Constitutional Coups: A Threat to Private Property

By

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“Just as the territorial conquests of Republican Rome called into being the Empire, so the extension of the attributes of the State in democracies made inevitable the coming of authoritarianism”

Bertrand de Jouvenel

“The right to the private ownership of material goods pertains to natural law, insofar as mankind is entitled to possess for its own common use the material goods of nature; it pertains to the law of Nations, or jus gentium, in so far as reason necessarily concludes that for the sake of the common good those material goods must be privately owned, as a result of the conditions naturally required for their management and for human work.”

Jacques Maritain

The French political philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel can be counted among the few scholars and political philosophers who saw the potential dangers of democratic governments for the liberty of the people. More than three hundred years ago Montesquieu warned his contemporaries that the individual’s right of taking part in power does not necessarily guarantee his liberty. According to the French writer: “As it is a feature of democracies that to all appearances the people does almost exactly what it wishes, men have supposed that that democratic governments were the abiding-place of liberty: they confused the power of the people with the liberty of the people.” The problem has been compounded in the 21st century when so called “democratic elections” are being used to grasp power and foster objectives which challenge the basic institutions of free societies.

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3 Charles Louis de Secondat, Marquis de Montequieu (1689-1755) was born in Bordeaux, France. His first literary success was Les Lettres Perses (The Persian Letters) but his major work was L’esprit des lois (The Spirit of the Law). His writings had a major influence on the American Founding Fathers, particularly on James Madison.
4 Bertrand de Jouvenel, op.cit., p. 293. It is helpful to bring to the attention of the reader the various interpretations that can be given to the term liberty and how dangerous some of them are for the true meaning of Liberty. Montesquieu writes: “Enfin chacun a apelle liberte le government qui etait conforme a ses coutumes ou a ses inclinations: Et, comme, dans une republique, on n’a pas toujours devant les yeux, et d’une maniere si presente , les instruments des maux paraissent don’t on se plaint ; et que meme les lois paraissent y parler plus, et les executeurs de la loi y parler moins; on la place ordinairement dans les republiques, et on l’a exclue des monarchies. Enfin, comme, dans les democracies, le people parait a peu pres faire ce qu’il veut, on a mis la liberte dans ces sortes de gouvernements; et on a confondu le pouvoir du people, avec la libertedu people.” Montesquieu, De l’esprit des lois.I (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1979) Livre XI Chapitre II p.292
Bertrand de Jouvenel warns us in his book *On power and Sovereignty* about the dangers of a rationalist individualism that often leads to collectivist politics: views that were already anticipated by the French historians Alexis De Tocqueville and Hippolyte Taine. They also predicted that democracy in its centralizing absolutist shape was the time of tyranny’s incubation. Taine claimed that the twentieth century would witness the perversion of science at the service of a “retrograde movement towards a barbarous and instinctual egotism”, a retrogression made possible by the triumph of the modern plebiscitarian state. Man’s ambition for power and domination has not changed substantially since the imperial days of the Roman Empire. The methods used for the acquisition of power may have changed but, in the last instance, raw power continues to be the ultimate goal.

The private ownership of property is, in no uncertain terms, one of the last bastions of political and economic freedom. To destroy it means the consolidation of raw power, a fact that runs counter to the nature of all free human beings and an outright violation of natural law. Thus, any violation of private property is an infringement upon one of man’s most basic inalienable rights.

St. Thomas Aquinas defines natural law as the participation in the eternal law by rational creatures. It flows from the Wisdom and Will of God. According to him the ownership of private property is not against natural law. On the contrary, in the Summa Theologiae he declares that it is legitimate for a man to poses private property. Among the three reasons that Aquinas gives the first one is that “…everyone is more concerned to take care of something that belongs only to him than of something that belongs to everyone or to many people, since in the case of common property he avoids effort by leaving its care to others, as occurs when one has a large number of servants. Secondly, human affairs are more efficiently organized if the proper care of each thing is an individual responsibility. There would only be confusion if everyone took care of everything in a disorganized fashion. Third, peace is better preserved among men if each one is content with his property. So we see that quarrels frequently arise among those who hold a thing in common and undivided”.9

Natural law, St. Paul tells us, is found in the heart of man. Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical Rerum Novarum “…strongly affirmed the right to private property against the socialism of his time. This right, which is fundamental for the autonomy and development of the person, has always been defended by the Church up to our own day”. In a similar way, the late Pope John Paul II and his predecessors have equally maintained the need and legitimacy of private property. The concept of natural law and its importance for the wellbeing of society is not limited to theologians and philosophers in the Christian West. There is an important legacy transmitted to us from Greece and Rome that is well manifested, among others, in the writings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle fully realized the existence of natural law and its contrast with the laws made by man. Sophocles in his play Antigone mentions his heroine disobeying the positive law in order to obey a higher law that comes from eternity; the divine law is the supreme law.

