergartens are now known as *Simoncitos*, 'Little Simóns'.

group of three diners. The conversation is being led by a woman in a pale blue suit, who is talking loudly to her two companions about the dessert before them. She turns out to be the chef and inventor of the macaroon-encrusted sweet.

'Some chocolate mousse cheesecake?' she asks, offering up a tempting slither of her calorie-rich creation.

Thanking her, I try a forkful: 'Wow. *Que rico!*'

'I trained in Belgium,' she replies, smugly.

I'm presented with a full portion and an invitation to join them. The sight of so much cream cheese persuades me to take a chair. Even in a Marxist-inspired republic, I should have guessed there's no such thing as a free lunch.

For the next thirty minutes, Virginia, Club Bolívar's head chef, holds forth on the unassailable benefits of Venezuela's cooperative movement. In her kitchen, worker solidarity rules: 'Chefs and waiters on an even keel, I say.'

Not only does capitalism turn workers into slaves, she pontificates, it brings us Subway and McDonald's. She scrunches her cordon bleu nose at the words: 'Our children should be eating food that contains something, some feeling, of where they belong.'

To make her point, she clicks her fingers, and the waiter comes running.

'Be a doll, bring us some *Cocuy de Pecaya*, would you?'

For an egalitarian enterprise, she runs a tight ship.

The 53-per-cent-proof liqueur is with us in seconds. Transparent and evil-looking, the local tequila equivalent is concocted from the spiny leaves of an indigenous cactus plant. Glasses are passed around.

'A toast?' Virginia suggests.

I wince as the smell of neat alcohol reaches my nostril.

'*Patria, socialismo o muerte, venceremos*,' one of her companions shouts. 'Fatherland, socialism or death, we shall conquer.'

And down it goes. A fit of explosive spluttering immediately overwhelms me. My mouth on fire, I lunge for the water jug. Everyone bursts out laughing. Socialism or death, indeed.

The serious Mr Primera finishes with a lengthy discourse on the philosophy behind all the turnarounds. 'Pragmatics' have dominated the teaching handbook for too long. More 'humanism' must be brought to bear: 'What's most important is putting an integrated vision of the individual at the centre of our education system.'

On my way out, I pass a pair of smooching teenagers on the school steps. Their tongues are closely examining one another's larynges, while their hands run over the remainder of the anatomy syllabus. Cecilio Acosta's students seem to be taking to the notion of integrated learning with enthusiasm.

In a *Simoncito* just around the corner, I find fifty-one-year-old Héctor, his knees squashed beneath a miniature wooden desk. The electrician is at the other end of the revolution's learning cycle. Every day after work, he attends a three-hour evening class. Héctor and his twenty classmates are swotting up on affidavits and contract law in the hope of qualifying as lawyers.

The extra-curricula lessons fall under the rubric of Mission Sucre, a programme designed to give mature students a crack at university. An equivalent initiative, Mission Ribas, is aimed at adults who never obtained their high-school diplomas first time round.

In the Bolivarian Revolution, family outings with grandpa and the kids are fast going out of fashion. If Mum isn't waiting in line, then everyone is busy with their homework.

Feeling my personal mission in Coro has run its course, I book myself onto the evening bus to Caracas and go in search of something to eat. In the colonial city centre, across from the spot where South America's first Catholic Mass was celebrated, I stumble on Club Bolívar.

A former private members' club for Coro's great and good, the town landmark lay vacant for decades until the bicentenary celebrations for Miranda's invasion earned it a revamp. The one-storey building now gleams with fresh paint. Inside, it houses an exhibition space for local artists, a bar area and a boutique restaurant.

I push open the restaurant door and find it empty except for a

Caracas

Gato Negro metro station in west Caracas is awash with the revolution's foot soldiers. Men and women bunch together on the sidewalk, uniformly dressed in the same shade of red. Political slogans adorn their T-shirts and baseball caps. '*Rumbo al socialismo*', runs the official favourite of the day. 'Towards socialism'.

This is the *Chavista* army. Drawn from the vast well of modern-day Bolívarians, these citizen volunteers are committed to defending the presidential project tooth and nail. Today, *El Comandante* is due to inaugurate a bridge on the way to the airport. The rank and file received their call-up, and here they are.

I join the queue at a food stall along the roadside. A tall man in wrap-around sunglasses is waiting in front of me. He orders himself two fried *empanadas* and a thimble of steaming black coffee.

'The same for me please,' I say to the street vendor.

Lingering over his breakfast at the stall's rusty counter, the man with the dark glasses asks if I'm intending to go to the inauguration. I tell him I am. My accent and blue shirt single me out as an outsider. Either from curiosity or courtesy, he invites me to tag along with him and his friends.

'Sure,' I reply, glad of the company.

'Great. My name's Ramón, by the way. Where're you from . . . er?'

'Oliver, my name's Oliver,' I clarify. 'I'm from England.'

The information meets with his approval:

'Was in England myself many years ago. Liver-poul. Fixing one of our ships. Used to be in the navy. *Mucha música*. Beatles, Lennon and all that. Good times. Follow me. I'll introduce you to my mates.'

We leave the wheeled *empanada* carts and head down the busy pavement towards a park entrance. Ramón's obligatory red T-shirt barely fits his muscular frame and generous girth. Repeated washing has faded the scarlet red into an off-crimson, and the cotton lining around the neck has begun to fray.

The T-shirt bears the logo of the Simón Rodríguez National

Experimental University, an alternative further-education institution for the underprivileged. Through Mission Sucre, the ex-navy deckhand undertook a two-year course in electrical engineering. Ramón has struggled to find a job though. El Valle, the district of southern Caracas where he lives, is better known for its gang violence than its graduate openings. Despite a year out of work, he remains upbeat about his new career opportunities: 'I'm waiting for the State to designate me a job. They've plenty to go around.'

It's a reasonable expectation, for a militant *Chavista*. Ramón recently acquired a government grant for several thousand dollars. 'For essential house repairs,' he winks. The money went towards remodelling his bathroom.

