



Venezuela and the United States Comparatively



These photographs were displayed in a museum which had a large section devoted to the history between the United States and Latin America, essentially, United States influence on Latin American history. Much of this history was depicted as military control and an interest in oil. While it may have been largely due to the fact that I couldn't read much of this history through Venezuelan eyes (because it was written in Spanish), out of all of the information, I found this poster the most pertinent to my own life.

The poster, roughly translated, says: "You need to be on a diet? They would die on a diet!" The pictures are far more articulate, however, clearly depicting vast inequality. The girl on the left is obese. She has eaten so much that she is now actually unhealthy because of it, while the child on the right does not have enough food for basic nourishment and will be plagued with health problems if he lives long enough to experience them.

So many United States citizens should be on a diet; the obesity rate is absurd when put in perspective with the starving children of the world. Perhaps even more troubling, though, is the obsession with being thin, most common among women. As women, we are constantly bombarded with unrealistic images of "attractive" women, many of whom actually have to starve themselves to look the way they do. I have had numerous friends fall victim to anorexia nervosa and bulimia; our culture is obsessed with thinness and has millions of people suffering from self-induced starvation and millions of other people who are severely overweight. The obsession with food is incredible. Rather than wondering how many calories we are consuming when eating or stuffing our faces until we cannot eat another morsel, we should be thankful for the luxury of food at all.



This photo was taken in downtown Caracas and is simply a poster in support of Chávez and the government. It is one small example of the political activism that has come to characterize Venezuela. This activism is vastly different from the seemingly apathetic political state of the United States. In the United States, there is a sense that individual votes do not count and political parties do not represent large groups of people; these hopeless thoughts do not promote political activism. While Venezuela now appears to be a shining example of participatory democracy and activism, this was not always the case. Lisa compared Venezuelan involvement in the political process to that of the United States until fairly recently when Chávez gained power. Many criticize Chávez for being a dictator or dangerous leader; however, he is a symbol for the country. He has given the people someone, something, to believe in; he has instilled hope in the hopeless. This poster is a small representation of that belief, of those hopes.



While the previous photograph exemplified support for the country's leader, this painting on a wall in downtown Caracas highlights an important distinction between the leader and the revolution. After witnessing the immense changes taking place in Venezuela, it is hard to deny the existence of a revolution. The progress is truly amazing and incredibly hopeful; however, many supporters of Chávez were insistent on separating Chávez and the revolution. Chávez has certainly set the wheels in motion, but, as this painting illustrates, "The Revolution is Forever;" the processes will continue with or without Chávez in power because it is the people of the country behind these great changes.

This once again illustrates the political motivation of the people, contrary to that of the United States. I think that in the United States people vote for a candidate which belongs to a particular political party and essentially hope for the best. The power is truly concentrated in one group of individuals and in my opinion, uniting the country as one strong unit is never a goal. Rather, a division between parties and beliefs is almost encouraged. With this being said, I find it ironic that many United States citizens, particularly those in the government, are so fearful of the revolutionary process in Venezuela, claiming dictatorship. While I am not qualified enough to say that the new government of Venezuela is better than that which is practiced in the United States, I am fairly certain it is no worse; difference does not necessarily equate to better or worse, and it need not cause fear.





This is a photograph of Lisa's house in Palo Verde. After living for many years in a barrio, she and her husband bought a plot of land and built a traditional mud house on it. I chose this photograph because the traditional type of house is energy efficient, portraying Venezuela's consciousness about energy conservation. Lisa explained to us that mud acts as an insulator; it keeps the house cool during the day and warms up at night. Additionally, mud is abundant and therefore a cheap material to build with, yet it is durable in nature because it comes from nature.

The house is simple and practical, yet impressive and beautiful. It exemplifies the simplicity of the Venezuelan lifestyle (even in a wealthier setting). Everyone thought the house was amazing, yet in the United States a house of this structure and even size would be considered second class. Extravagance and luxury are highly valued in United States society and the desire for these characteristics is apparent in houses. The very wealthy have enormous houses, lavishly decorated and cluttered with impractical items, such as indoor swimming pools or saunas. Additionally, those individuals in a lower economic class even try to imitate the lavish lifestyle of the wealthy by purchasing cheaper pseudo-designer items.

These differences arise from the root of society. Venezuela, operating under a socialist style government, places high value on the advancement of the larger social group. The United States, in full-force capitalism, urges individuals to move themselves up economically, essentially to make it to the top without concern for those who are left behind. These great differences are clear through many aspects of life. Housing is just one of these aspects.