The Roman lawyer and statesman Cicero (55-51) probably gives us the best definition of natural law when he says: “True law is right reason in agreement with nature, universal, consistent, everlasting, whose nature is to advocate duty by prescription and to deter wrong doing by prohibition. Its prescriptions and prohibitions are obeyed by good men, but evil men disobey them. It is forbidden by God to alter this law, nor is it permissible to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish the whole of it. Neither the Senate nor the

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8 St. Thomas Aquinas defines natural law as the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature. Thus, it should not be violated.
9 See: Paul E. Sigmund (Editor), *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics*. Summa Theologiae, Qu.66 p.72.
People can absolve us from obeying this law, and we do not need to look outside ourselves for an expounder or interpreter of this law. There will not be one law at Rome and another at Athens or different laws now and in the future. There is now and will be forever one law for all peoples and all times. And there will be forever one master and ruler for all of us in common – God, who is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. Whoever does not obey this law is trying to escape himself and to deny his nature as a human being. By this very fact, he will suffer the greatest penalties, even if he should somehow escape conventional punishments.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{On the Republic} 3.22.33.}

John Locke, the British philosopher of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, had already warned that the erosion of private property would gradually endanger the pillar of liberty and bring about the totalitarian state so well described by George Orwell in his book \textit{Nineteen Eighty-Four}.\footnote{John Locke, \textit{Second Treatise of Government}. Chapter V, “Of Property” (Indianapolis:Hackett Publishing Company, Inc,1980). pp.18-30.} If private property is degraded into a precarious de facto possession and ceases to be one of the natural and primary rights of man, then, as the late German political economist reminded us in his book \textit{A Humane Economy}, the end of free society is in sight.\footnote{Wilhelm Roepke, \textit{A Humane Economy} (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960). P.18} Once power falls into the hands of un-scrupulous leaders democratically elected by a mass society, often suffering from pathological symptoms, the basic institutions of the country are challenged in order to meet the demands of those in power. Such a policy is crucial for the success of collectivist policies eventually leading to outright socialism. The natural right of private property is among the first institution to be challenged and, if possible abolished in the name of “social justice”. There is no longer need for military coups to obtain these objectives. They can be obtained though democratic means. Is the erosion and gradual elimination of private property one of the first steps in the process of collectivization? The late professor of Georgetown University once wrote about his native Germany: “...the Nazi Party deftly used German legislative, administrative, and judicial institutions to impose totalitarian rule”.\footnote{Heinrich A. Rommen, \textit{Natural Law, A Study in Legal and Social History and Philosophy} (Indianapolis:Liberty Fund, 1998) p.xi.}

Recent events in Latin America tend to validate the views of Bertrand de Jouvenel. Latin America is not exempt from this race for power and domination. On the contrary, the continent’s history, from the southern cone to the Rio Grande, is full of political systems that have ignored the legitimate wishes of the people and have relied on the state as the sole guardian of their destinies. Military “coups d’états” were the most common route to follow in the process of acquiring power. Liberal democracies, as understood in the United States, were, with few exceptions, a rare commodity in Latin America,

It is a fact that most of the authoritarian regimes that arose in Lain America were the result of military coups that introduced different levels of government intervention in both the political and economic areas. But, in most cases, the right to own private property was respected. Something similar can be said in relation to the foreign policies of many of these countries, especially during the critical years of the “cold war”. Tacit alliances, undercover agreements and outright interventions were widespread in Latin America, especially during the “cold war”. The Soviet Union was deeply committed to the spreading of its communist ideology in order to undermine the relative political stability of the Latin American countries and reduce the influence of the United States in the area. Some of these authoritarian or, in some cases, outright totalitarian regimes served as proxies in the ideological war that waged between the two major contending powers. However, with the exception of Cuba and Chile, during the Allende period, direct attacks against private property were few, if any. The major powers were mainly interested in using the prevailing authoritarian regimes to foster their own political objectives.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the popular belief prevailed that a new era of political and economic freedoms was in the making. Fukuyama’s book \textit{The End of History and the Last Man}, among others, was predicting a new era of freedom
with the final triumph of democracy and economic liberalism.\textsuperscript{16} The failure of communism had opened the gates to a new era where the totalitarian regimes were a thing of the past. Liberty had finally triumphed over the forces of evil.

Events in Latin America and other parts of the world do not seem to have given credit to the predictions of Fukuyama. The overthrow of many of the former dictatorial regimes of the region and their replacement by fragile democratic systems have not led to the panacea visualized by the wishful thinkers of the last decade of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. On the contrary, the establishment of so-called “egalitarian” democracies contributed to the spreading of collectivist systems of a tyrannical nature. In fact, under the banners of freedom, democracy and a hypothetical justice, the peoples of many nations in the process of development have been led into a dangerous path that is conducive to a collectivist state. Private property has been increasingly under attack by unscrupulous “freely elected” leftist leaders. Military coups do not have the exclusive monopoly of tyranny. Through the democratic process, nations, including the most developed, can fall into the most abominable of centralized political and economic systems. Perhaps Germany in the nineteen thirties is the best example.

