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A new organization comprised of students and members of the Latin American community. VISIONS provides a forum for elaborating ideas and concepts relevant to Latin America through a newsletter to be published every semester. The articles will be written on topics and themes related to the region. You are welcome to be part of VISIONS! We are seeking an array of articles concerned with politics, economics, human rights, security, culture, or any other interesting theme pertaining to the region for our next issue. For more information contact: faz13@pitt.edu

Venezuela…A Good Neighbor?

By Felipe Zuluaga
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On May 22, 2005 the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, declared his country’s interest in acquiring nuclear energy. Chavez claims that his notion of developing nuclear capacity in Venezuela is for the sole purpose of improving the country’s energy capacity and advancing Venezuela’s position in other areas related to nuclear technology. Chavez invited Brazil and Argentina to work along with Venezuela on issues of nuclear investigations while encouraging other Latin American countries to follow his lead.

Although Chavez indicates that the development of nuclear power is to be for peaceful purposes only, his statement in May was not well received in the majority of Venezuela’s neighboring countries or in the United States. But why is Chavez’s idea regarded with suspicion by the international community? Why is his initiative viewed as a threat rather than a positive development? The most likely answer can be summed up by security and stability reasons, as Venezuela is seeking a more secure position in the global context. However, this ambition engenders concerns in the Latin American region and could potentially generate serious repercussions for the entire Latin American community.

Among these concerns is determining the true reason as to why President Chavez aspires to acquire nuclear energy. According to Douglas Mackinnon in an article from the Houston Chronicle, the real reason that Chavez wants to develop nuclear technology is for the purpose of developing nuclear weapons! It may be hard to determine the credibility of this statement, but considering Mackinnon’s source is a high ranking official for a Latin American government, it should not be taken lightly.

It is upsetting and almost incomprehensible to conceive of the Venezuelan government developing nuclear weapons. This not only poses a threat to the stability and security of the Latin American region, but it also has the potential to cause a crisis at the global level. If nuclear technology is developed in Venezuela for the purpose of acquiring nuclear arms, the country will violate the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which prohibits nuclear weapons in Latin America. This treaty, signed by 23 Latin American states, has been the pillar in maintaining nuclear security for the entire region and sets an example for other regions to successfully achieve nuclear-free zones. However, if Venezuela officially decides to break the treaty by achieving nuclear power, it is probable that other countries with previous intentions to develop military nuclear capacity - such as Mexico, Chile, Brazil and Argentina – will follow suit.

Second, Chavez’s continual statements against the United States and his constant
Social Conflict in Bolivia: A Recurring Revolution

By Lindsey Jones

Support to the theocratic regime of Iran in developing nuclear weapons have alarmed the U.S. State and Defense Departments. For this reason, U.S.-Venezuela relations have been deteriorating. Such a situation has segregated some Latin American countries between those supporting Chavez and those that do not. Specifically, this is the case of Colombia. Colombia has been in a difficult position in trying to maintain good relations with its most important neighbor, Venezuela, and its most important ally, the United States. The root of the problem lies in the fact that, if Venezuela acquires nuclear power, the U.S. may not concord; instead, the U.S. may retaliate with force. Not only would this have huge political, economic, and social implications in Latin America, but it also may initiate an arms-race in the region.

The aforementioned concerns imply that it is important to follow Chavez’s nuclear idea very carefully. Even if Chavez’s intentions are purely passive and for civilian purposes only, I believe that his aspiration to achieve nuclear power will cause more harm than good. Therefore, although it is not known what measures the U.S. and/or the international community will take to prevent Chavez’s nuclear ambitions, it appears that the Venezuelan President’s actions are driving his country into an isolated position – one with huge implications for the entire region.

After months of protests and road blocks by peasants, workers, and miners, a sense of normality has returned to conflict-ridden Bolivia. For the past several years, Bolivians have had to adjust more than ever to the consequences of living in a twenty-first century multiethnic and disparate society in the twenty-first century. This skirmish has by no means come to end; however, it appears that a more peaceful atmosphere has temporarily replaced the sadistic events of the past several months.

