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No idiocy like educated idiocy

by [Anthony Daniels](#)

A review of *The Guide to the Perfect Latin American Idiot*, by Plinio Alueyo Mendoza, Carlos Alberto Montaner, and Alvaro Vargas Llosa & *In the Shadow of the Liberator: The Impact of Hugo Chavez on Venezuela and Latin America*, by Richard Gott.

Man is born rich, but almost everywhere is poor.

It is to the elucidation of this paradox that many of the finest minds of Latin America have been devoted for nearly a century. And the best answer they have been able to give is that most men are poor because a few men are rich. And, by the same token, those few men are rich because most men are poor. On this view, wealth is a form of institutionalized plunder. Nothing had to be—or remains to be—discovered, invented, or developed. The wealth of the world has been the same since the beginning of time and will remain the same until the end of time. Hence your slice of the economic cake, both personal and international, necessarily decreases the size of mine, and thus poverty is always someone else's fault. This means that the wealth of Europe and America was erected on a foundation of cheap bananas.

These ideas—a kind of anti-Semitism *sans* the Jews—are so absurd that they are almost auto-refuting, at least for anyone with a few facts at his disposal and a minimal ability to think connectedly. Yet they have had an historical importance and influence vastly disproportionate to their intellectual merit, and have even constituted an unassailable orthodoxy among Latin American intellectuals, some of them of great distinction. Indeed, it was hardly possible for someone to be considered an intellectual at all in Latin America unless he subscribed to these ideas. A man who pointed out their logical and empirical shortcomings was considered a traitor to the patria and most likely in the pay of the CIA to boot.

The Guide to the Perfect Latin American Idiot [1] is therefore a deeply iconoclastic book, to an extent that no one unfamiliar with Latin American intellectual life, economic theorizing, historiography, and even theology would suspect. The dialectical ease with which the authors are able to dispose of prevailing orthodoxy is no guide to the courage that is necessary to do so. For Latin American literati to argue that the poverty of Bolivia or Honduras is not caused by the rapacity of the United States is a little like arguing in Saudi Arabia that the prophet was the victim of a psychiatric disorder.

The book works best as a kind of twentieth-century bestiary, in which appear the sea-monsters of Latin American political economy and philosophy. It is a valuable work of historical conservation because it is not impossible that in a few years it will be denied that such foolish ideas were ever given wide currency. (The Library of St Antony's College, Oxford, threw out its Ceausescu-era Romanian collection within weeks of the dictator's downfall, since they were no longer 'relevant.')

The “Latin American Idiot” of the book’s title is not, of course, the uneducated peasant or slum-dweller, because it takes a degree of education to be able to deny obvious truths and defend obvious falsehoods. The Idiot of the title is thus the university-educated intellectual trained in what must now, alas, be called the inhumanities. This type, produced in ever larger numbers, discovered to his chagrin that his accession to the educated minority did not automatically reward him with the high position in society of which he believed himself worthy and to which he also believed himself entitled. Nothing was left for him but the sour consolation of resentment, and the theory that wealth is the cause of poverty (and vice versa) fitted his bill perfectly.

Latin American universities (which, ever since the reform movement in 1919 at Cordoba University in Argentina, have cherished and defended their autonomy from the state) were for many years centers of revolutionary ferment in which it was dangerous for students to dissent from the ideas of the Latin American Idiot. To think differently was to risk social ostracism or worse. Revolutionary squalor reigned everywhere, and a situation developed in the 1970s and 1980s in which there was violent anarchy within the confines of the university, tempered by the operation of death squads without. *Sendero Luminoso* (“The Shining Path”) was perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of Latin American idiocy, indeed its platonic distillation, and it was entirely the product of Ayacucho University in Peru.

Even when the beliefs of the Latin American Idiot did not impel him into revolutionary action, they caused him to support or adopt disastrously impoverishing economic policies. The Idiot in power was always a catastrophe. Juan Domingo Perón of Argentina and Alan García Pérez of Peru are two shining examples, and proof moreover—if any were needed—that the belief that wealth is plunder never stopped anyone from indulging in a little plunder on his own account.

Perón had the distinction of turning Argentina into a Third World country when, for the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, it had been the equal of Canada or Australia. In other words, he so comprehensively destroyed prosperity with his xenophobic populism that, in Argentina, the question as to the origin of poverty was entirely answerable. (Perónism has inspired an entire academic literature, with titles such as *The Reversal of Development*.) Perón’s feat of national impoverishment has, perhaps, been equalled only by that eternal gazer down the wrong end of the telescope, Fidel Castro, who inherited a country at approximately the economic level of Italy and will leave it to his successor at a level closer to that of Guinea or Tanzania. Needless to say, Latin American Idiots have no difficulty in persuading themselves that Cuba’s problems before Castro were caused by trade with America, whereas its problems after Castro were caused by absence of trade with America.