The American Founding Fathers established in the United States an American Republic. As Russell Kirk writes:“….a democratic republic, but not a ‘totalitarian democracy’, or government directly and absolutely controlled by the masses”.\textsuperscript{17} The word “republic”, continues Kirk, meant for the founders of the American constitution public concern. James Madison did not hesitate to express his fear of the multitudes when he wrote: “In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the scepter from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.”\textsuperscript{18}

John Adams was another of the American Founding Fathers who saw the dangers of radical French thought. He wrote against the theories of the French philosopher Turgot who espoused perfect democracy and was critical of any institution that collected all authority into one center, that of the nation.\textsuperscript{19} According to Adams, a simple, perfect democracy has never yet existed because the whole people are incapable of ruling. To think otherwise is plain nonsense.\textsuperscript{20} The brilliant lawyer from Braintree, together with Burke and De Tocqueville, among others, saw quite clearly the connection between free institutions and the basic Christian principles inherited from the past. Adams firmly believed that the American Constitution was made only for moral and religious people. It was totally inadequate to the government of any other. A people, lacking religious-ethical guidelines, would eventually lose its freedoms.

The pitfalls of democracy and majority rule were stressed by De Tocqueville.. He visualized the threat of their foundering into chaos. His fear of the tyranny by majority rule was always present in his mind.\textsuperscript{21} But

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  \item[16] Fukuyama believes that the economic logic of modern science together with the struggle for recognition will lead to the collapse of tyrannies as has been demonstrated on both the right and the left. As a result, these dynamic forces will finally establish capitalist liberal democracies, the end of the historical process. See Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man. (New York The Free Press, 1992).
  \item[20] For an excellent analysis of Adam’s thought see: David McCullough, John Adams (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001)
  \item[21] “Unlimited power is in itself a bad and dangerous thing. Human beings are not competent to exercise it with discretion. God alone can be omnipotent, because his wisdom and his justice are always equal to his power. There is no power on earth so worthy of honor in itself, or clothed with rights so sacred, that I would admit its uncontrolled and all-predominant authority. When I see that the right and the means of absolute command are conferred on any power whatever, be it called a people or a king, an aristocracy or a democracy, a monarchy or a republic, I say there is the germ of tyranny, and I seek to live elsewhere, under other laws”. Alexis De Tocqueville, Democracy in America. (New York: A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1956). p. 115.
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his main concern and what he considered the greatest danger was democracy’s gradual evolution into oppressive totalitarianism.\textsuperscript{22} He warned democratic nations to beware of an extremely dangerous tendency, natural in democracies, which leads them to despise and undervalue the rights of private persons. According to the French historian:"The attachment which men feel to a right, and the respect which they display to it, is generally proportional to its importance, or to the length of time during which they have enjoyed it. The rights of private persons amongst democratic nations are commonly of small importance, of recent growth, and extremely precarious; the consequence is, that they are often sacrificed without regret, and almost always violated without remorse.\textsuperscript{23} If this tendency tends to prevail in liberal democracies, as De Tocqueville suggests, what can be expected from the so-called “popular democracies” where the real power lies not in the masses, as it is claimed, but in a well-trained minority “freely elected” by the people? As Bertrand de Jouvenel reminds us: “Democracy being a battle for Power, those who are not represented necessarily go under. Children, for instance, having no vote, get little attention, and what concerns their well-being tends to be neglected. For this to be remedied under the present system they would have to receive in their cradles the ballot papers which are the sole means of self-defense.”\textsuperscript{24} Something similar could be said of the yet unborn.

In this brief paper we are not so much interested in the background and origins of these military controlled government centralized regimes that plagued Latin America since its revolutionary wars of independence in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. The grandiose ideas of Bolivar and San Martin were short-circuited by the petty jealousies of ambitious men who were more interested in power grabbing than in anything else to foster their own selfish interests. At present, we should be more concerned with the potential threat to our fundamental principles posed by the “democratic” takeovers occurring in Latin America.

Military coups seem to be a thing of the past but that does not mean that Latin America is free from the threat of future totalitarianisms. In my opinion, the most insidious danger posed to the political freedom of Latin America in these early years of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century lies in the legal grasp for power through the formal democratic process and the gradual and unequivocal path to collectivism. Open military actions are relatively easy to detect. On the other hand, the imposition of totalitarian methods through juridical institutions are much more subtle and far more difficult to perceive. Under the slogan of “democracy” and “equalitarianism” popular tyrannies can be deceptively introduced.\textsuperscript{25} The basic ideas of Gramsci and Garaudy are still very much alive!\textsuperscript{26} These tendencies raise serious concerns about the future wellbeing of Latin America.

