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Venezuela: And Yet It Moves



Paper Tiger, Chinese Revolutionary Poster, 1951.

The most impressive rebellions that have taken place over the past half decade—the *gilets jaunes*, Minneapolis, Chile, and now Colombia—have left political parties and established organizations behind. These either can't catch up or don't want to. The reasons for their lagging behind are surely multiple, but it likely has a connection with another evident problem in our ranks. The established left is increasingly nearsighted. It scans the horizon and sees only the largest shapes.

Far from being attributable to mere dogmatism, this is, I believe, essentially a problem of ontology. Ontology can be reduced to the simple question of *what there is*, to use the nice, flatfooted phrase of philosopher W. V. O. Quine. Quine thought that this question had a

relatively simple solution. We should be pragmatic. If it gets you nowhere to conceive the bunny in your yard as composed of “undetached rabbit parts” (Quine’s favorite example) or as a mere instance of the Rabbit Idea (Plato), then you had better adopt another conception of the basic units of reality.

The same advice could be given to the left today, with its tendency toward crude monisms and dualisms. In effect, if a world composed mostly of one or two big entelechies doesn’t seem to be producing results—and it doesn’t—then perhaps we should start to see the world with a different set of building blocks. Here I would like to suggest that at least one of those building blocks should be people. What do people want and think? Let’s not make political judgments without knowing what is happening on the ground and in people’s minds. Questions of desirability, acceptability, and aspirations should all be taken into account. If that is done—instead of searching for only one or two Prime Movers with which to assimilate all existing things—then perhaps the organized left could finally catch up with popular movements and rebellions.

By saying this, I am by no means rejecting the thought of Marx or Lenin. Far from it. Consider the detail, the thirst for information, with which these revolutionary thinkers approached the world. Of course, capitalism produces a specific sort of sociality, a destructive and unjust social nexus. It creates a polarized society and chaotic forms of development. But being aware of these scientific truths does not relieve us of the necessity to study real situations and the people in them, as Marx and Lenin both did with great enthusiasm. Remember that Lenin always paid careful attention to what he heard on the streets of Petersburg, and he also learned things from the humble couple he rented quarters from in Finland.

That brings us to Venezuela, the reality I know best. Here in Venezuela, those of us on the left engage in interminable discussions about what is going on. We try to see our way forward, struggling with problems of depoliticization and demoralization. Our reality is changing, there are surprising movements. New actors have appeared, while old ones are transformed. In countries whose economies are tied to natural resource extraction, politics can be extremely dynamic, even mercurial. The United States harasses and attacks us. But these attacks do not determine any single outcome, because on the other side there is also intelligence, agency, and resources.

A recent article of mine grew out of a conversation with former minister of communes Reinaldo Iturriza. We were talking about depoliticization and disaffiliation. Then the conversation moved on to the question of turning points in recent history. Just as

reality has elements of different granularity, so time has its sequences, which are important. The curious thing is that a major turning point in Venezuela occurred some six years ago, before the most important economic sanctions were put in place (there were sanctions against individuals at that time, but these don't damage the economy much). Around 2015 and 2016 the government turned away from intervening in the economy, generally abandoning its efforts to control prices and assist public and collective projects. Then the heavy sanctions came and made things worse.

The US's sanctions are terrible and kill people. They should be stopped. Please write to your representatives, and please protest against these sanctions in any way you can. Here in Venezuela, there are some other fish to fry. We have to think about what should be done. How should these cruel sanctions and other economic difficulties be confronted? We on the left do not believe, as the IMF contends, that every economic problem should be solved by privatization, abandoning price controls, and giving free rein to the market. This is what Maduro's government has done, and it is an error. It is in no way the only available response to foreign sanctions and previously existing economic problems. (The implication that this was the only possible response, and consequent justification of capitalist restoration, mars the otherwise good work of some commentators.)

Politics and, a fortiori, revolutionary politics is about exploring options, including tracing roads not taken that could be reprised in the future. To advance this idea has nothing to do with denying imperialism. Imperialism exists and is surely the most defining feature of our global reality. Fortunately, however, imperialism does not determine our responses to it (or there would not be anti-imperialism!). That is, in part, why Mao called imperialism a paper tiger. An imperialist attack does not mean that we have to respond by adopting neoliberal capitalism. We do not have to react by abandoning our project and principles. This is what Maduro's government has done, and it was unnecessary.

I will go on defending Maduro's government in the face of imperialism, but I cannot be convinced that it has made the right decisions. To claim that it has is an insult to the Venezuelan people and the Bolivarian process. It is to short shrift the communards here working to build an alternative society. It also amounts to turning one's back on the loyal cadres in Venezuela who defend Chávez's socialist legacy, and to the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggle worldwide. It is even unfair to Nicolás Maduro, since to the degree that one should always treat people as potential allies in the revolutionary struggle, one has a responsibility to point out their errors in the hope that they will rectify.

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