A block away, lounging against the park railings, we find Ramón's five friends: 'Meet Oliver, from the land of the Beatles' [pronounced 'Beet-less' in Spanish]. They look at him blankly. 'From *Inglaterra*, you morons!'

My guide for the day introduces me to the group. There's Guillermo, a short man with a pockmarked face and the rough hands of a veteran labourer; Jonny, a gangly black man with a goat-bee beard and the unimaginative nickname of 'Negro'; Edgar, who is scrawny, moustached and the spitting image of an Indian rickshaw-wallah; Julio, the group joker, who has a plastic Venezuelan flag sticking out from beneath his red bandana; and, finally, Elizabeth, a wiry-haired *mulatta* with rounded thighs who's wearing an unflattering angler's fly jacket. As with Ramón, all are in their late forties or early fifties. I go round shaking everyone's hand.

The introductions done, Jonny reaches down into a plastic carrier bag between his feet and retrieves a bottle of rum. It's wrapped in a brown paper bag. 'One for the heat?' he suggests. A plastic shot glass makes the rounds of the seven of us. I check my watch. It is just after 9 a.m.

'Time we were off, no?' advises Edgar, nodding his head in the direction of the two-lane highway at the corner of the block.

Julio falls into step with me as we make our way to the road and the waiting transport. His voice grows in volume as he speaks.

'This bridge being opened today is just one of heaps of projects that this government has enacted. Schools, hospitals, train lines, power plants, you name it. Previous presidents just used to pocket the money or share it around among their cronies. You should see the millions they've got stashed away in *gringo* bank accounts. Chávez is different. He cares about Venezuela. He wants to make us great again!'

Everyone nods in agreement. The affirmation of his audience buoys him up, and he continues.

'Venezuela is a country facing many threats. International capitalists want to keep the poor like us in chains. We won't stand for it, I tell you! Not to mention the United States. Bunch of terrorists, always meddling in our internal affairs and insulting our sovereignty. Damn Yankees, they can just sod off, that's what we say.'

'Yeah, too right, *compañero*,' an overweight man shouts from further down the pavement. 'Socialism or death!' another joins in. There's a festive atmosphere to the day already.

We reach the bus stop just as Julio is finishing up his public discourse. His audience has grown from our small group to the entire bus queue.

'In our battle for socialism, we are fighting against the tide. But we are confident that our president can achieve victory for us. He's an honest man, a strong man, a true Bolivarian leader!'

The rousing finale earns the crowd-pleaser the applause that he's looking for. It's impossible to tell how much Julio actually agrees with what he's saying. But he plays the part of political apparatchik to a tee. Here, in the trenches of the revolution, that's all that really matters.

'All aboard,' Guillermo hollers. As the oldest of our number, he's the unofficial leader of our small unit of *Chavista* loyalists.

I climb up behind Ramón onto the waiting minibus. The driver revs his engine impatiently, sending up a cloud of black smoke from the exhaust. The smell of diesel leaks through the open windows. The air is muggy and stale-smelling, a tendency that increases as the vehicle fills inexorably.

I find a seat at the back. Elizabeth hands me a bottle of water that she'd extracted from a large ice-filled barrel on the kerbside. I put it into my bag and thank her.

'Think nothing of it,' she says, handing out bottles to everyone else in the group. 'It's free. This country produces a lot so it can pay for stuff like this.' I'm reminded of the unsightly oil refineries outside Maracaibo.

Ramón and his friends have grown used to 'free stuff'. How long the gravy train will last depends largely on world oil prices. Not that they're complaining about the government's short-termism. None of them has a salaried job exactly. They are all volunteer members of an ill-defined 'committee'. Their task is to invigilate the delivery of foodstuffs, medicines and other government-subsidised goods in their neighbourhood. By hanging around the stockrooms, employees are supposed to be dissuaded from stealing. There's still a substantial deficit in the stock-list every month. Despite never having caught anyone, the team collects an 'incentive' for its vigilance. The monthly stipend conveniently tallies with the national minimum wage.

'*Vamos! Vamos! Vamos!*' the animated busload begins yelling.

The driver slides the free bus service into gear, and we pull off. Mexican hip-hop is blasting from the minibus radio. A popular track comes on, and the bus begins to rock as everyone joins in with the chorus. Five minutes into the journey, we run into traffic. The delay inspires a violent spate of horn-pounding from our driver. A cacophony of irritated klaxons responds. The passengers treat the racket as a test of their vocal power and begin screaming the song lyrics.

Wedged between two corpulent women who are bulging out of their seats and onto mine, I begin to feel slightly queasy. Now we've slowed to a crawl, there's no longer a breeze to offset the stultifying heat and humidity. The sun is beating through the rear window and my shirt is growing damp with sweat.

I begin to regret the *empanadas* back at the metro station. The taste of bile rises to the back of my mouth. I think I might vomit.

I scan the bus for an open window. The nearest is two rows ahead. To reach it would require manoeuvring around a trio of busy middle-aged ladies. They are dancing along the row in a violent form of sedentary salsa. Arms and arses are flailing everywhere. I prepare to lunge.

Seconds from take-off, my mind flicks back to the free water. Immediately I thrust a desperate hand into my bag and grab the bottle. It's still cold to the touch. I flip the cap and take a swig. It's so refreshing it makes my toes curl. I close my eyes and take another gulp, cherishing each icy rivulet as it rolls over my tongue. The nausea passes. If Ramón had handed me a recruitment form for the *Chavista* army then and there, I would have willingly signed up.

Eventually the heat begins to get to the other passengers as well. In a commanding voice, Guillermo demands that the man at the wheel let us off. The door slides open, and we all pile onto the melting tar mac. Weaving between the hooting cars, it's a fifteen-minute walk to the bridge. Hundreds of others are also making the pilgrimage.

In the sea of red, Ramón and I manage to get separated from the rest of the group. After a long but fruitless search for them, we press on. As we near the inauguration point, the security increases. Military police mix with civilian law-enforcement officers, their arms locked together in an impenetrable wall of Robocop riot gear. They steer us along with the help of volunteer stewards.

To the left of the bridge runs the old highway. It curves down the gorge of a precipitous valley. Above straddles the imposing concrete bridge that we've all collectively gathered to admire.

