

The World Social Forum in Chávez's Venezuela

Earlier this year I was appointed delegate from the Stop the War Coalition to the World Social Forum (WSF) in Caracas. This was a not just a chance to get a feel for the Bolivarian revolution, but also to see what would happen when the 'movement for another world' meets at one of the front lines of the struggle against the new world order.

Caracas is symbolically supercharged. You can tell from the tourist options. You can walk the Bolivar trail to relive key moments in the life of the father of Latin American nationalism, visit the Miraflores Palace, storm centre of the foiled 2002 coup, or, to get up to date, take a trip to one of the barrios that cling resentfully to the mountains overlooking the city's business centre.

A day before the Social Forum was due to start thousands of locals were already milling around the sound systems in the city centre in anticipation. Stallholders were selling kitsch Chávez baseball caps, T-shirts and badges; even a Chávez doll that did speeches. On a stage decked out with Bolivarian flags a trainer was leading a crowd in Chavista samba-aerobics. After a few conversations it was clear we were in that rarest of places, a country in which the poor were enthusiastic about their government. We soon got a lesson in the local class struggle. On the metro, we were suddenly surrounded by a huge crowd of well-dressed pale-skinned people with flags and banners. My companion told me knowingly we were in a baseball crowd. Baseball is indeed a national obsession. I still thought it was odd that so many of them were wearing George Bush T-shirts. Between stops, it dawned on us we were caught up in the assembly of an anti-Chávez, anti-WSF demonstration. Venezuela is not just a relatively poor country, but a very divided one. And the rich are not happy.

Previous WSFs were almost like carnivals. This time the context made it more serious. There were hundreds of meetings on a huge range of topics, but it was the threat from the USA that focused most peoples' minds. Thousands packed in to meetings denouncing US intervention in Latin America from Chile to Columbia, Brazil to Bolivia. Every attack on George Bush was met with wild cheers. What it means to oppose Yankee imperialism was another question. While Cubans and Bolivians were universally welcomed, when Brazilian government delegates expressed solidarity with the Venezuelan people, the audience split down the middle: half clapped, half booed.

Things started badly for the British anti-war contingent. Our first meeting was scheduled for 9 a.m., three miles from the city centre, in a tent in an army base. Most of the soldiers didn't take too kindly to the few committed peacenicks who turned up. Some of them flashed their guns menacingly. We held the meeting, but couldn't wait to get off the base. Still, there were moments of real solidarity. Most activists know that the outcome of the war in Iraq matters directly in what the USA likes to regard as its backyard. Even the vice-president is on record as saying the USA's failure in Iraq is giving the Bolivarian revolution a much needed breathing space.

Chávez himself had helped spark a debate that is new to the WSF. His talk of socialism and revolution in the twenty-first century generated a host of meetings about what this actually means in today's world. There were all sorts of different, often conflicting answers, and although some of the discussions were couched in formulaic Marxist-Leninist, this was a real departure for the Forum. Up to now there has been a conscious effort to avoid issues of power and concentrate on movements and issues. That was not possible in a region where there have been six major insurgencies in six years and where mass movements have unseated

presidents in country after country. The relationship between the movements and power, and the role of political parties, were at last discussed.

Chávez is himself in a roundabout way a product of the resistance movements. He launched his first coup attempt in 1992, three years after Caracas's own anti-neoliberal uprising, the 'Caracazo' of 1989. His coup was put down but not forgotten, and Chávez became the symbol of resistance to the old neoliberal regime. Since being elected in 1998 he has been saved by mass mobilizations three times: most spectacularly in April 2002, when half a million of Caracas's poor surrounded the Miraflores Palace after Chávez was removed in a coup. Equally significant was the oil bosses' lockout in December of the same year. Concerned about increasing government control of the industry, they tried to turn the taps off and starve Chávez of the oil revenues he needs. In the event, oil workers kept the pipelines flowing and broke the bosses' strike.

There is no doubt that all of this has radicalized the president. In his first two years in office, he modelled his policies on Tony Blair's Third Way; now he is calling for the formation of a popular militia of 2 million people under arms. When I met him, along with Cindy Sheehan and six other delegates from the anti-war movement, we were expecting a polite formal greeting and a few words of encouragement. In the event, we discussed the nature and fortunes of US imperialism for two hours. Talking movement strategy with a head of state was a novel and slightly disorientating experience, but Chávez was completely at ease with activists.

One comment by Chávez stuck in my mind. He said that he really needed to move out of the palace for three months to let the renovators do a proper job, since it had become so dilapidated; but he is not able to, because it is the only secure spot in Caracas. That was an alarming insight into the state of the regime, echoed by many of the supporters we talked to. Chávez is doing his best, they say, but he is surrounded by enemies: many top civil servants are hostile, some of the generals who launched the coup are still in post. Others explained that there are two police forces on the street in Caracas, and one of them is completely off the leash.