Further exemplifying the simplicity of the home structures is the photographs taken at Goudie's house, where I did a home stay in Montecarmelo. The town was by no means wealthy, but they seemed to have the necessary resources at hand and appeared to be more than content. The photo on the left shows the little room attached to the back of Goudie's house which Lindsey and I slept in. It was small and the beds were not very comfortable, but it was such a generous gesture to welcome us to stay in her home. The photo on the right is of the outside of her house. I think it was made of concrete and it was meticulously swept and cleaned. It was apparent that Goudie took great pride in her home and was more than happy to have us share it with her for two nights.

While the home that Goudie owns was one of the nicer ones I saw in Montecarmelo, it would surely be considered a shack in the United States, but I can guarantee Goudie made us feel more welcomed and more at home—dispite vast differences in the kinds of homes we are used to—than most United States citizens would have; It is simply a different culture. The idea is to share what you have, so while Goudie may not have appeared to have a lot from a United States perspective, she was willing to share everything.

Both evenings we stayed and mornings we woke up there, Goudie had plentiful—and delicious—meals prepared for us. I remember she said (well, I remember someone translating what she said...) when we commented on the generous portions she gave to us at breakfast. She said that you have to eat a lot for breakfast because you don't know when you're going to get lunch. This really impacted me because I realized that there were probably many days that Goudie had gone without plentiful food in the past, in harder times, and I have never had to worry about the availability of three meals a day while living in the United States.



The educational system in Venezuela is at the forefront of the Revolution. It is rooted in the belief that education is the only way to a brighter future for the country. This sentiment is not only an ideal, it is truly a reality. These photographs were taken at La Pastora, a Bolivarian high school that my group visited. The building is modest and only has one large room inside. At first glance, it would be easy to assume that the standard of education is far lower than that which many students receive in the United States. Simply by looking at the building I initially deduced this; however, the students inside the small building taught me that education has nothing to do with the building in which they are taught.

During my senior year, my high school completed major renovations. We now had central air-conditioning and a larger cafeteria, gymnasium, art wing, and much more, but this didn't enhance our education at all. While the building may have been aesthetically pleasing, even impressive, the students within the newly-renovated walls were not enthusiastic. Actually, a large number of the students did not enjoy or even appreciate the opportunity they had to study because in the United States a high school education is not usually considered a privilege or opportunity.

The students of La Pastora, however, were able to change my view of an educational system in one brief meeting. The enthusiasm displayed by the students absolutely astonished me. Not only did each and every student seem ecstatic to be at school, but they also all had visions of future education—every single one of them. It was certainly an eye-opening experience that I will never forget, for it made me realize just how privileged I have been and how powerful a revolution can be. The revolution is clearly not being run by the government; the revolution is in the hopes and dreams of these students.





These photographs remind me of just how prevalent poverty is in Venezuela. The photo on the left is a beautiful landscape—a common view in Venezuela—while the photo on the right is simply a closer look at the houses tucked away in the same landscape. I chose these photographs because I think it's important to illustrate the severity of the current state of poverty in Venezuela. On one hand, there is a breath-taking view, but a closer look reveals the reality of many Venezuelans. It is hard to imagine 80% of a country living below the poverty line until you witness it.

While it is true that there are many United States citizens living below the poverty line, the numbers are nowhere near 80% of the population and the greatest difference is simply that there are no monumental programs in action to change the situation. Before traveling to Venezuela, I had my doubts about Chávez and the Revolution, but after seeing the giant steps being taken to improve the living conditions of the poor, I find myself unable to doubt the process. While George W. Bush may incriminate Chávez and accuse him of being a dictator, he cannot deny the improvements being made to so many Venezuelan lives and he certainly cannot show progress in the poverty in the United States. Given the progress of the Revolution, the potential success of the programs implemented, and the unimaginable enthusiasm and resilience of the Venezuelan people, I am confident that the rate of those living in poverty will begin to decrease.





This is, of course, a photograph of the beach in the town of Choroni. I chose to end with this photograph because it elicits—at least for me—a feeling of separation or detachment from Chávez, the Revolution, and all the political processes in the world. Nature is a common denominator in the life of all human beings; it is simple and real. It is often easier to find the differences between cultures—Venezuela and the United States, for example—but I think it is vital to find the similarities and remind ourselves that the universe is bigger than political conflict and unrest, for at the end of the day, we all look up at the same stars.