In view of the fact that, after the collapse of communism in Russia, Marxism lost much of its strength in the popular mind of the Latin Americans, the leftist politicians supported by many intellectuals devised new means to destroy the prevailing socio-economic structures and replace them with what they euphemistically called “progressive” arrangements. One of the ways to do this was to conceal their real intentions and proclaim that the revolutionary movement that they were defending only had in mind the protection and welfare of certain impoverished ethnic groups; the mistreated indigenous population. At the same time, it could serve as a means to recruit the young for their revolutionary armies, as for example “El Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (The Zapatista Army for National Liberation) in Mexico. Other means proposed included the promotion of separatist movements, claiming that the territories occupied by the indigenous population should

\textsuperscript{22} “I had remarked during my stay in the United States, that a democratic state of society, similar to that of the Americans, might offer singular facilities for the establishment of despotism; and I perceived upon my return to Europe, how much use had already been made, by most of our rulers, of the notions, the sentiments, and the wants created by this same social condition, for the purpose of extending the circle of their power. This led me to think that the nations of Christendom would perhaps eventually undergo some oppression like that which hung over several of the nations of the ancient world”. See” Alexis De Tocqueville, Democracy in America. (New York: A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1956). p. 301
\textsuperscript{23} De Tocqueville, op.cit., p.310
\textsuperscript{24} Bertrand de Jouvenel, op.cit., p.297
\textsuperscript{25} According to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Legislators and revolutionaries who promise equality and liberty at the same time are either psychopaths or mountebanks”. Quoted by Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn in his Book Leftism Revisited, From de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Pol Pot (Washington D.C. Regnery Gateway 1990) p. 9
\textsuperscript{26} See: Rafael Gomez Perez, Gramsci, El comunismo latino. (Pamplona, Spain: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, EUNSA), 1977
no longer belong to the national state. The ecological argument is not absent from the revolutionary
movements. The claim is often repeated that terrorism is used as the sole means to avoid the abuse of the State
and private corporations that do not respect the environment in their efforts to build roads and extend the
country’s infrastructure (a camouflaged way of attacking the private ownership of the means of production).
Something similar can be said about how religion is also used to foster the revolutionary movements in Latin
America. Let us be clear and not be led by false pretenses: all of these objectives can be reached more
successfully through “peaceful democratic” means and the manipulation of the popular vote. The power of the
masses, manipulated by a dedicated and ideological minority, is perfectly suited for the gradual socialization of
Latin America’s basic institutions. Violent military coups are no longer needed. Many of these goals became
part of the final Declarations approved by the participants in what became known as the Foro de Sao Paulo.

In 1990, a year after the fall of the Berlin wall, the Workers’ Party of Brazil (PT), with the support of
Fidel Castro and Ignacio “Lula” Da Silva, convoked a conference of nationalist and socialist parties and social
movements of Latin America and the Caribbean with the objective of debating the consequences of the
implementation of neo-liberalism in the region. The meeting was a reaction of the leftist governments and
organizations to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism. The objective was to find a
socialist alternative and argue for a popular and democratic alternative to neo-liberalism. It is important to point
out that the original name given to the meeting was Left and Anti-Imperialist Parties and Organizations of Latin
America Encounter. It was only in Mexico that the yearly meetings began to be called Foro de Sao Paulo (FSP).
The last meeting in 2009 took place once again in Mexico City.

Over one hundred political organizations participated in the more recent meetings, including social
democratic parties, left wing labour and social movements inspired by certain leftist sectors within the Catholic
Church and outright activists promoting guerilla movements in Latin America. The means to reach their
ultimate objective – the socialization of Latin America – may vary from the use of armed force to the support of
“representative democracy”. It should be pointed out that at the first meeting in Sao Paulo in 1990, the
Declaration that was approved by the participants declared unambiguously their “willingness to renew leftist
and socialist thought, to reaffirm its emancipating character, to correct mistaken conceptions and to overcome
all expressions of bureaucratism and all absence of true social and massive democracy.” I stress the point
related to what the participants called “all absence of true social and massive democracy” in today’s Western
democracies. Such a statement would have astonished the American Founding Fathers who feared more than
anything else the tyranny of the uncontrolled masses and the “ideal of a nation of equals”. Such an ideal is
impossible. Bertrand de Jouvenel in his book The Ethics of Redistribution gives us some insights as to the
dangers of redistributionist policies geared toward the equalization of incomes. He does not hesitate to write:
“Inssofar as the State amputates higher incomes, it must assume their saving and investment functions, and we
come to the centralization of investment. Inssofar as the amputated higher incomes fail to sustain certain social

27 Apart from the Brazilian Workers Party (PT), the following guerrilla groups attended: the meeting in Sao
Paulo: El Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FARC) of
Colombia; El Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional de Nicaragua; the (FSLN); el Frente Farabundo Marti
de Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) of El Salvador; la Union Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala (URNG); the
Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) of Mexico and many other guerilla and leftist organizations that
joined the group in later years. Among them is the well-known Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional
(EZLN) of Mexico. It is in Sao Paolo that they decided to give birth to an organization that received the name
of El Foro de Sao Paulo. This information is based on a statement made by the Colombian guerilla leader Raul
Reyes to the journalist Alejandro Pena Esclusa during a visit the former made to Venezuela. Reyes admitted
that the FARC formed part of the Sao Paulo meeting.