The proceedings leading to both the 2003 resignation of the elected president, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, and that of his ineffectual successor, Carlos Mesa, two years later have occurred amidst a backdrop of a popular revolution by oppressed Andean Indians. The protesters, representing a majority of Bolivians, are said to be battling the neo-liberal reforms imposed by the Western nations while deeming the multinational found in the world. This skirmish has by no means come to end; however, it appears that a more peaceful atmosphere has temporarily replaced the sadistic events of the past several months.

In order to understand the extent of Bolivia’s social conflict, it is important to recognize the complex political history of the nation. After the transition to democracy in the 1980s, Bolivia’s prospects for governability were slim with the violence that accompanied the conversion. While Bolivia experienced peaceful civilian governments from 1880 until 1930 and again from 1952 until 1964, between 1972 and 1982 severe political turmoil, economic catastrophe and state disintegration existed.

The Movimiento Revolucionario Boliviano (MNR) was founded in 1941 by a small group of dissidents from the middle and upper classes and has played a big role in Bolivian politics. The two prominent original leaders of the MNR were Victor Paz Estenssoro and Hernan Siles Suazo. MNR members ranged from intellectuals to both white and blue-collar workers. The MNR’s influence with the Bolivian miners increased, and Paz Estenssoro led congressional interrogations of government ministers. The MNR also had contacts with reformist military officers, particularly a group called “Razon de Patria-Radepa.” This faction sought mass support, backed military intervention in politics, and hoped to prevent excessive foreign control over Bolivia’s natural resources. In 1943, the Radepa/MNR alliance overthrew the Peñaranda regime. The MNR denounced Peñaranda’s close cooperation with the United States and especially criticized his agreement to compensate Standard Oil for its nationalized holdings. The United States declared that the MNR was under the influence of “Nazi fascism,” and the MNR resigned when the United States publicly denounced their government.

When the MNR assumed power again, Paz Estenssoro became the Minister of Finance. He hoped to get popular support with a budget that emphasized social spending over economic development. The MNR was the dominant opposition group for the revolution that took the side of workers and the defense of Indian rights. Social unrest, laid off workers, economic crisis and a disagreement with the United States over tin prices halted exports and hurt the Bolivian economy. Food imports increased as 92% of land was held by estates of 1000 hectares or more. The revolution that followed brought three days of fighting, 600 deaths and the surrender of the army.

A coalition government between the Centro Obrero Boliviano (COB) and the MNR was formed under Paz Estenssoro in 1952. The COB represented the Bolivian workers and was seen as the government within the government. They proposed that the MNR assume ownership and responsibility of the government administration, but the COB could veto anything passed by the MNR. The COB was the real government of the Bolivian workers and hence, of the national economy.

Paz Estenssoro passed the first universal suffrage law in Bolivia. He closed the Colegio Militar and required officers
There is no question about it: free market economies yield greater overall productivity and an increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Renowned economists Robert J. Barro and Xavier Sala-i-Martin contend that any present economic growth, however minor, yields an unprecedented and exponential rise in per capita income over time. They calculated the average annual rate of growth in real per capita GDP in the United States over the last 120 years and concluded that even a minuscule increase of a percentage of GDP produces unbelievable per capita wealth over the long term. But what ill effects do free market economies have on developing nations? What negative externalities arise from such rapid and unprecedented growth? Globalization then creates a paradox in terms of development: on the one hand, a free market economy produces increases in GDP, but on the other hand, it produces drastic decreases in standards of living and living wages.

Globalization, or free trade, spurs rapid economic growth and is assumed to be the de facto tool for achieving significant growth in GDP in Lesser Developed Countries (LDCs). But ill effects from free trade can be seen everywhere. Regarding the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Timothy A. Canova argues that despite Mexico’s widely-hailed free trade success story, “NAFTA’s liberalization of capital flows and the subsequent peso crash and economic austerity contributed to steep declines in jobs and real incomes for millions of Mexicans.” The evidence can also be seen in the inequitable development of Mexico: hundreds of maquiladoras have massed in the northern provinces near the U.S.-Mexico border, and southern provinces like Chiapas remain economically neglected. Regardless of such disproportionate development, Mexico’s economic growth has been steady. But if millions of Mexicans are losing with globalization, are free market economies really working?

