

IMPRESSIONS OF THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM VENEZUELA:

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Faculty of Law, Room 201 NCDH

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Summary

Marc-André Séguin presented us with a student's perspective on the World Social Forum [WSF] Venezuela 2006. Marc-André attended the WSF as a journalist for *Le Délit*, McGill's on-campus francophone newspaper, and as a freelancer for *Le Soleil*, *La Presse*, and a radio station from Nicaragua. He highlighted some of the biggest challenges his delegation of journalists and photographers faced, namely, the impossibility of adequately covering the overwhelming number of conferences and meetings of the WSF, not to mention those of the sub-groups, such as the "Campement de la Jeunesse." His focus at the WSF was primarily as an observer on the growing collaboration between Quebec-based non-governmental organizations and Latin American left-wing movements. Marc-André also shared his view of Chavez' "appropriation" of the WSF, and presented the vast differences in local newspaper coverage of the WSF.

More Details

WSF Venezuela 2006

- Marc-André attended as journalist and photographer.
- Attended as part of a delegation of francophone student journalists.

Background of WSF

- Annual non-partisan meeting convened as a counter-summit to Davos.
- WSF started in 2001.
- WSF usually attended by approximately 100,000 people.
- This was a polycentric event, focused on South America.
- The significance of Caracas as a location was not lost at the WSF, with Hugo Chavez serving as the symbol, and standing at the heart of the Bolivian Revolution.

Journalistic Coverage of the Event

- An overwhelming number of meetings and conferences were scheduled in a 250 page program, which was impossible for the eight-member delegation to cover in its entirety.
- Not only was the WSF program overwhelming, but many counter-forums held meetings and conferences at the same time.
- Marc-André focused on the "Campement de la jeunesse," which served initially for those persons unable to gain access, but has since become a symbol for the WSF. This counter-forum has a life of its own, apart from the WSF.
- Not only was the number of meetings overwhelming, but practical problems also hindered effective coverage, such as inevitable re-scheduling.

Venezuela

- Venezuela is still a politically unstable country.
- Two weeks prior to the WSF, the bridge on the road connecting the airport to Caracas collapsed. While travellers could reach Caracas in 30 minutes on this road, all traffic was diverted to a secondary road with a travel time of approximately three hours, passing through some of Caracas' roughest *barrios*.

Chavez and the WSF

- Marc-André found it challenging to take an accurate pulse of the political situation in determining the population's pro-Chavez or anti-Chavez feelings. This was complicated by the politically controlled media.
- Chavez made three appearances at the WSF, and Venezuelan government kiosks were positioned at key locations. Marc-André saw the WSF as an important promotional event for Chavez.
- Marc-André observed that it was nearly impossible for attendees to distinguish between the Bolivian Revolution and the WSF. For instance, Chavez action figures were sold just next to WSF t-shirts.

Local Newspaper Coverage during the WSF

- The government-controlled papers showed only positive coverage of the success of the marches, and presented none of the organizational problems.
- The anti-Chavez paper, *El Universal*, showed no coverage whatsoever of the WSF on the first page, and only on the fifth page was there an article deploring the organization of this year's event in comparison to the well-organized WSF in Porto Alegre.
- The anti-Chavez paper, *El Nacional*, did show coverage of the WSF on the first page, but again this was a pejorative article where a picture of a communist flag figured prominently, and which painted WSF attendees as persons coming only to purchase souvenirs.

Focus: campement de la jeunesse, Canadian presence, Chavez' appropriation

- Marc-André was looking at the Latin American left-wing movement, rather than the presentations themselves.
- Marc-André visited the *barrios*, some of the poorest areas surrounding Caracas.
- He looked at presence of Québécois on location, and found the Canadian presence of attendees rather discrete. The Québec flag was seen everywhere, and he spent time with the Québec delegation.
- Most delegations held informal meetings and dinners where agreements were reached, rather than formal affairs.
- Marc-André felt Chavez appropriated the WSF for his own purposes related to the Bolivian Revolution.
- Marc-André covered one official event where Cindy Sheehan, an anti-American protester, spoke. He also attended a Chavez speech as photographer.