29 According to Adams “Was there, or will there ever be a nation whose individuals were all equal, in natural and acquired qualities, in
virtues, talents and riches? The answer in all mankind must be in the negative.” Quoted by McCullough, John Adams. (New York:
Simon @ Schuster, 2001) p. 377
activities, the State must step in, subsidize these activities, and preside over them. Insofar as income becomes inadequate for the formation and expenses of those people who fulfill the more intricate or specialized social functions, the State must see to the formation and upkeep of the hired personnel. Thus, the consequence of redistribution is to expand the State’s role. And conversely, as we have just seen, the expansion of the State’s takings is made acceptable only by measures of redistribution.”30 To use a policy of redistribution of incomes to foster a greater level of centralization and State control is extremely dangerous because it can result in atrophy of personal responsibility. It will only lead to an expansion of the bureaucracy and in the long run will not benefit the lot of the minorities that it is supposed to serve. The downtrodden sectors of Latin American society must not be led astray by unscrupulous politicians who under the slogan of greater equality and social justice have only in mind the expansion of power.

It is difficult to deny that one of the most important steps in the process of collectivization is to denigrate and finally eliminate private property. To destroy private property is to put an end to freedom, both political and economic. The right to own property is a God given right that no government has the power to destroy without impunity.

For many decades Fidel Castro was the Latin American leader who carried the torch of revolution in the region. Under the banner of political freedom and democracy he mobilized the masses with the ultimate goal of destroying all past institutions and replacing them with a political and economic form of government in accordance with the principles of Marx and Engels. In the early stages of his revolutionary movement he tried to camouflage his real objectives under the slogan of social justice, going as far as claiming that his revolution was only following the suggestions delineated in the Papal Encyclicals Rerum Novarum and Quadragesimo Anno. However, under the pretext of nationalization he was gradually expropriating (confiscating) private property until he finally admitted that his real objective was the communization of Cuban society, a clear violation of human rights and natural law. Castro was perfectly well aware that for the success of the revolution he had to destroy private property.

In his early speeches, the Cuban leader never hesitated in insisting that his revolution was truly “democratic”. It was the Cubans themselves, he proclaimed, who had voted for him, as manifested by the over a million people who enthusiastically greeted him when he arrived triumphantly in Havana the first week of 1959. The populace, he claimed, voted with their presence at the mass meetings that he organized in the Cuban capital. This was pure democracy in practice. Thus, Castro “legitimized” his take over of power and transformed a de facto situation into what he called a “legitimate and democratically elected” leadership. Through the art of sophistry and rhetorical speeches he ignored the inner contradiction of his fallacious arguments.

Gradually and through government decrees the Cuban dictator initiated his objective of harassing and finally destroying the right to own private property. One of his first decrees in the early nineteen fifties was directed at the real estate market. By setting all sorts of ridiculous conditions with respect to the purchase and sale of real State (land property), he brought chaos to the entire market. Shortly afterwards the entire system collapsed and, for all practical purposes, the elimination of private property in the real-State industry became a reality. A similar process occurred in the agricultural and all other economic sectors of the economy. Finally in the 60’s Castro openly declared that he was a communist. The farce was over. The entire country had fallen under a dictatorial Marxist-Leninist regime without most of the population becoming aware of what was going on until it was too late. Furthermore, and what was even worse, few people realized that his actions were ethically unacceptable and in dire violation of natural law.

Since 1989, with the demise of the Kremlin’s military and economic power, the Soviet Union’s generous assistance to the Cuban government reached minimum proportions. The centre of gravity of the

30 Bertrand de Jouvenel, op.cit., p. 76
revolutionary movements began to shift from Havana to other Latin American capitals. Caracas seemed to be the natural heir because of the country’s immense natural resources and a political environment, which was propitious for the development of a revolutionary movement. The opportunity arose when in 1992 Hugo Chavez led a military coup in an attempt to overthrow President Carlos Andres Perez. However, the coup failed and Chavez was sentenced to prison. A year later Carlos Andres Perez was impeached under a cloud of corruption charges and Rafael Caldera succeeded him. After Chavez served two years Caldera pardoned him.31 Upon his release Chavez reconstituted the MBR-200 Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario as the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR – Movimiento Quinta Republica).32 Was Venezuela becoming a second Cuba?

Chavez did not lose time in beginning to campaign for the presidency. His agenda during the campaign drew heavily from the writings of Marx and Lenin, and the revolutionary views of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.33 Chavez refers to his political and social ideology as Bolivarianismo but in reality his policies are far different from those proposed by Bolivar. He claims his aim is to lay the foundations of a new republic.

Chavez participated and won the elections of December 1998, although there is reason to believe that his election was fraudulent. From past statements of Chavez, it can easily be deduced that his belief in the democratic process was nil. Even when he was sworn in as President of Venezuela, the band of office was not imposed on him by President Caldera but by the President of Congress, an unusual procedure. Furthermore, he swore to defend the Constitution when, in reality, the very first thing he did upon acquiring presidential powers was to pass a referendum and a constitutional assembly formed. The new Venezuelan Constitution was approved by a second referendum on December 15, 1999.34 His attacks on the private sector were continuous claiming it was primarily responsible for the exploitation and decay of Venezuelan society. The right to private property was rapidly becoming in jeopardy. There were already clear indications that Chavez, following in the steps of Castro, was in the process of introducing in the country a totalitarian state similar to the one prevailing in Cuba.