The Bolivarian Circles and the more recent Misiones are attempts to get round the old state machinery and get things done on the ground, mainly by volunteers and activists. A great deal has been achieved, including the virtual elimination of illiteracy and an impressive programme of public health in poor areas, with the help of 20,000 Cuban doctors. One of the most important missions supplies staple foods at subsidized prices through a chain of government-supplied stores. The majority of poor families and even a third of high-income families shop at these stores, called 'Mercal'. This type of initiative ensures Chávez's popularity (56 per cent approval in recent polls).

Yet these initiatives can't resolve the central problems faced by the regime. Poverty dogs Venezuela. Chávez has raised expectations, and there is a growing sense of frustration with the slow pace of reforms. One veteran activist from the barrios, Roland Denis, told us he thought only about 20 per cent of the slum population had seen any major improvements.

Chávez has room to manoeuvre because of the extra revenue generated by the high price of oil. But relying on oil revenue is risky. Caracas is full of half-finished building projects that are testimony to the ups and downs of the oil market. Without a real challenge to vested interests in Venezuela, the massive social problems will remain. On the other hand, Chávez has done enough to enrage the local bourgeoisie, never mind the USA. There seems little doubt that unless they can tame him, at some stage they will go for him again.

Much depends, then, on what is happening at the grassroots. The spirit in some of the barrios is inspiring. There is a sense of purpose about some of the local committees and a real pride in their self-organization. Many of the people leading in the barrio committees are veteran leftists. But they are playing a role that is half-activist, half-social worker. The committees are quite narrowly focused on administering reforms, rather than mobilizing the population. At some stage one can't help feeling that this will become a problem. Chávez is still very popular, but the historic Left has been devastated over the last two decades. Activists

are grappling with how to strengthen organization on the ground. They are trying different strategies. One important spin-off from the defeat of the oil blockade was the creation of the first independent union confederation in Venezuela in decades, the UNT. Others are trying to construct networks among the various movements of landless labourers, city workers and the poor. We witnessed a fantastic demonstration of agricultural workers from the south, brandishing machetes, marching alongside a feminist group from the barrios chanting 'socialism is not possible without women's liberation'.

The people have been politicized but the job of grassroots organizing has only just begun.

Chris Nineham

The assassin

The Critical Legacies of Manfredo Tafuri, Columbia University,
New York, 20–21 April 2006

There are many reasons today to find the figure of the 'Marxist' architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri a compelling one. Always critically and practically engaged in the world around him, even at the times when he appeared to be advocating a strategic withdrawal from it, Tafuri pursued an ideological criticism of the discipline and its relationship to the capitalist production of the city that changed the self-conception of the architectural institution and profession worldwide, in ways that have hardly begun to be worked through. He attracted to the architecture school in Venice, where he was professor from 1968, a number of brilliant young academics, including Francesco dal Co, Michel de Michelis, and, perhaps most importantly, Massimo Cacciari (the philosopher who would later become mayor of Venice). At the same time, he was, for many years, a member of the Communist Party and related left-wing parties in Italy, integrating these activities into the development of the academy in ways that are almost inconceivable to us today. As an editor of the journal *Contrapiano*, whose contributors included Cacciari and de Michelis as well as Antonio Negri, he contributed to the emergence of some of the most important contemporary intellectual discourses.

James Ackerman would hardly be alone in describing Tafuri as 'probably the most influential architectural historian of the later half of the twentieth century.' Yet when the architect Aldo Rossi dedicated his image *The Assassination of Architecture* to Tafuri, it was never clear whether the assassin was imagined to be capitalism, or Tafuri himself. And whilst Tafuri always denied apocalyptic readings of his work, it seems that, since his untimely death in 1992 at the age of fifty-eight, the suspicions and anguish generated out of the 'crisis' he uncovered at (and as) the heart of modernity and architecture have never quite disappeared, but have simply been repressed and denied. In the anglophone world at least, this can be explained, in part, by the continuing lack of translations of much of his large output. So it was with much anticipation that I travelled to New York to bear witness to that rare beast, a conference on Tafuri called to welcome into existence that equally rare creature, a new and excellent translation of a significant work by Tafuri, in fact his last major piece of writing: *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects* (Yale University Press, 2006; originally 1992).

Tafuri's initial and most lasting impact came in the mid-1970s, following the translation into several languages of an essay originally published in Italian as 'Progetto e utopie'. Written in 1969 for *Contrapiano*, the 1976 English book-length version, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, with its at times clunky translation and cover image by Rossi, established Tafuri's reputation as the difficult-to-read prophet of the end of architecture. The work remains a stunning example of a Marxian dialectical analysis of the dynamics of

metropolitan modernity and its critical and creative leading edge, as defined through the critical-historical concept of the 'avant-garde'. Form, plan and assemblage are amongst the concepts in the book whose dynamic, interpenetrating histories move productively between ideology and matter as they are taken on and developed by the competing yet interconnected logics of political utopianism and capitalist accumulation.