As for Alan García Pérez, the genius of his economic management can best be captured by a personal anecdote. One afternoon in Arequipa, I went out for a cup of tea. I was running short of intis, which at the time were exchanging at 90,000 to the dollar (and one new inti equalled 1,000 old, pre-García soles). I decided to have my cup of tea before changing my money, which was just as well, because by the time I had finished it the exchange rate had risen to 110,000 intis to the dollar. Needless to say, you could buy nothing much more substantial than a cup of tea or a taxi ride with the national currency, and thus the fervent radical Peruvian nationalist de facto dollarized the entire Peruvian economy.

There is no idiocy like educated idiocy, and it takes a certain kind of utterly useless and tendentious erudition to produce a book with a title such as *How to Read Donald Duck: Mass Communication and Colonialism* by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, which is cited in the *Guide* as one of the ten sacred texts of Latin American idiocy and which turns Donald Duck into the Trojan Horse of American cultural imperialism. Opening my copy at random (the twenty-eighth Mexican edition to be printed between 1972, when it first appeared in Allende’s Chile, and 1987), I find the following:

In spite of his falseness, Donald is felt to be the authentic representative of the contemporary worker. But while in reality the worker needs his wages, for Donald they are not essential: while the worker seeks in desperation, Donald finds without difficulty; while the worker produces and suffers as a result of the material that opposes itself to him and the exploitation of which he is the object, Donald unrealistically experiences the negative weight of work as an adventure.

The book ends with the following words:

To the accusation that this study is merely destructive, without proposing an alternative to replace the overthrown Disney, we must reply that no one can, by his own unaided individual will, 'propose' a solution to these problems, because there are no experts in the restructuring of culture. What comes after Disney will grow, or fail to grow, out of the social practice of the masses that are seeking their own emancipation. The vanguards, organized into political parties, will have to gather up and facilitate this new social practice.

And there are no prizes for guessing who were in the vanguards.

The *Guide* is intended as a work of criticism, to sweep away the accumulated intellectual rubbish of a hundred years, and as such it succeeds admirably. Nevertheless, one can see emerging from its pages the gleam of a new orthodoxy, to the effect that the operation of the marketplace will make Latin Americans rich, well-behaved, and happy. Once market relations have been established within the countries of Latin America, and free trade instituted with the outside world, there will be nothing left for economists or political philosophers to say or do. In a sense, therefore, the authors are but a mirror image of the Idiots they lampoon; they have merely changed the minus sign in front of the marketplace to a plus sign.

There are several questions they scarcely touch upon. For example, if man were an economically rational creature, free trade would have swept all before it a long time ago. But it hasn't: and even in an era of relatively liberal trade relations, many barriers still exist. For example, while Poland is permitted to export any number of its aircraft to the European Community, it is not permitted to export any of its raspberries. Since it produces more raspberries than aircraft, however, this is a distinctly disadvantageous arrangement.

It is also disadvantageous to the millions of European consumers of raspberries; but the minor inconvenience caused to them does not add up, politically-speaking, to the major inconvenience that would be caused to a tiny number of European raspberry-growers, whose livelihood would be destroyed if Polish fruit were allowed free entry on to the European market. Chilean raspberry growers, by contrast, are fortunate; their fruit is imported because it arrives in winter, when European growers are comfortably in hibernation.

In a world of truly free markets, Western Europe would produce hardly any food, except of a highly specialized variety, and Japan would produce no rice. But protectionists can play upon the fear of complete dependence on foreign staple foodstuffs, as well as on concern about what would happen to the countryside if the growing of food were abandoned. These anxieties might be exaggerated or used illicitly to protect special interests, but they are not inherently ridiculous. And they cannot be allayed by the wave of an ideological wand or by the mere recitation of a mantra.

This does not excuse the Latin American Idiot his idiocy, but it does suggest that the world is a little more complex in its actual operations than the authors of the guide to his idiocy seem to credit. In other words, their refutation of the world view of the Latin American Idiot is a necessary intellectual undertaking, but certainly not a sufficient one, if Latin America is to cast off the ideological shackles that have so impeded its rate of progress.

The Latin American Idiot has his counterpart outside the region. Indeed, the academic study of Latin America in both American and European universities is dominated by such counterparts. And most foreign journalists who are interested in Latin America share the Idiot's world view. It is difficult to find books about the Central American civil wars of the 1980s, for example, that suggest that the guerrillas were anything other than selfless freedom-fighters. But it was always perfectly obvious to anyone with the faintest knowledge of either history or human nature that inside every Central American rebel there was a dictator trying to get out.