The recently ratified Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) is already stirring controversy and protest. According to Stephanie Saul of The New York Times, CAFTA will empower drug companies with unprecedented monopolies in Central America and ultimately lead to “higher drug prices for the mostly impoverished people of the six Latin American countries it covers.” CAFTA has also resulted in dozens of violent protests throughout Central America, clearly signaling Central Americans’ disapproval of globalization and neo-liberal efforts.

Arturo Escobar, Associate Professor of Anthropology from the University of Massachusetts, agrees: “the demise of neo-Keynesianism and the rise of neo-liberalism” are “draconian economic reforms introduced in the Third World.” The price and human cost of neo-liberal free market policies seem to be a non-issue. “Never mind that as a supposedly temporary casualty of the necessary adjustment people’s living standards have fallen to unprecedented levels.”
By Willys Santos  

In 1989 the Brazilian people voted for president for the first time in 21 years thereby sealing the surrender of the military dictatorship. At that time, the economic situation of the country was chaotic. Inflation in 1988 had been 933.6%, and in the following year it was 1,764.8%.

The elected president Fernando Collor promised to modernize the industry and Brazil’s financial system, which in his view needed to be updated in order to compete with other developing nations. To this end, he opened the country to the international market by eliminating tariff barriers and boosting imports. However, Brazil’s industry was not prepared for the sudden competition with import products, mostly coming from China; therefore, a huge recession followed. The unemployment rate rose and investments decreased. Mr. Collor, however, managed to do what he had promised. He made available to the Brazilian middle class products from the first world. The population engaged in consumerism habits which were incompatible with their income.

Brazilians soon realized that they could not afford the products they saw in the store windows. To make matters worse, two years after taking office, Pedro Collor, the president’s brother, denounced a corruption scam which benefited the president and his family. This marked the beginning of the end of Mr Collor’s term of office. An inquiry commission was called to investigate the president’s finances, and he was judged guilty by the senate. In order to avoid his impeachment, Mr Collor resigned. The vice president Itamar Franco then took office. During Mr Franco’s ruling another scandal was uncovered involving congressmen who were taking bribes for transferring public money to private companies.

In 1994 the sociologists Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former researcher from CEPAL, was elected with 52.2% the votes. Mr Cardoso had been a minister of Itamar Franco’s administration when he launched an economic plan in 1993 called the Real Plan. The plan brought monetary stability to the economy, and as a result, it helped Mr Cardoso be elected. His administration was marked by neo liberal tendencies. In order to stabilize the monetary system, he pegged the “real” (Brazilian currency) to the dollar at the exchange rate $e = 1$/1. As a consequence, Brazilian products became extremely expensive, the import/export ratio sky rocketed, leading to huge balance-of-payment deficits. After the financial crisis in Asia in 1997, the Brazilian government had no alternative but let the real float. One of the most problematic issues in the Cardoso administration was that of the intense privatization program of state companies. When the CVRD (Companhia do Vale do Rio Doce), an ore extracting and processing company, was privatized, the whole process was marked by suspicion of state officials benefiting certain groups through bribery.

The Lula administration has been able to boost economic growth. The GDP grew 4.9% in 2004, and it is expected to grow

The Lula administration has been able to boost economic growth. The GDP grew 4.9% in 2004, and it is expected to grow 3.5 this year. The economic and social policies, however, have not changed much but rather seem to be a continuation of previous governments. Lula has not made the social transformations necessary to affect a change in income inequality, reduce poverty and eliminate hunger, as promised. Unemployment has stalled in the double digits (12%), and the motto of Lula’s presidential that campaign “the hope won the fear” no longer seems relevant. Confidence in the new government is waning as may be evident by the fact that Brazilians are the second-largest group entering the US across the Mexican border.
Latin Americans in Southwestern Pennsylvania

By Jorge Enrique Delgado. D.D.S., M.Ed. jdelgado4501@yahoo.com.ar

Not only does “Latin American” define the citizens of Central American, South American and Caribbean decent, but it also describes the entire U.S. Latino community (Hispanics and others of Latin American origin), including those whom have permission to work, undocumented people, immigrants and their offspring. They are not a homogeneous group; there are racial mixtures that occurred among Latin American natives, Europeans and/or Africans in times of the Conquest, in addition to some more recent Asian groups. In addition to ethnicity, there are geographic, linguistic and cultural factors contributing to the diversity in Latin America. Nevertheless, Latinoshare their religious faith and have a similar history of underdevelopment and dependency. For that reason, many Latin Americans attempt to seek new ventures in developed countries, like the U.S.

