

Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below

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To cite this article: Babak Amini (2018) Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below, *Socialism and Democracy*, 32:2, 146-149, DOI: [10.1080/08854300.2018.1508949](https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2018.1508949)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2018.1508949>



Published online: 20 Nov 2018.



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Book Reviews

Dario Azzellini, *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016 [Hardcover]), xii + 303 pp., \$132.00; (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018 [Paperback]), \$28.00.

Dario Azzellini, one of the leading voices in the growing literature on alternative forms of labour organizations, builds on his productive repertoire which includes edited books such as *The Class Strikes Back* (with Michael Kraft; 2018), *An Alternative Labour History* (2015), the co-authored book, *They Can't Represent Us* (with Marina Sitrin; 2014), numerous journal articles on self-management and workers' control in Venezuela and Bolivia, as well as documentary films such as *Occupy, Resist, Produce* (with Oliver Ressler; 2014). This monograph presents the most detailed account available in English of communal councils and workers' control initiatives in Venezuela that have evolved since the beginning of the Bolivarian Revolution in 1999.

At a time when Venezuela is grappling with the most serious economic and political crisis that it has experienced since the turn of the century, understanding the transformative processes that the country has undertaken is crucial for anyone seeking to have an informed assessment of what Venezuelan experience signifies for the socialist project in the twenty-first century. Beyond his comprehensive overview of initiatives and three detailed case studies on the evolution of participatory democracy in Venezuela, the most significant contribution of the book especially for non-specialist is its serious engagement with the question of the dialectical relation between the state and the multitude (or what, in the context of Venezuela, Azzellini calls *pueblo*) towards advancing the project of emancipatory socialism. This question is particularly relevant for our time when the prospect and the appeal of parliamentary and state socialism are at a historic low. As the author states, the notions that "either the seizure of state power or the participation within the state is sufficient to enable the transition to socialism is wrongheaded and simplistic; the truth lies somewhere in between" (8).

To highlight the specificities of the Venezuelan experience and shield it against conceptual misunderstanding, Azzellini revises the notion of class especially in the context of Venezuela and explores the limitations of the (new) social movement theories to account for the specificities of

the participatory movements in Venezuela. Through a critical engagement with contemporary political theorists, most notably Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, he argues that while the concept of "multitude" has definite advantages over the classical conceptions of class, it still does not quite capture the historical reality in the context of Venezuela. Instead, he suggests the notion of "pueblo" and "popular power" as more appropriate notions to characterize the "community of struggles" in Venezuela. Furthermore, he submits the notion of "popular movement" as an alternative and grounds it in concrete examples of the main autonomous popular movements in the country.

Equipped with these theoretical notions, Azzellini goes on to examine the origins, compositions, and the administrative and legal structures of communal councils and workers' councils in their evolving relationship with the state. He contextualizes these through a number of detailed case studies such as communal councils in the barrios of Caracas, and workers' councils in Interval and Alasca. He also presents different initiatives towards building collective-ownership models such as cooperatives, co-managed firms, and Social Production Companies, recuperated companies, and socialist workers' councils, and demonstrates their limitations in creating a sustainable socialist alternative. Building on these analyses, he recounts the evolution of the most general form of this prefigurative politics in the territorially-defined communes and the Communal Social Property which are geared toward constructing a communal economy and a communal state. He shows how government organizational initiatives (e.g., *Misión 13 de Abril*), budgetary schemes, and legal frameworks have in fact facilitated the proliferation of these communes.

A refreshing aspect of the book is that the discussion goes beyond the structural and institutional elements and considers the subjective dimension of these transformations on those who have worked within them. Reflecting on a host of interviews that he has conducted, the author concludes that in many cases, the participants express a sense of having been transformed into "new people" in the sense of becoming "agents of change rather than objects of social processes" (233). He claims that this new subjectivity is rendered through class struggle whose locus is often at the points of friction between the constituent and constituted power.