The new constitution increased the presidential term from five to six years, established a new presidential two-term limit, and approved a new provision for presidential recall elections. He also expanded significantly presidential powers and transformed the bicameral National Assembly into a unicameral legislature that he controlled. In addition to this increase in presidential power, Chavez created a Public Defender, a position that was authorized to regulate the activities of the presidency and the National Assembly. In accordance with the new constitution, elections for all government positions took place in the year 2000, including the Venezuelan presidential election.

Soon after Chavez ascended to the presidency he did not lose time in creating what he called the Bolivarian Circles. He considers them as perfect examples of grassroots and participatory democracy. They are supposed to be meetings of local residents who decide how to spend government funds for social development. They also serve as a means for social mobilization.35

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31 After Castro’s failed attempt to take over the Moncada military outpost in Santiago de Cuba, he also was sentenced to prison and later released by Batista, well before serving his sentence. Both Castro and Chavez, radical leftists, followed similar paths; they ended up as revolutionary leaders in their respective countries. Quite a different outcome in comparison to what happens to those who attempt to rebel against the authorities in communist-run countries.

32 The V stands for the Roman numeral 5.

33 Chavez was also well acquainted with the Latin American socialism espoused by Jorge Eliecer Gaitan and Salvador Allende.

34 Chavez was inaugurated in February 1999 and less than a year later the new constitution was passed. The rapidity with which he acted gives ground to believe that he had no intention of complying with the oath of office. Would it be fair to conclude that he participated in the electoral process as a wolf in Lamb’s clothing? What seems to be without a shadow of a doubt is that he had the full support of the world’s radical left and has been in contact with groups such as Al-Qaeda, Hezbola and Hamas, not to mention Putin in Russia and Ahmadinejan in Iran. His close relationship with the Iranean leader and other radical anti American governments is well known.

35 Potentially, they can also be used for other purposes. In many ways they can serve as “Comites de Barrios (Neighborhood Committees) very much in use in Cuba and other communist countries to control the population.
All attempts to remove Chavez from power failed including the one that took place in 2002. His gradual march toward socialism and his ever-increasing collectivist policies caused much unrest in the country. The Venezuelan people began to realize that the policies of Chavez were taking the country farther and farther away from the democratic principle that he was supposed to maintain. However, all further attempts to remove him from power failed also. With the support of all the world socialist and radical leftist movements he won the elections that took place in December 3, 2006. He consolidated his power and accelerated his policy of gradual but effective centralization of authority in the hands of the government. His march toward socialism was rapidly becoming a reality.

Once again on August 15, 2007 Chavez proposed a constitutional reform that included such measures as an end to presidential term limits and proposed limiting central bank authority. In addition, the proposed reform strengthened state expropriation powers and provided public control over international reserves. These goals were to be attained through “democratic means” and legislative measures. Few, however, doubted that Chavez was aiming at the gradual socialization of Venezuela. The process was definitely made easier because of the country’s huge natural resources and in particular from the huge income derived from the oil industry. Monetary resources are very important tools in any electoral process where corruption is rampant and the populace is ignorant of the real objectives of the authorities in power. Ethnic arguments and the promise of public services to the previously impoverished masses can easily turn the electoral balance in favour of the “democratically elected” revolutionary leaders. As Cervantes wisely wrote in his famous book “El Quijote”: “poderoso caballero es el dinero.” Petro-dollars are perfectly suited to buy political influence and Chavez is an expert in carrying out this dangerous but rewarding policy in the international arena.

Chavez’s model of socialization has undoubtedly superseded Castro’s communist take-over of Cuba even though the Cuban leader still claims, as mentioned earlier, that his revolution was democratic because the populace “voted” for him in public fora. How easily can the populace be fooled by the use of the terms “democracy” and “freedom”! I am always reminded of Mme. Roland’s famous phrase as she was being taken to the guillotine: “Liberty, liberty, how many crimes are committed in thy name”. The Italian Marxist Gramsci and his followers must rejoice from their graves at the way Chavez is taking Venezuela in the Long March toward socialism. The term Long March is attributed to Gramsci but the term was popularized by the German New Leftist Rudi Dutshke and later by Mao Tse-tung.

The Frankfurt School was another school of neo-Marxist critical theory, social research and philosophy. Its origins can be traced back to the Institute for Social Research (Institut fur Sozialforschung) at the University of Frankfurt am Mein in Germany. With the rise of Hitler in the nineteen thirties, the Institute moved to Geneva and New York where it became affiliated with Columbia University. Herbert Marcuse was intimately related to the Institute. It is highly probable that Chavez and his advisors were influenced by Gramsci’s and the Frankfurt School’s methodology in their rise to power. The policies of the Venezuelan leaders are without doubt oriented toward radical social change as proposed by the brilliant Italian communist. It is certainly true that Chavez with his disdain toward the Western liberal democracies is rapidly becoming the prime example for other socialist leaning Latin American countries to follow.