Not that this would have worried Richard Gott, the British journalist and one of the most talented and distinguished fellow travelers of Latin American idiocy. At the outset of his book about Hugo Chavez, the former military officer and now radical populist president of Venezuela, Mr. Gott admits to a soft spot for Latin American strong men. [2] Indeed, on the evidence of the asides in this book, he seems to admire every rabid xenophobic left-leaning nationalist who has ever ruled in Latin America, including Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the first dictator of Paraguay who was known as El Supremo, and who, among other quirks, cut down all the trees of Asunción for fear of concealed assassins. Mr. Gott is definitely a no-omelettes- without-breaking-eggs man.

Latin American guerrillas are to him what duchesses are to social climbers; he longs to be able to claim acquaintance with them. In 1971, he was the author of a book entitled *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, in which his acknowledgments ended: "My wife, Ann Zammit, would have preferred me to join the guerrillas rather than write about them." And not long ago, it was revealed that he had taken money knowingly from the KGB, a peccadillo that was laughed off by the liberal intelligentsia in Britain as a sign of youthful exuberance and naïveté. After all, he hadn't done anything really wicked during the Cold War, like take money from MI6 or the CIA.

Mr. Gott is far from the only writer to have developed a soft spot for Latin American strong men: García Marquez loves his Castro as Graham Greene loved his Omar Torrijos. But whether President Chavez makes the grade as far as the left-wing intelligentsia of Europe and America is concerned remains to be seen. Hitherto he has confined himself mainly to symbolism and rhetoric, such as paying homage in China to the Great Helmsman whose first words on reaching power were "China has stood up." Chavez found these words deeply moving, though "China will stand to attention until it faints from hunger" would have been a more candid statement on Mao's part.

As for Chavez's scheme to reverse the Venezuelan population's drift to the city by establishing *Poblaciones Agro-Industriales Sostenibles* ("Sustainable Agro-Industrial Towns") in the countryside, he should realize that he will never receive the adulation of the western intelligentsia while migration to them is restricted to mere volunteers; only when he forces people into them, and scores of thousands starve to death as a result, will he become a true political hero to what used to be known as the progressive forces of mankind.

There are some hopeful pointers, however. Chavez's planning minister, Jorge Giordani, trained as a development economist at Sussex University, whose Institute of Development Economics was the *autor intelectual*, as they say in Spanish, of the Ujamaa villages in Tanzania. In the course of establishing these collectivized villages, three-quarters of the peasant population of Tanzania was moved by force from where it was living, thus bringing about an economic and social catastrophe from which the country has still not fully recovered. Woe unto that land whose minister of planning has studied economics at Sussex University!

Of course, a populist figure like Chavez could have emerged only where there was strong (and in this case, justified) dissatisfaction with the old order. The politicians of the old political system, in which two parties alternated in power but nothing much changed, were utterly discredited. They had squandered the country's immense oil revenues in an orgy of speculation and corrupt clientelism,

leaving it almost as poor as they found it. But, needless to say, there is no situation from which the Latin American Idiot and his foreign acolyte cannot draw precisely the wrong lesson. Far from being too weak, the Venezuelan state is too preponderant in national life, so that control of its levers is the only way to personal advancement. Like many another state in Latin America, it does not so much hold the ring as dominate the fight. President Chavez, at least in his public pronouncements, wants merely to replace corrupt conservative clientelism with honest radical clientelism: which is a little like hoping for cloudless rain.

President Chavez might still go off in one of many directions, or in several all at once. Compared with Mr. Gott's former Latin American heroes, he is timid and moderate indeed, more milk and water than *aguardiente*, more Mussolini than Stalin. I fear that Mr. Gott is destined for disappointment, and will have to transfer his loyalties to, say, the EZLN of Chiapas in Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, whose Subcomandante Marcos is definitely Mr. Gott's kind of guy.

These two books have one thing in common: they both implicitly subscribe to the modern belief that economics and politics encompass the whole of life.

Notes

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1. *The Guide to the Perfect Latin American Idiot*, by Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, Carlos Alberto Montaner, and Alvaro Vargas Llosa; Madison Books, 218 pages, \$24.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *In the Shadow of the Liberator: The Impact of Hugo Chavez on Venezuela and Latin America*, by Richard Gott; Verso, 160 pages, \$25. [Go back to the text.](#)

Anthony Daniels's most recent book is *In Praise of Prejudice* (Encounter Books).

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