Looking up across the ravine, I spot a brightly painted shanty settlement sitting high on a distant hill. The residents are just visible on their rooftops, tiny stickmen and stickwomen standing out against the cobalt-blue sky. From their scrappy hilltop escarpment, they have an eagle's view of the events below. There, on the barren slopes of Caracas, in tens of thousands of colourful matchboxes, live the residents of the *Chavista* heartlands.

It was from hillside shanties like this one that the poor and marginalised swarmed down into the city streets at the end of February

1989. Ostensibly annoyed by a rise in bus fares, they ran riot through the capital for two full days. Barricading themselves inside their homes, the middle classes looked on in horror as shops were looted and cars set on fire.

El Comandante is fond of pointing to the so-called *Caracazo* as the Miranda moment of the Bolivarian Revolution, the time when the people stood up and demonstrated their desire for change. It would take ten years, one failed coup attempt and a prison sentence for the modern-day Bolívar to take power. Now that he had, the streets were teeming once again.

'It looks like there's a clearing over there,' Ramón says above the crowd. 'Perhaps we'll get a view of the others?'

We edge off to the left, away from the ravine and the bridge, towards a steep bank running along the roadside. At its edge runs a pipeline, yet another reminder of the liquid gold propping up the new bridge and mega-projects like it. We climb up onto the hulking metal tubing, which stands about three feet off the ground. It feels good to be briefly out of the swirling sea of people, but there's no sign of Guillermo and company.

'You wait here, I'll have to go look for them,' says Ramón, after unsuccessfully scanning the crowd for a few moments.

I watch him climb back down and disappear, swept up by the tide of human bodies. Back up the road, six white drums are floating downstream on the surface of the crowd. From a distance, they look like giant buoyancy aids. As they bob closer towards me, a band of toused drummers comes into view beneath them. Eventually, the drums' owners escape the swell and wash up in the clearing beneath me.

They brush themselves down and, after a quick conflag, kick off their set. In an instant, the rally-goers quit their pushing and begin clapping and dancing to the percussion's energetic vibe. The beat of the drums drowns the voice of the event's official announcer, who's finding infinite ways to thank *El Presidente* for the gift of the bridge.

A television cameraman on the roof of his crew van swivels round to catch the action, and the drummers pick up the tempo.

The pulsating beat spreads through the crowd, setting bottoms wobbling and arms waving. In the centre of the throng, the band-leader blows repeatedly on a whistle. The sound rents the air like piercing shards of high-pitched shrapnel. On the pipeline beside me, a jiving black woman with bleached peroxide hair thrusts a plastic flag into my hand. Then the man on my other side throws an arm round my shoulder. He's jumping up and down in time to the rhythm. Soon the flag woman is joining in too. Before we know it, an improvised line dance is rippling down the elevated oil duct.

'Oliver, have you gone loco?'

It's Ramón. Having miraculously located his friends, he's come back to collect me. I half thought I'd never see him again, and I wave down to him enthusiastically. The *Chavista* cheerleader is pointing a rotating index finger at the side of his head, a sign of my alleged dementia. I release myself from the grip of the unknown spectator next to me and climb down to the roadside. Immediately, another revolutionary reveller fills my space on the party pipeline. If Chávez's supporters care half as much about politics as they do about partying, the Bolivarian Revolution can but grow.

'They've got front-row seats, overlooking the ravine,' an animated Ramón tells me.

We wade back into the roaring current, emerging flustered but unscathed on the highway's far bank ten minutes later. Julio welcomes me with a mock salute. Jonny, who's now onto his second bottle of the day, offers me a drop of rum, 'for the heat'. Meanwhile, the rest of the group occupy themselves laying into Ramón for getting lost and criticising his scouting skills.

Sharing our rocky outcrop above the ravine is a legion of civil servants from the Ministry of Education. They've been given the morning off work to attend the opening. Excited to be on a day out, the work colleagues snap giggling photos of themselves on their mobile-phone cameras.

An hour after the scheduled arrival time, with the sun at its highest, three small specks emerge on the horizon. A woman from

the Ministry of Education spots them first. 'It's *him*,' she squeals overexcitedly. An animated buzz passes through the crowd. Eyes shaded behind dark glasses look up towards the approaching celestial cohort. Fingers point. Banners unfurl. Cameras are retrieved from belt-holders.

The far-off dots grow in shape and form until finally the insignia of the President's helicopter is visible to the naked eye. The two support choppers branch off, leaving the skies empty for Chávez. Alone, he flies circular laps above the crowd.

'There he is, there he is,' Elizabeth is screaming. Others join in the bedlam. 'Chávez! *Viva mi Presidente!*'

Above our heads, the ex-paratrooper is standing in the open door of the helicopter's hold. He leans forward, suspended on the ledge by a safety harness. The presidential Action Man salutes the multitude, sending thousands of waving arms shooting up in response. Three times he circles the swaying reed bed of people below.

Another woman from the Ministry of Education is crying unstrainedly beside me, beyond herself at the sight of her real-life hero. 'Te amo, mi Presidente, te amo,' the star-struck pen pusher is shouting hysterically: 'I love you, my president, I love you.' These are not rent-a-crowd tears. Her emotion is visceral and mildly scary.

The ceremony itself passes in a haze. The President lands at the bridgehead, gently lowered to earth like a *deus ex machina* in an ancient Greek stage play. The descending helicopter drowns the retinue of waiting dignitaries in a cloud of dust. Then a priest intones a solemn blessing, a ribbon is clipped and a trail of red balloons is released into the indigo blue sky.

From our high-up vantage point, we watch the ceremony unfold like battlefield generals on a far-off hilltop. The presidential cavalcade sets off across the bridge, pressed in from behind by a slow-moving phalanx of toy soldiers. President Chávez rides in an open-backed jeep. A contemporary Caesar, he waves imperially at his faithful foot soldiers from the rear of the diesel-powered chariot. Engulfed by security staff and carnivorous press photographers, it's almost impossible to catch a glimpse of him. Back at the bridge-

head, the helicopter makes a stealthy take-off and arcs back across the ravine. Leaving his blades turning, the pilot is ready to whisk away *El Comandante* as soon as the victory march is done. A final wave and the president is duly off, chasing after the balloons towards the rocky horizon.

