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An Unannounced Rupture in Venezuelan Politics



Meeting of the Unión Comuna in Apure, Venezuela, 2020.

The brilliant Venezuelan thinker Reinaldo Iturriza has been writing about “disaffiliation” recently. Iturriza believes that a great many Chavista voters and militants have become disaffiliated. They are not exactly depoliticized, in his view. Rather, the country’s politics has become so empty — lacking in substance — that they are standing aside and waiting. Iturriza has also written important texts about polarization in politics as something positive. Polarization, in his lexicon, is about two distinct, class-based political projects facing each other off. This type of contest is precisely what has disappeared from Venezuelan politics.

Iturriza’s claims about *disaffiliation* resulting from a *lack of political polarization* are very interesting, especially if combined with an interpretation of the developments that have led

to an emptying of Venezuelan politics of real content, its loss of “polarization.” Here, a complete account requires us to take distance from capitalist and neoliberal normality. That is, we must contrive to understand the nature of normal capitalist politics, rather than take it for granted. This is because, unless we distance ourselves from capitalist normality, we will not perceive what happened some five years ago in Venezuela. In effect, there was a silent, unannounced rupture then that left half of Chavismo reeling.

Capitalist normality involves a basic separation between politics and economics. The separation is not, of course, absolute. However, in contrast to earlier social formations, capitalism brings an important degree of autonomy to the economy, now operating under spontaneous laws (it is precisely this autonomy that free-market enthusiasts unceasingly tell us to respect). Under neoliberalism, this separation between economy and politics continues, with the paradoxical complexity that even while neoliberal politicians rail constantly about the evils of economic intervention, they ceaselessly intervene on behalf of capitalist private property (but never in favor of the people).

The silent event that shook Venezuela in 2015-16 involved an abrupt return to capitalist normality. At about that time Maduro’s government decided to step back from interventions in the economy. His cabinet changes during those years show this: the first businessman to take a key economic role in the Bolivarian government comes with Miguel Pérez Abad’s appointment as head of industry and commerce, while Rodolfo Marco Torres, a probusiness technocrat, comes to occupy various crucial roles in the government. Meanwhile, Maduro is reshuffling the direction of the state oil company PDVSA, which had heretofore been key to economic interventionism. Along with this shift in the government, there comes a telling political event: the loss of the parliamentary election in December 2015, in which many former Chavista strongholds flip and instead vote for the opposition.

The rupture signaled by the 2015 election results receives decisive confirmation when Maduro’s government blames the loss on the people’s ignorance and lack of political awareness. It does this rather than considering the deep causes of people’s discontent and moving to rectify. In this way, capitalist business-as-usual is announced on two fronts: first, the government’s ministerial line-up says to the people *we will not intervene in the economy on your behalf*; second, the government’s post-elections discourse reminds the people that *they should not think they count for anything in politics*. Hereafter, we will see a wave of privatizations, which have continued full swing up to the present. Yet the most

important message is already in place: politics is not about the people — they play no role in it — but rather about distribution of power among interest groups.

This is the sleight of hand, unrecognized by most observers, that lies behind the current widespread *disaffiliation* among Venezuelan voters (for Iturriza) or *depoliticization* (for those who disagree with him). Regardless of the term that is used, however, what clearly sets the Venezuelan people apart from most other peoples in the world is the recent memory of having participated in politics and of having had a government intervening on their behalf. Essentially this is a matter of having known a form of politics in which people figured as agents, not a politics of mere factional struggle. It is important to recognize that the former is not the normal situation in capitalism. The real meaning of *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama, who understood this very well, is that people have ceased to be agents, actors capable of collectively projecting and determining their future.

In this sense, a look to the somewhat more distant past is revealing. It shows that the cycle of exceptionality that took place with the Bolivarian Process in Venezuela really began with the Caracazo uprising of 1989 — seemingly a direct reply to “end-of-history” neoliberalism. This rebellion was essentially a refusal to accept the inevitability of market laws and their autonomy (*the lack of alternative*, in Thatcherspeak). Hugo Chávez would later translate this insistence on popular agency into an innovative and experimental politics involving state intervention in the economy. It was a politics in which the popular majority counted. The cycle of exceptionality and economic intervention that constituted the essence of the Chávez epoch came to an end in 2015-16 in an event that remains invisible, despite its devastating consequences both for the Chavista bases and on the level of world history.

The path to reconstructing an interventionist politics and breaking once again with capitalist normality will surely be a difficult one. However, it will inevitably involve recognizing the singularity of Chavista politics in its earlier “polarizing” and interventionist mode, without which the recent restoration will remain most likely invisible and at best badly characterized. Fortunately, there is a slow process of reconnoitering and reconstruction now taking place among Venezuela’s *desafiliados*, especially among people in the rural areas and those participating in communes. Still, without a clear memory of what *was* but *is no more* — the advent of popular agency in politics — this exceptional modality will be difficult to recover.

The regrouping taking place among the *desafiliados* is capillary and tentative for now, conscious of its own marginality. It is clearly where hope resides: the Unión Comunera, a new effort to coordinate communal projects, is one exciting highlight. Most of the *desafiliados* in Venezuela look to Chávez as a key point of reference. They are right to do so since Chávez, despite his frequent talk about the inevitable victory of the Bolivarian revolution, was on a more profound level aware that breaking with capitalist business-as-usual cannot be left to the tide of history, but rather requires constant experimentation and invention. The former can be understood as part of Chávez's effort to keep people's morale high. The latter shows his deep understanding of the exceptional, embattled character of socialist projects and the fighting, interventionist spirit needed to keep them alive.

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