36 It was no surprise that Chavez won the approval of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Centre.
37 In America Herbert Marcuse was a follower of the Frankfurt School, founded in Germany prior to the rise of Hitler. He has been described as the theorist or intellectual progenitor of the New Left. Marcuse, together with the “French Marxists” was considered the representative of the best of Western civilization. In his writings Marcuse calls for a thorough going revolt against the political machine, the corporate machine, the cultural and educational of affluent western society. Maybe Chavez or his advisers were familiar with the writings of Gramsci or the Frankfurt School. Their ideas certainly would have been helpful when and if they were used in carrying out the “electoral coup” in Venezuela. See: Eros and Civilizations: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966)
38 I am giving the term liberal the classical European interpretation.
The latest example of Chavez’ meddling in the internal affairs of other Latin American countries is the case of Honduras. On June 28, 2009, President Manuel Zelaya was ousted from power by the military and forced to leave the country. The *de facto* government of Congressman Roberto Micheleti argues that Zelaya’s removal was legal because he had violated the constitution by organizing a referendum that would have permitted him to evade the one term limit for the presidency. The Honduran people feared that Zelaya, following the example of Chavez, would introduce the latter’s socialist agenda. There is no denying that Zelaya violated the Honduran constitution by carrying out a public survey the goal of which was to extend his rule beyond the one term limit; a clear violation of a Supreme Court order. The reaction of Chavez and his allies and followers in Latin America was swift; the outright condemnation of Honduras and the demand that Zelaya be restored to the presidency. The attempt to find a solution to the crisis at a meeting in San Jose, Costa Rica turned out to be a complete failure. The Hondurans did not want a repetition of what happened in Venezuela.

The case of Colombia is well documented. For years Chavez has tried to destabilize the government of Colombia’s president Alvaro Uribe by supporting the machinations of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia). The latest incident that took place at the border with Ecuador from where the FARC was operating is another proof of Chavez’s relentless efforts to bring down Uribe and promote the triumph of the radical leftist guerilla movement. In the incident, the Colombian military penetrated Ecuadorian territory where the FARC commander Raul Reyes had established a guerilla camp. He was killed in the process but the Colombian government found documents that proved Chavez’s support of the FARC. It is mystifying that President Obama skipped Colombia in his recent trip to Latin America. Colombia, after all, has been the most loyal supporter in South America.

Rafael Correa, the president of Ecuador calls himself a humanist and a Christian socialist and maintains close contacts with Venezuela. Following Chavez’s example he also approved in February 2007 a plan to have a referendum on the need to convene a Constituent Assembly and rewrite Ecuador’s constitution. The plan was approved by Ecuador’s congress, but Correa modified it so as to give the Constituent Assembly a greater level of power. Ironically, one of the powers granted to the Assembly was the ability to dismiss Congress. Correa’s modified version of the referendum was passed by the majority of the seven-seat electoral tribunal who, immediately afterwards, removed from office 57 opposition members of Congress. An attempt was made to impeach the president of the electoral tribunal on the grounds that he was trying to intervene in the electoral process. Unrest followed in the country but the government was able to control the situation. Late in March alternate delegates (41) were sworn in to allow Congress to regain quorum. The new majority pledged to support the referendum. As a result, Correa won the “popular” support to rewrite Ecuador’s constitution and expand state control of the nation’s economy. Gradually, he began clamping down on any possible sources of opposition, especially the media. Once again Latin America finds itself in a situation where through “democratic” means a process of centralization and outright radical socialization is taking place. “Constitutional Coups” are definitely more practical than military coups in obtaining the desired results: the acquisition of total power.

Ecuador’s new allies and friends run all the way from Ahmadinejan and other radical anti-American governments who follow the domestic and foreign policies of the likes of Hugo Chavez. In many ways Correa represents a greater threat to the basic principles of Western liberal democracies, including the right to own property. He is, undoubtedly, a well educated man, fluent in several languages and is able to speak Quechua. As a result, he can more easily convince the native population of the benefits of his socialist agenda. The potential threat of his left wing policies to private property cannot be dismissed. In many cases it is the primary role in the agenda.

Juan Evo Morales in Bolivia created the political movement Movement for Socialism (MAS) whose ultimate objective is the socialization of the country. He has been accused of fomenting social divisions in an

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39 Correa was reelected for a second term in April 2009.
increasingly mestizo Latin America. Through his revolutionary movement Morales is trying to modify the country’s constitution and has the full support of Chavez. He is also greatly indebted to the generous assistance of Venezuela. Chavez’s abundant petro-dollars can do miracles at the polls. However, they have not always been successful in attaining the purported goal. In the mid term elections of June 28, 2009, Cristina Kirchner, in spite of Chavez’s close friendship and monetary assistance, lost her absolute majority in both houses of Congress. This short term failure should not underestimate Chavez’s long term goals in Central America and the Caribbean. Together with Castro in Cuba, Ortega in Nicaragua and other existing and potential allies, Chavez constitutes a real threat to private property and the principles of liberty and true constitutional democracy in the hemisphere.