Our regiment of the *Chavista* army is left suffering in post-orgasmic deflation. 'Would have been good to hear him speak,' mumbles Julio.

Ramón shoots him a stern look: '*El Presidente* is a busy man. Have some respect. He has a whole country to run and don't you forget it.'

There are no free shuttle buses for the return leg. We prepare to walk back up the highway, already awash with other footsore soldiers returning from the front.

The crying bureaucrat has grown calmer now. Dry-eyed, she's sitting on her haunches observing the flow of spectators crossing the bridge above the ravine.

'It's so beautiful,' she's murmuring repeatedly to herself. 'End to end, a sea of red.'

Jonny wanders over and pulls out his bottle of rum. He's been saving the last drops for the trek back up the hill to the metro. Bending his lanky legs down to her level, the tall black man touches the woman paternally on the shoulder. 'Go on, *compañera*,' he bids in solidarity. 'For the heat.'

She takes the bottle from him, a benign smile across her upturned face. Slowly she raises it to her lips. Drip by drip, his final measure trickles away. Both of them, in their own way, silently savouring the revolution.

In an Italian restaurant across town, the taste of change has a more bitter edge.

'Can ya speak up?' a loud voice in American English hollers from the back of the room.

Amid the bustle of waiters and food trolleys, Bárbara Pugliese's gentle voice is difficult to make out. Wearing a dark suit with a

chiffon scarf, the attractive law graduate is the face of the revolutionary enemy.

Bárbara is used to fighting to be heard and raises her voice as requested. Along two long trestle tables sit her evening's audience, the forty-member Seattle Peace Chorus.

For the past three weeks, the amateur singing troupe has been travelling through Venezuela spreading harmony and love. Their performance repertoire includes such classics as 'I've Got Peace like a River,' 'Circle Round for Freedom' and 'Peace Salaam Shalom'. Before leaving home, they mugged up on some songs in Spanish too. 'Todos Somos Americanos', 'We Are All Americans', an up-tempo tune with accompanying hand actions, has emerged as the undisputed hit of the tour. Their West Coast drawl makes the title lyrics sound like a group request for black Americano-style coffee. Back in Seattle, it could lead to a mix-up. Here in Venezuela, where the tentacles of Starbucks have yet to reach, their revolutionary fan club does not suffer such confusion.

When not out waging peace, the choristers have spent their time on a guided visit around *Chavezlandia*. They're but one of a steady stream of politically motivated tour groups coming to see the 'Bolivarian experiment' for themselves. With a disproportionately high number of teachers and care professionals among their number, the non-violent activists were especially anxious to see some schools and to familiarise themselves with the missions. Their tour coordinator also organised a factory visit, a trip to a cooperative farm and a singing contest on the Isle of Margarita. Bárbara has been pencilled in right at the end, a token contrary voice before the chorus packs up its song sheets and flies home.

'I am here to represent Primero Justicia, Venezuela's largest opposition party,' the pretty dissident hollers. 'As you might be able to tell from my surname, my grandparents are from Italy . . .'

No one in the audience seems to care too much about the party spokeswoman's parentage nor, for that matter, about her politics. She struggles on for ten minutes in a vain attempt to explain how Primero Justicia would change the country for the better.

As representatives of a young party, they aren't afraid to try 'radical, new policies', she says. Cutting taxes, encouraging foreign investment and reducing bureaucracy are the way ahead for Venezuela apparently. The manifesto of uninspired economic orthodoxies has the unmistakable ring of the US grant-maker that helps fund her party. The choir isn't buying it.

Dennis, a nonconformist pastor and tenor bass, turns from his shrimp risotto and whispers something to his wife. The tail end of the phrase is loud enough to carry across the table to where I'm sitting: 'This woman is more Neocon than the Neocons.'

Wisely, Bárbara gives up on her efforts to build a constructive case. She does what all opposition parties do best: she looks around for mud to fling.

Crime is on the up. Did we know forty-six people are killed in Venezuela every day? The government hides the true figures. Were we aware that six in ten Venezuelans live in sub-standard housing? Or that the only way to apply for a passport was through a website that's permanently crashing? Had we heard what a mess the economy was in: inflation running out of control, millions lost through public mismanagement, scarcities of basic foodstuffs? Companies are even moving their operations to Colombia - 'I mean, they prefer the violence of the guerrillas to working with Chávez!'

Bárbara recalibrates her verbal assault weapon, adding extra firepower for her attack on the missions. Barrio Adentro is little more than 'basic first aid', degrees from the new Bolivarian universities aren't worth the paper they're written on, and Mercal is 'positively Third World'. As for claims that Venezuela is now an 'illiteracy-free territory', the government's own statistics indicate one million people snill can't read or write.

Bellowing from her soapbox, there's certainly no problem hearing her now.

'Every one of Chávez's good ideas is just a rip-off from previous governments. All the government does is repackage old ideas and make them look new. So now we have the "tribunal" rather than the "court" and the "National Assembly" rather than "Congress".'

But they're all basically the same thing. And as for changing the name of the country to the *Bolivarian* Republic of Venezuela . . . frankly, it's just embarrassing. Can you imagine how much it cost to change all the bank notes?

'More risotto anyone?' a bored Dennis inquires of his table companions. Ten weary heads shake back at him.

Bárbara will have to shift tack again if she's to convince the chorus that the Bolivarian Revolution is not the best thing since sliced, gluten-free bread. She's astute enough to realise.

'Do you know that democracy is under attack here in Venezuela?' The rhetorical question touches a nerve. The choir's attention is briefly wrested away from the dessert menu.

'Under Chávez, power has become increasingly centralised. Congress and the Supreme Court are packed with government sympathisers. What the president decides, they rubber stamp. Anyone that disagrees is branded a "counter-revolutionary".'

A muffle of concern greets her use of Cold War terminology, a throwback to a trip the choir made during the Communist era to Moscow, Leningrad and other Soviet hotspots.