Tafuri's essentially classical Marxist warning against utopianism's potential to act as a deluding ideological veil is expanded and animated through a series of dialectical tales that pin down an originary crisis within contemporary architectural culture. This crisis is played out as a kind of primal scene, which in the absence of either a social transformation of architectural knowledge and the demands made upon it, or a sober critical awareness of their absence, is destined to be replayed endlessly as farce. The moment that architecture becomes self-conscious, and can represent society in the city, that representation becomes redundant, as a new temporality takes over. It is most fundamentally the need for urban growth in modernity that destroys the possibility of the 'classical' city, and in a sense constitutes the crisis of architecture itself. As Marco de Michelis stated, in his very useful paper at this conference:

The very establishment of science and technique as independent bodies of knowledge, separated and isolated architecture from the real process of conformation to modern society and condemned it to a laboured and irresolvable course. This, for Tafuri, is the origin of the ideological nature of any modern architectural work: the fact of no longer being a protagon-

ist of the real transformations that capitalistic development produces, of not being able to produce but only interpret them a posteriori. It could be said that architecture was no longer permitted to give form to reality but, at most, to re-form it.

For Tafuri himself, the crisis described in *Architecture and Utopia* had been played out personally some years earlier in the decision 'one tragic night' to become an architectural historian, when he found it no longer possible to continue direct, operative engagement in the struggle over the production of contemporary urban solutions. Yet this personal trauma was itself no more than the manifestation of Tafuri's emerging understanding of the unresolved disciplinary trauma within architectural culture itself.

Tafuri had set out the critical armature that would structure this work, and indeed that of the entire Venice school, in the 1968 book *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* (the English translation of which did not appear until 1980). As several contributors to the conference argued, the different sequence of publications has been an important cause of confusion in Anglo-American architectural circles as to the trajectory of Tafuri's development. In this, his



central argument was for the necessity of a split between the practice of writing architectural history, and the practice and theorising of making buildings, because, as Andrew Leach set out in his paper: ‘architectural ideology, in the sense of values that determine or shore up architectural production, is inextricable from the representation of the past as history’. Leach rightly emphasized the awareness of temporal orientation at work in Tafuri’s position: the differences between knowledge of objects from the past and the way that this knowledge is used to determine the possibilities of the future. If architectural practice is paradigmatically orientated towards the future, then the status of architectural history entails a particular ‘difficulty’ that needs to be acknowledged. Daniel Sherer, the translator of *Interpreting the Renaissance*, also delivered a paper which sought to dispel the notion that there was any simple shift in Tafuri’s work, from the position of a younger politically engaged activist to an older archival and remote philologist. As Sherer argued, modernity never ceased to be object of Tafuri’s analysis. Indeed, consistently for Tafuri throughout his research (though not, perhaps until now, in his English translations), it was the Renaissance’s ideological relationship to antiquity that determines and acts as the ground of a later modernism.

Perhaps the main question raised by this conference was how the contemporary and historical elaboration of the central concepts deployed in Tafuri’s works (such as criticism, ideology and operativity) could be extended beyond the narrow understandings often promoted by that generation of ‘Tafuri’s children’ most widely published in English. Such an activity is essential to any historicization of Tafuri today, and is crucial if we are to create new tools that can in some sense continue this project. Some useful contributions to such a project were made at the event, by Leach, de Michelis and Sherer, and also notably by Carla Keyvanian and Marco Biraghi. In rather different ways, there were some memorable scholarly contributions from Mark Rakatansky, Beatriz Colomina, Alessandra Ponte, Jean-Louis Cohen and James Ackerman as well. Almost entirely ignored by the event, however, were questions concerning Tafuri’s reception in bodies of thought not entirely situated within architectural culture – a reception marked in *Radical Philosophy* by recent contributions from David Cunningham and Gail Day (see *RP* 133). This omission is not insignificant since a great deal of Tafuri’s importance within architectural culture itself derives from the extent to which he was an emphatically trans-disciplinary thinker, so obviously influenced by Foucault, Benjamin and Althusserian Marxism – a historian who once audaciously attempted to form a fully trans-disciplinary and transdepartmental, critical history faculty at Venice, with a remit which stretched way beyond architecture.

It is finally, perhaps, in this broadest sense, as a thinker prepared, whilst working with fragments, to think through social, political and cultural totalities, that we should continue to work through his legacies today. For although, as Mark Wigley (contemporary architectural culture’s own Wildean wit) could not help but point out, ‘a successful conference on Tafuri would be a disaster’, there was a real sense of urgency at the end of this event, persistently expressed in terms of the need to keep returning to his work. It was in this sense that a now-aging generation of theorists and critics – including Anthony Vidler, Kenneth Frampton, Diana Agrest and Joan Ockman – all concluded with the idea that it might be Tafuri’s very indigestibility within consumer culture that keeps this project critical, as well as obscure. What they remained far less clear about was to what extent such a critical project remained their task, or that of contemporary architectural theory more generally, today.

Jon Goodbun