The powerful tentacles of Chavez’s public relations machinery have not been limited to Latin America. For example, in an effort to gain the sympathy of the American public he reached an agreement with Citizens Energy Corporation, a non-profit organization founded by Joseph Kennedy II in 1979. The Corporation has grown from a local charity serving 10,000 Massachusetts homes a year into a national operation delivering fuel oil to 200,000 households in 23 states. The growth of Citizens Energy Corporation owes a debt of gratitude to the “munificence” of the president of Venezuela who controls the country’s oil industry. Kennedy uses the income from the donated oil to fund millions in advertising. Perhaps Kennedy is not fully aware of Chavez’s anti American campaign that is being waged all over the world. Under the pretext of oil for the poor, Kennedy unintentionally is endorsing or at least facilitating the public relation goals of Venezuela’s strong man who is a declared enemy of the United States.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, radical leftist movements need no longer be implanted through military coups and violent means. The same objectives can be reached through “democratic” means. Following the revolutionary tactics of Gramsci, who visualized the triumph of socialism through “infiltration” and the “change of institutions”, the New Left is applying a modernized version of the old “Front Populaire”. It can rightly be called “the constitutional coup”, a perfect substitute for the discredited “military coup”. There is no doubt that, through “democratic elections” and legislation, the New Left has been successful in Latin America’s Long March toward socialism, especially since 1989. Latin America seems to have rejected the liberal “Washington Consensus” and embraced socialism with all its centralized and collective policies, including the control of education and the promise of an equilitarian society free of antinomies. The end result of this trend is yet to be seen but the United States must no longer take it for granted that Latin America is its faithful and loyal ally and is dedicated to the principles of liberal democracy. The gathering storm facing Latin America is a reality that cannot be denied.

Can it be said of Latin America what Rommen said about Germany in the 1930’s:”Hitler aimed not at a revolution, but at a legal grasp of power according to the formal democratic process”. Once in power the so called “freely elected” democratic leaders are well aware that sooner or later private property must be challenged and finally crushed. There is no longer a need for a military coup. The democratic process, as understood by many left leaning intellectuals and politicians, can serve their purpose without antagonizing large sectors of the population. Let the world remember that, according to Marxism-Leninism, private property is the original sin and the cause of all evil. Thus it must be destroyed if peace and justice are to prevail. But what is even more important to remember is that the destruction of the right to own property is a violation of natural law and of moral divine law.

40 In August 2008, Morales won a recall referendum and was certified as Bolivia’s president. Less than a year later a new Bolivian constitution was approved in another referendum.
41 Citgo Petroleum Corporation controlled by Chavez has close ties with Kennedy, who uses the proceeds of the donated oil to fund millions in advertising for the heating oil charity.
42 In his latest visit to Syria, Chavez did not hesitate to blast all sorts of insults at the United States in the most undiplomatic way possible. His close contacts with Islamic terrorist organizations are also well known.
44 Rommen, op.cit., p. xi
The brilliant Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek wrote the following more than fifty years ago: “What our generation has forgotten is that the system of private property is the most important guarantee of freedom, not only for those who own property, but scarcely less for those who do not. It is only because the means of production is divided among many people acting independently that nobody has complete power over us, that we as individuals can decide what to do with ourselves. If all the means of production were vested in a single hand, whether it be nominally that of ‘society’ as a whole or that of a dictator, whoever exercises this control has complete power over us”\(^{45}\). The new power structures that are developing in many countries of Latin America do not look favourably on private property. They even condemn it as the major source of all their evils. These “democratically elected” dictators not only ignore Hayek’s warnings by following the path toward radical socialism but also disobey natural law, a reflection of God’s law as

Let me conclude this brief paper by reminding all lovers of freedom and liberal democracies the warning that Dr. Goetz Briefs, a professor of mine at Georgetown University, kept telling us (his students) during his lectures on History of Economic Thought many years ago: “…beware of democratism (which he distinguished from democracy) because it inevitably ends in despotism”. The reason for this is that it is opposed to the realities of man and society.\(^{46}\) How true is this statement; a statement that coincides with the views of many other scholars – past and present - who have warned about the dangers of tyranny whether it originates in a monarch or in a democratically elected government. Let us be alert about “Constitutional Coups”, so popularized in Latin America, which threaten the natural right of private property and with it the very concept of liberty and the dignity of man.

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\(^{45}\) Hayek, op.cit., pp.103-104

\(^{46}\) Professor Briefs expanded on these thoughts in his book *Entre Capitalismo y Sindicalismo (Zwischen Capitalismus und Syndicalismus)*, Introduccion y Comentario Critico (Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, S.A. 1955) pp. 17-47