Spotting a chink in her audience's resistance, the refusenik pulls out one of the big guns from her arsenal.

'How many of you know about the Tascón List?'

A few doubtful hands go up, but the question draws a blank from most.

Bárbara fills them in. Understand the list, we're told, and we'll get an idea of how democracy works in Venezuela. On paper, the country's newly revised constitution could be lifted straight from Plato's theory of 'rule by the governed'. Any voter, however lowly, can decide an elected official is not up to scratch and call a no-confidence vote. All it takes is for a fifth of the electorate to agree to it.

At the beginning of Chávez's second term, the opposition used their new-found constitutional powers to try and unseat the very president who'd introduced them. To do so required the collection of two and a half million signatures. Armed with clipboards and biro, the anti-*Chavista* mutineers went door-knocking.

It was the last play of a fast emptying hand, a fact Bárbara neatly skips over. In the full version of events, mention would also be made of the opposition's less libertarian tactics. First, they tried the traditional route. Their palace coup saw businessman Pedro Carmona take the throne. His tenure lasted two days, earning himself the unkind epithet of Pedro the Brief. Next, they attempted to starve the president out. For four months, the Maracaibo 'mafia' turned off the taps at the oil wells. The situation hung in the balance for a moment, but ultimately the lockdown didn't work either. *El Comandante* just came out stronger.

Bárbara's rebel colleagues had no more luck with the democratic option. They managed to force a referendum but succeeded in losing the vote. Chávez would stay in power, and the 'betrayers' would pay the price. The president charged Luis Tascón, a respected congressman, with collecting the names, addresses and identity numbers of every last signatory. Somehow, the list made its way onto the Internet. A later version came out on CD-ROM with a fully searchable database.

'It was amazing how often people on the Tascón lists fell victim to bureaucratic bungles and lost cheques in the mail,' Bárbara says sarcastically.

'People like me were branded. We were like the Jews in Hitler's Germany being made to wear the Star of David. Those of us who aren't *Chavistas* are now denied everything: jobs, credit lines, public health care, you name it. Where's the democracy there, eh?'

The choral singers shift in their seats, temporarily discomfited. Dominic, a floppy-haired postgraduate student and tenor, has a question. His tone is ultra-polite, but the left-leaning chorister is clearly rankled.

'I might be mistaken, but as I understand it, Venezuela's old *representative* system of democracy has been replaced with a *participative* model. Isn't that all rather progressive?'

In answer to his own rhetorical question, diffident Dominic recounts a visit the chorus made to a *consejo comunal*, a communal council. They'd been told - 'and, please, correct me if I'm wrong' -

that these neighbourhood councils empower everyday people to determine what needs doing locally. The council they'd visited had received funds to have the water tank fixed, for example. Others are asphaltting their street or having playgrounds built in the square.

'Now democracy doesn't - umm, err - get much more grass-roots than that, surely?' says Dominic, who stutters to a stop after thanking Bárbara for listening and apologising if she thinks him rude.

Bárbara, who's used to having far worse things said to her, is not flustered in the least. Instead, she launches into an immediate counter-attack.

'It's essential to remember that the communal councils remain new and untested. The participants are totally ill-prepared for managing budgets and designing projects. It's all very well getting the people to involve themselves, but you can't just pass on the responsibility of local government overnight.'

Her scarf becomes dislodged in the harangue to the tremulous tenor. Brushing it back over her shoulder like a tank commander in a desert squadron, she loads up for a second round of fire.

'You should know there's a darker side to these councils too. They developed out of what were known as "Bolivarian circles", groups of residents who went around at election time getting people to vote for Chávez. They're like nasty little soldiers. And do you know where the idea came from?'

Dominic did not.

'From Cuba. Yes, it's true. Chávez's mentor Fidel came up with the idea first. There, they serve as an extension of his spy network. Here, it'll be just the same.'

If we want a sign of things to come, Bárbara pronounces, we need look no further than the RCTV case.

'Anyone heard of it?'

A roomful of hands go up. The chorus has been watching their CNN.

'Good,' continues the indefatigable Bárbara, 'then you'll know that Chávez ordered our longest-running TV channel to be closed. And why, you ask?'

Nobody is actually asking, but she carries on just the same. . . . because he didn't like its editorial content. Closing down hostile press is what dictators do, or am I wrong?'

Dominic had retreated to his shell, and none of the other choristers had the appetite to enter the fray. Coffee had just arrived, and the elderly audience were thinking about pyjamas and bed. In Bárbara's defence, the RCTV case sparked widespread disquiet throughout the country. Technically, the channel's broadcasting licence wasn't 'closed' as such. It simply wasn't renewed after it ran out. Still, intellectuals inveighed against the attack on freedom of speech. Students staged massive rallies in the street. More nerve-racking for the regime, the masses were upset.

Editorial considerations had nothing to do with the proletarian disquiet. The revolution had climbed into their homes and had taken away their soap operas. The sofa-sitting polity wanted their *My Cousin Ciela* back. In the weeks after its closure, thousands would turn up to see public viewings of RCTV's hit show, now only available via costly satellite channels. But television viewers are a fickle bunch. A new favourite *telenovela* and the whole affair soon passed into history.

A waiter comes with a bill for each table. The chorus fumble with their wallets. After three weeks, Dennis and his wife are still having problems calculating the dollar equivalent of the funny-looking bolivian notes in their pockets. Their cause isn't helped by the parallel exchange rate or escalating inflation.

As the choir prepares to go, I'm struck by the irony of the evening: Bárbara, the young, intelligent Venezuelan law graduate, so desperate for her country to be more like the USA, and the US citizens of the chorus, who'd pack Venezuela's socialist-inspired revolution into a suitcase and take it home with them if they could.

Another paradox hangs unrecognised, or at least unacknowledged, over the event. Here is Bárbara, wheeled in to play her part as the political dissident. Yet there, opposite her, itching to be back in their hotel, sit the passport-holding representatives of the real enemy. In the revolution's ranking of evil, *Primero Justicia* is a

blob on the radar compared to the mighty *imperio* of the USA.