“Latinos are the greatest minority in the U.S. (12%): it is estimated that in 2050 they will comprise 25% of the population. The distribution and characteristics of Latinos vary among states and cities. For example, there is a higher percentage of Mexicans in the south and west, but fewer reside in the east where Caribbeans and South Americans are also predominant groups of immigrants. In states, where the proportion of Latinos is significant, many jobs require workers to be bilingual (Spanish-English) with knowledge of the Latino culture.

In Pennsylvania, the situation of Latinos is different from those in other eastern states. The percentage of Latinos in the state is very low, reaching only 3.2%; however, this is more acute in southwestern Pennsylvania with statistics reaching only 0.705%. The highest concentration of Latinos in Western Pennsylvania can be found in Allegheny County (0.9%). In the city of Pittsburgh, the greater urban center of the zone, they comprise 1.3% of the population. The Latin American countries that have significant representation are Mexico, Puerto Rico, South Americans (mainly from Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Colombia), Cuba and some Central Americans.

The population is migrant and scattered, being concentrated mostly in the city of Pittsburgh, but also in Allegheny County and even in Greater Pittsburgh (southwestern counties around this metropolis). Several belong to universities, either as students or as professors/researchers. Many work in agriculture, construction, landscaping and restaurants (especially Mexican and Central American workers). There are also professionals and artists in the area. Some work in big companies and a few are entrepreneurs.

Most of Western Pennsylvania was populated by immigrants from different European countries, who came to work in the mining and steel industries. They gathered together by nationality and religious affinities, and have tried to maintain their parents’ and grandparents’ traditions. Today, there are second and third generations of descendants, who do not see themselves as immigrants, but rather as Americans. Due to this vast history, it is interesting that new immigrants from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia and/or Africa go unnoticed, and are almost invisible to Western Pennsylvanians.

Southwestern Pennsylvania is experiencing deceleration in demographic growth and economics, and it is interesting to notice that the population in Allegheny County decreased 4% from 1,336,449 to 1,281,666 between 1990 and 2000. Running against that trend, the Latino population grew 28% (11,166) according to the Census 2000. A possible solution to the problem of this region’s population decline could be remedied by welcoming the Latino population.

Despite their limited presence in the region, Latinos have various groups representing them, such as the Latin American Cultural Union (LACU), a variety of national associations (for instance, Colombia in Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Venezuelan Association), the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Hispanic Center and the Latin American Choir. Additionally, outstanding academic centers are dedicated to the study of Latin American and Caribbean cultures, including the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) housed at University of Pittsburgh. However, to empower Latinos in the region, it is necessary to develop better community building and communication strategies as well as to create new agencies or make the existent ones work more closely together to give Latinos clout.
Experiencing Cuba Through the Eyes of Teachers

By Luz Amanda Villada
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During the months of October and November 2004, the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) and the Mattress Factory offered a five-week professional development course for K-12 teachers, “Experiencing Cuba through the Eyes of Cuban Installation Artists.” The workshop was designed to demonstrate how art can be used in Spanish language and social studies classrooms to introduce students to the rich, diverse history and culture of Cuba.

As CLAS’ Academic and Outreach Assistant, it was a wonderful experience to participate in a program that enhanced educators’ knowledge about Latin America, especially Cuba. It was the first time that I was involved in all aspects of a workshop and had an opportunity to work with the teachers. As a Latin American (Colombian), seeing the educators’ reactions to and hearing their comments about Cuba and the installation art was the highlight of the workshop.

To some of the participants the information was new and surprising; to others it was a reiteration of information about life in Cuba and Cuba’s relationship with the United States. Due to visa problems, the artists were not able to come to the U.S. to work in Pittsburgh. Therefore, the staff of the Mattress Factory (in Pittsburgh) and the artists (in Cuba) worked long distance, via computer technology and the telephone, to recreate the installation art projects. Furthermore, it was a humbling experience to realize the obstacles that must be overcome to create art in Cuba and to begin to understand the theme of each piece “through the eyes of Cuban Artists.”