Although the theoretical elaborations presented in chapters 2 and 3 are interesting on their own merits, they do not take us very far in the specific project of the book. Having been caught up in theoretical debates that, except for a few key concepts, have a marginal bearing on understanding the empirical picture, the author misses the

opportunity to sufficiently elaborate on important theoretical insights that he puts forward throughout the book. For example, the extended re-articulation of Negri only takes the author as far as putting the constituent power (i.e. the creative and unrestricted power of the collective) and constituted powers (i.e. the state and its institutional structures) in a polar opposition. This is fundamentally different from what is uniquely revealing about the case of Venezuela which, as the author makes clear, lies precisely in the fact that the two have a mutually constitutive, albeit conflicting, relationship.

The author also falls short of clarifying a number of fundamental theoretical concepts, such as “the logic of capital” or “the bourgeois state”, that are used repeatedly and centrally throughout the book. This seems especially unfortunate for a book that aims at a broad audience who might not be familiar with these basic theoretical concepts within the Marxist tradition. Neglecting to unpack the “the logic of capital” leaves an open question regarding the durability and the limitations of the Venezuelan experience especially given its embeddedness in the global capitalist regime. Furthermore, a careful dissection of the “relationship of forces, or more precisely the material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions,” as Poulantzas famously argued, for the case of the Venezuelan “bourgeois state” would have been helpful in light of the contemporary political crisis that is seriously threatening the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Nonetheless, the book meticulously documents the ways in which different policies or institutional arrangements in Venezuela have expanded and/or limited the democratic capacities necessary for the realization of participatory, socialist social relations and, in turn, how these have changed in response to the grassroots pressures or disengagement. It indicates clearly how certain arrangements such as cooperatives and co-managed enterprises, though massively expanded through concerted governmental efforts, have gradually fallen back into capitalist logic and market competition. While it shows the resilience of autonomous and grassroots organizations such as the Communal Councils (reaching 44,000 in 2015) (110) and the Communes (reaching 1,195 in 2015) (244), it acknowledges the crucial role of the state. It either promotes or limits these initiatives especially through the provision a clear legal framework for their development, public investment, and organizational coordination between them.

Given the tendency of the state to discipline and co-opt popular organizations (e.g. Local Councils of Public Planning and Metropolitan Council for Planning Public Policies) and the market imperative to

reassert itself within their operational logic (e.g. cooperatives), what the book makes apparent is that “the democratic control of the means of production by workers and organized communities is the strongest mechanism against corruption in the companies, and is the only guarantee of production oriented towards satisfying popular needs, besides signifying the automatic end of privileges.” (280–90) This is true in spite of the constitutional commitment and the material (and sometimes administrative) assistance of the state towards creating a participatory and protagonist democracy. Azzellini firmly states that “popular power cannot be conceived of by the state, nor can it be conceived of without the state” (51). His account of the relation between the constituted and constituent powers is sophisticated precisely because it goes beyond both the statist and the anarchist approaches and suggests an essentially dialectical relation between these poles to “transform not only the model of accumulation, but also the model of development” (265). Therefore, “the relationship between the constituent and constituted power is not – nor can it, nor should it be – harmonious; it is a relationship of cooperation and conflict” (265).

Perhaps the Venezuelan experience of the Communal Councils and Communal Social Property Companies are the contemporary archetype of “the political form at last discovered”, to use Marx’s characterization of the Paris Commune of 1871. Undoubtedly, there is much theoretical and practical work to be done to understand the structural limitations of “council communism in one country” and whether the positive aspects of the Venezuelan experience can be extrapolated to other parts of the world. Nevertheless, a sympathetic yet unapologetic study of the developments of socialism within the Bolivarian Revolution, such as presented in this book, is indispensable to any serious engagement with the project of socialism for the twenty-first century.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2018.1508949>

Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (New York and London: Verso Books, 2017), 296 pp., \$15.95.

These days universities are subjected to several different cross pressures. While there is some variation in how these institutions