Revolutions breed two types of enemies: internal and external. Bolívar spent the first decade or more of the War for Independence fighting against the second. With the Spanish foe finally smitten, a spate of civil wars forced him to turn to the first.

Likewise, the Bolivarian Revolution is a war on two fronts. Outside its borders is the entire capitalist world. At its head rules the 'evil empire', that brooding, conniving, jealous oppressor to the north. The US government and its multinational minions are painted as the master manipulators, always lurking offstage, ever stirring the pot. An order from Washington is all it takes for democratically elected presidents to come toppling down: Jacobo Guzmán in Guatemala, Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, Salvador Allende in Chile. It doesn't take much to persuade loyal *Chavistas* that their man is next in line.

Rarely does Bolívar's heir allow an opportunity to pass without denouncing the enemy at the gates. A typical example took place on *Aló Presidente* the previous week. *El Comandante* used his Sunday spot to present an unpublished manuscript to the nation. Its pages, we were informed, contained a fly-on-the-wall exposé of the Central Intelligence Agency, the enemy's international Gestapo. A handwritten note ran across the title page, which the show's presenter kindly read out to us.

'For Hugo, so that you might know the machine of terror . . . Fidel Castro.'

Chávez, like his Cuban mentor, revels in the idea that US-sponsored assassins are out to get him. He's even coined a term for it, 'magnicidè'.

Later in the programme, the defender of the Bolivarian Revolution leaves no doubt in the public's mind where the chief danger lies.

'Our principal enemy is the most powerful empire that has ever existed on Earth, and it does not rest, nor will it rest, from trying to derail movements that seek social justice, independence, sovereignty.'

Regrettably, the chorus didn't catch the episode.

Timing has certainly helped in casting the USA as the arch-oppressor. For much of his second and third terms in office, Chávez had the perfect whipping boy in the White House. In George W. Bush, the Venezuelan showman never ran short of material. Over the years, *El Comandante* came up with a catalogue of insulting pseudonyms for the man who 'walks like John Wayne'. *Terrorista* (terrorist), *burro* (donkey) and *alcohólico* (drunkard) featured among the favourites, but 'Mr Danger' was the one that stuck. Chávez would blame his Texan nemesis for everything from genocide in Iraq to global climate change. 'More dangerous than a monkey with a razor blade,' he once said of him. Empire-bashing goes down well at home. If the Seattle *Americanos* are anything to go by, it also has its fans behind enemy lines.

The revolution's internal enemies are now amassing as well. Bolívar knew the pernicious power of domestic infighting.

'It was your brothers, not the Spaniards, who ripped out your hearts, shed your blood, set fire to your homes and forced you into exile,' the Liberator argued in his 'Manifiesto of Cirúpano'. The man who had freed half the continent, who had defeated a very real, flesh-and-blood empire, could not get the measure of his local rivals.

On the eve of Venezuela's independence, with the Spanish on the run, he wrote to his minister of foreign affairs about his fear of 'peace more than war'. Ultimately, the unremitting squabbles between opposing factions squeezed the life from him, sending him to his grave depressed and demoralised.

Chávez has proved a master strategist at outmanoeuvring the enemies within. But the Bárbaras of the revolution are persistent. Several months after my visit, they'd succeed in voting down *El Comandante's* idea for a radical overhaul of the constitution. If passed, the text would have technically allowed him to be elected indefinitely. The idea of a president for life wasn't new. It first appeared almost two centuries ago, in the Liberator's own draft charter for Bolivia.

For now though, Bárbara is wrapping up warm and preparing to head out into the chilly Caracas evening. She's running late for a date with her girlfriends. There's a Hollywood blockbuster they all want to catch. She'd ask the chorus but senses it'd be too all-American for their tastes.

Merida

In Mérida's central square, a bronze Bolívar sits astride a splendid stallion. Legend has it that beneath him is buried the right hand of Lope de Aguirre, a brutal conquistador who took the unwise step of rebelling against the Spanish king. When the forces of his royal employer finally got their hands on him, they dismembered him and distributed him in little pieces across Venezuela. His body parts were supposed to be a visible lesson for others not to do the same.

The history of South America is constructed on the plinths of its *plazas* and the leading actors of its legends. The continent's authorities know the past is too important to be left to the academics. Better the sculptors and storytellers be allowed to tell it. That way, everyone's favourite heroes and villains get to stay centre stage. But monuments and myth have their limitations as tools of history. They are to the past what horoscopes are to the future: never dull, rarely factual and always open to manipulation.

Nowhere is history more at the beck and call of its modern masters than Venezuela. Chávez recently assigned his vice-president and nine cabinet ministers to head up a scientific commission into Bolívar's death. For two centuries, received wisdom held that the Liberator died from tuberculosis. Now his bones are being exhumed to prove that assassins hired by the 'oligarchies' bumped him off.

Poor old Christopher Columbus is bearing the brunt of these changing winds. The European adventurer is held responsible for introducing the New World to the Old, a fateful encounter that makes him *persona* very much *non grata*. His birthday is now celebrated as the Day of Indigenous Resistance. In Caracas's Plaza

Venezuela, his statue has been shrunk. Sculptors are currently working up a miniature replacement. Above him, dominating the spot where the discoverer of America used to stand, the image of a gigantic indigenous warrior is planned. In Mérida, they've gone one step further. Someone has lopped off Columbus's head. All that's left of the man who once sailed the ocean blue is a bare plinth with a severed neck.

A picturesque university town perched on a river plateau in the folds of the surging Andes, Mérida has always understood the significance of historical symbolism. Its citizens were the first to recognise Bolívar by the name 'Liberator'. The move was a testament to foresight. The vagrant general and his ragtag army of New Granadians were still eight years short of fully liberating Venezuela. Its burghers were also the first to erect a statue in his honour, twelve years after Bolívar's death.

I'd travelled down to Mérida on an uncomfortable night bus from Caracas to speak with José Sant Roz. A mathematician by training, he's also author of half a dozen books on Bolívar and the independence period. We meet in the coffee shop of an out-of-town shopping centre.