For example, the dual project by JEFF (José Emilio Fuentes Fonseca) entitled Sentimiento, 2004 (boat house) and Pensamiento, 2004 (boat), at first did not seem like much, just a house filled with water; upon which was floating a small, rusty, dirty, old boat. However, when looking in the window of the house, you were overcome with a feeling of immense desolation and melancholy that could not be understood or explained. To me, it felt like Cuba – old and falling apart but at the same time (as you noticed the boat coming into the light) you sense an indescribable beauty, which of course is the island.

Months after the workshop, I emailed several of the teachers and the organizers of the event to find out what they experienced – what they felt about the art work and the program. I contacted Jeff Poole, Spanish teacher, Franklin Regional High School, William Pfahl, art teacher, Arsenal Middle School, CLAS Outreach Coordinator Rosalind Eannarino, and Jennifer Baron, Director of Education, the Mattress Factory. I asked: “Did the art exhibition help you to understand Cuba and Cubans? Can the content of the workshop be used in your classrooms? What, from the workshop, was the most beneficial to you?”

Jeff Poole not only benefited as a teacher from the workshop, but was preparing to take a group of 100 students to the exhibit. “I think the workshop was very well organized and not only helped me to understand more about Cuban art but to realize what a great resource we have in Pittsburgh with the Center for Latin American Studies...I am looking forward to talking to my students about Cuba and preparing them for the exhibit, I don’t want to tell them what they will see; I want to tell them about Cuba and have them tell me what they saw...”

William Pfahl indicated: “…I am old enough to remember the Cuban missile crisis. However, not having studied Cuban history and the reasons that Castro came to power, I was not well-informed on the subject...He continues “…As an artist concerned with beauty and life, I have really not been involved with political art... The art work at the Mattress Factory was very well put together and in their own way most of the installation pieces had great beauty. They were expressions of the life and conditions of Cuba as well. As an artist who tries to create things, I can relate to art objects as having their own spirit. No words are needed to explain....”

As I read the comments from the teachers I started reflecting on what it was that I learned about Cuba. I thought I had a substantial knowledge about Cuba; but I was pleasantly surprised to realize that there was much more to learn. By experiencing the Cuban Art and realizing that each piece was made from old or recycle parts; yet each piece was designed to demonstrate the history, politics, economics, and creativity of Cubans.

Finally, I received comments from the two people that worked side by side organizing this workshop, Rosalind Eannarino and Jennifer Baron. And Rosalind Eannarino, CLAS Outreach Coordinator “…I enjoy working with teachers in Western Pennsylvania. I appreciate the opportunity to introduce them to the diverse countries, cultures, and languages of Latin America. Because U.S. citizens often have a negative bias related to Cuba, it can be a hard subject to discuss. The art work enabled us to approach the subject of Cuba through the eyes of the artists – rather than through those of political entities. The Spanish language, social studies, special education, and art teachers who participated in “Experiencing Cuba through the Eyes of Cuban Installation Artists” were open to learning new ideas and discussing new points of view. Many knew very little about Cuba prior to the workshop. They once again proved to me that...”
Pennsylvania teachers work above and beyond what is required of them.”

Jennifer Baron commented, “...Though the Cuban artists were not permitted to participate and work on site here in Pittsburgh, the museum's dedicated and experienced staff worked long–distance to realize the artists’ large-scale projects. The exhibition brings to Pittsburgh a taste of the vibrant and exciting art scene that exists in Cuba today...Through the lens of a contemporary art exhibition, teachers were provided with firsthand, in-depth experiences to examine the intersection of music, visual expression, politics and social issues inherent in Cuban art and culture...The course included lively music and art-making workshops, lectures on historical and cultural context, presentations by K-12 teachers who have studied in Cuba, a dialogue with Mattress Factory Curator of Exhibitions Michael Olijnyk, an exploration of museum and studio teaching techniques, lesson writing, and Cuban dinners.”

I am very hopeful that more Pennsylvania teachers will participate in CLAS teacher training workshops. I personally feel that the workshop “Experiencing Cuba through the Eyes of Cuban Installation Artists” was an innovative way to share one of the cultures of Latin America with educators. Each of the participating teachers prepared a lesson on Cuba for classroom use. These will be published on CLAS’ website by the end of summer 2005.

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http://www.mattress.org/catalogue/04/cuba/index.html
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