'Bolívar has been a passion for me all my life,' the white-haired academic says up front, fussing over the removal of his Barbour jacket. 'Even now, when I read his journals and his letters, it sometimes makes me cry.'

I try and picture the learned university professor sitting in his study with Bolívar's collected works in front of him and a damp hanky at his side. The image stays with me as we talk.

Like Chávez, Dr Sant Roz's perception of history is coloured by his politics. The sentimental statistician is one of the few avowed government sympathisers on campus.

'What is it that attracts you so much to Bolívar?' I ask, anxious to orientate the conversation back towards Venezuela's founding father.

His reply is long and convoluted, as all true stories of infatuation should be. Like every schoolboy, it was the Liberator's dashing

exploits on the battlefield that first grabbed him. As he grew older, he found inspiration in his hero's intellect and political vision.

'Bolívar's genius was too profound for the country in which he found himself,' he says, a curious mix of awe and disappointment in his voice.

In his later years, it's been Bolívar the man that moves him most: his spirit of adventure, his single vision, his sense of destiny, his indefatigable energy and, of course, his many trials. Spaniards have no concept of tragic-heroism, the Bolívarian enthusiast maintains. *Don Quixote*, the great heroic epic of Spanish literature, is saturated in comedy; Bolívar, in contrast, is a character directly from the pages of a Shakespearean tragedy.

'And what of President Chávez? Are the comparisons that people make between him and Bolívar fair?' It's the question I'd travelled down to Mérida to ask.

The beep of an incoming text message postpones the academic's answer. For a few moments, he fumbles in his jacket pocket in an attempt to locate his mobile. I feel my question lingering in the air, like courtroom nerves before a verdict.

The mathematician places the retrieved phone beside his empty coffee cup. The contents of the message seem to have flustered him. He's lost track momentarily. 'Sorry, what was the question again?' he asks.

'Chávez and Bolívar,' I repeat. 'Are they similar?'

'Yes, yes, of course, I remember now.' He pauses, weighing his reply. Again, he comes to his answer in a roundabout way:

'No politician has ever understood the thinking of Bolívar. They want to be like him, that's the problem. But none of them have the capacity.'

He cites the example of Antonio Guzmán Blanco, a despot from the late nineteenth century. Keen to show himself a true patriot, the right-wing military president officially deified the Liberator. A vast painting of this glorious apotheosis still hangs on the wall of Bolívar's childhood house in Caracas. It goes without saying that Blanco occupies a prominent spot in the picture's foreground.

'But Chávez is the only one that's different,' Dr Sant Roz maintains. 'El Presidente is the one politician who has the personal qualities to become the new Bolívar. He has intelligence, bravery, charisma, knowledge. He understands how the other half live.'

There's something of the zealot in the professor's eyes as he marks off the historical similarities: both men know what it is to suffer; both have shown they can bounce back from defeat; and, most strikingly, both are consumed by the pull of destiny.

'Bolívar knew political independence was just the first step. Chávez is likewise aware that our struggle will not end with him. His destiny is to establish a milestone, to start *la lucha*, the fight.'

The coffee house has grown busier since we started talking, and I request a refill of coffee to keep the hovering waitress at bay.

'What fight exactly?' I ask, as the waitress shuttles off to another table.

There's no hesitation this time.

'Our fight is the fight to win back justice, to win back our values, to stop this ridiculous consumerist race to possess more and more. It's the fight of twenty-first-century socialism.'

I can almost sense his mathematician's brain buzzing with political theorems and historical equations: Bolívar raised to the numerical power of Chávez equals the logarithm of the Bolivarian Revolution.

'And how long will the fight take, do you think?' A straightforward question, I judge, in search of a straightforward reply. The hypothesis proves incorrect.

The professor's answer comes back like a bad lesson in probability.

'No one knows. Perhaps fifty years. Maybe one hundred. But we feel that we are close. It's as if we are swimming in the ocean and we can see the shoreline. Many people now sense we are arriving towards the beach. We feel we can save ourselves.'

Our coffees are brought over by the waitress, who listens in to the professor but pretends not to. He ignores her and continues.

'What's preventing us from getting to the coast faster are the millions of opponents that get in the way. Sometimes there is also a

cloud that stops us from seeing the shoreline. Chávez is the one that clears the mist for us, the one who shows us north from south.'

The historical field is more exacting. Before leaving for Mérida, I'd paid a visit to Caracas' prestigious Central University. In place of ivory towers, I'd found a series of square concrete blocks dotted around campus. The man I'd arranged to interview was sitting in the musty, first-floor staffroom of the History Department.

Miguel Hurtado, a sinewy professor with a smoker's cough and a close-cropped beard, has been teaching Bolivarian thought for five decades. Far from welcoming the renewed interest in his subject matter, the lecturer was horrified.

'Today's Bolívar has nothing to do with the historical character, the Bolívar of flesh and blood.'

He went on to cite copious examples of quotations taken out of context and ideas twisted to fit with Chávez's socialist thinking.

The use of Bolívar for political propaganda had particularly offended his academic scruples.

'He even turns up in your soup these days!' Professor Hurtado had complained, in reference to the Government's habit of stamping political messages on food packaging. The Liberator never claimed to speak for ever; the history purist had continued. The questions of his own day, not those of the future, were what bothered him. Bolívar never even wrote a coherent political theory.

Not that the academic traditionalist could complain too vigorously. Today, his department counts over six hundred undergraduates. His own matriculation class at the Central University had had nine.

Walking back to the town centre after our discussion, I reflect on the differing historical perspectives of Dr Sant Roz and Professor Hurtado: the *Chavista* mathematician, with his romantic, utilitarian view of history and the classical historian, with his admonishments and his desire for 'Bolívar to be left to rest in peace'. Which, I wonder, is the most valid?

I'm still toying with the question when I reach the central square. It's late, and I'm surprised to find a group of labourers still at work.

They've fenced off the statue of Bolívar with plastic tape. Venezuela is due to host the Copa América, a continent-wide football competition, and Mérida is desperately trying to spruce itself up in time. I sit briefly on a bench and watch a workman buffing up the bronze Bolívar and his stallion.

In the man's dusting cloth and tin of polish, I locate what appears to be an answer. As far as historical documentation goes, Professor Hurtado's archivist approach has the undoubted upper hand. But a thousand of his academic journals will never make one of Dr Sant Roz's statues. Symbolism and science are two divergent lines running across the same page: one is set on making history, the other is happy to record it. With revolutions to fight, the first is what really counts.

There's no question on which side of the line *El Comandante* falls. The seer from Sabaneta is inspired more by the morals of history than its methodologies. In Bolívar, he's discovered the ultimate heroic figure: idealistic, revolutionary and malleable.

'Bolívar is not just a man,' the president once recounted to Aleida Guevara. 'She's daughter, in a lengthy interview. 'Bolívar is a concept.' This conceptual Bolívar isn't bound by the rigours of history. The president's version of the Great Liberator would have been a socialist, for example, if only Karl Marx had been born earlier. He would presumably have been a twenty-first-century Bolivarian too. Nor would reincarnation pose a problem. In the presidential chair, Chávez's Bolívar would find an exaggerated replica of himself.

Legend has it that the Liberator will rise again.

'I awake every hundred years when the people awake,' Pablo Neruda wrote in his poem, 'A Song for Bolívar'. To be certain, Venezuela's contemporary replacement sent the earth removers in to dig him up. In Chávez's mind, his life and that of his hero weave into one another. The fates have built a bridge across the ravines of history. His description of the Second Republic's fall displays this habit of historical schizophrenia.

'Bolívar had the greatness required to reflect on the defeat, to understand it, and then to go back and unite with the black and

olive-skinned Venezuelans, the people of the plains; he won the people's support, their admiration. He removed from himself all vestiges of oligarchy . . . and joined with the marginalised sectors of society.'

The story is pure Chávez: the failed coup in 1992, the brief years in prison, the political comeback, the electoral victories, the man of the people. It's history rewriting itself into the present. It's Bolívar being born again. It's Sant Roz's shoreline being reached.

For Venezuela's Bolívarians, the second War of Independence is at last taking shape. Fortunately for future generations, Professor Hurtado's students are at hand to write the chronicle.

Ciudad Bolívar

Ciudad Bolívar is celebrating Independence Day. The distinguished citizens of the riverside town are gathered around their elegant square. Each is in their finest attire. They sit in the plastic seats assigned to them by protocol. The Governor looks to have waxed his bushy moustache especially for the occasion. Occupying pride of place beside him sits a stiff-backed general. Military medals cluster together across his lapel.

Those in the second row look over the shoulder of the dignitaries in front – some scheming how to sit up front the following year, others honoured to have made the invite list at all. Above everyone's head, the tropical sun beats down. The ceremonial flags hang limp and heavy in the absent breeze.

The representatives of Venezuela's security forces stand to attention in the square: soldiers, sailors, airmen, police and civil guard, all in neat formation. Together they fashion a regimental semicircle of clipped haircuts around the Liberator. Perched high on his plinth, overlooking the terracotta rooftops of the colonial town, the sword-brandishing Bolívar endures the formal speeches along with the rest of us. The flowered wreaths and cathedral bells would please his wandering spirit more, were it passing. A pigeon lands on his head, scans the pomp below and flies away.

Nineteen decades before, Bolívar and his patriot army had found refuge in this tropical town on the banks of the river Orinoco. They were invading Venezuela for the third time. Isolated and outnumbered, the Liberator convoked a congress to discuss a constitution for an independent republic — an eventuality the self-proclaimed 'plaything of the revolutionary hurricane' saw as inevitable. He wrote a lengthy letter to the congressional delegates, in which he highlighted the best and the worst of the world's political systems. 'Let us not aspire to the impossible,' the pragmatist in him cautioned, 'lest in reaching for the ring of freedom we fall into the abyss of tyranny.'

Claiming liberty, Bolívar knew, would be no easy task. His South American compatriots were still 'numbed by chains' and 'their sight dimmed in dark dungeons'. Like a good general, he laid out the terrain ahead.

'Our weakened citizens will have to strengthen their spirits mightily before they succeed in digesting the healthful nourishment of Freedom . . . Will they ever be capable of marching with firm steps toward the august temple of Freedom?'

The twenty-six delegates met in the Governor's residence opposite the cathedral. Around its columned garden cloister and over its hardwood floors Bolívar paced as the representatives discussed his counsel. At the conference table, they toyed over the political lessons of Greece, Rome, France, England and North America. After two days' talking, the final document was ready.

Wandering over to the congressional meeting house, now a museum, I find a shady step on which to sit and watch the remainder of the ceremony. The speeches show no sign of letting up. Switching off from the official sermons, I reach into my bag for my copy of Bolívar's collected works. The book is dog-eared and worn after its trek around the continent. As guide and companion, it's served me well. I open it to 'The Angostura Address' and begin reading. The Liberator's words to his delegates have a pleasant familiarity to them, like the creases in the leather of a favourite armchair. I reach the conclusion as the last of the wreath-bearers are having their photographs taken:

'Flying from age to age, my imagination reflects on the centuries to come . . .'

The dignitaries are slowly cooking under the midday sun. Valiantly, the military band strikes up. Their trumpets and cymbals surprise the pigeons, which disperse in a flock of frantic flapping. Bolívar dreams on.

'I look down from such a vantage point . . . I feel a kind of rapture, as if this land stood at the very heart of the universe, spread out from coast to coast between oceans separated by nature . . .'

The uniformed semicircle disbands, marching off unit by unit from the civic parade ground. The Liberator, the voice of past and present, continues to contemplate the splendour of his beloved South America from his pedestal above.

'I see her seated on the throne of liberty, grasping the sceptre of justice, crowned by glory and revealing to the old world the majesty of the new world.'

A local politician in a dark suit closes the act. The dignitaries' wives reach for their handbags. '*Socialismo o muerte! Venceremos!*' 'Socialism or death! We will conquer!' Ciudad Bolívar erupts. The square begins to empty, but the band plays on. Above the rooftops, the Liberator and the pigeons are listening.