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# Rising up against institutional racism in the Americas and beyond

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## Editorial



## Call for papers



## Latin America

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## General pieces

## Cover art

Artwork by LB Back, based on the Wiphala symbol used by indigenous Andean peoples and movements.

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# Review of three recent books on Venezuelan social movements

**Review Author: Jeremiah Gaster**

**Dario Azzellini, 2017, *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*. Leiden, NL: Brill (303 pp., paperback, $28).**

**Geo Maher, 2016, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso (138 pp., paperback, $15).**

**Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert, 2020, *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle: Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press (376 pp., paperback, $22).**

> "Outside Venezuela, almost nothing is known about the process through which local self-government structures with direct, non-representative democracy have been created by means of communal councils and communes." *Communes and Workers' Control* (p. 2)

There is much that is not known or understood about what is happening in Venezuela. Add to the mix, a mainstream media in the global north quite often inaccurate in its reports on Venezuela, and we will tend to have an incomplete picture. It is true that politics have been continuous and quite contentious in Venezuela for decades, and that many have fled Venezuela's shores, but this does not mean that what has been occurring is without any support from Venezuelans.

In *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle*: *Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution,* Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert, two political science professors employed in Venezuela, put it bluntly: "Despite the diversity of their prescriptions, all mainstream positions on Venezuela systematically deny that the masses are capable of purposeful world-changing activity" (p. 14).

Since February 27, 1989, the Venezuelan people have completely and thus far irrevocably changed the Venezuelan political landscape. After years of research, I believe that Venezuela has one of the most organized, largest, and most experienced social movements in the world. Yet most outside of Venezuela do not know about this wealth of experience and have little sense of the strength of these movements.

Each of the three books reviewed here, are important in their own way, and together these four different professors of political science, describe in some

detail, the experiences of resistance, of creation, and of solidarity within Venezuela. According to these authors, the Venezuelan people have organized an impressive collective experiment in solidarity that has lasted for at least three decades. In different ways, these books layout how, why, and what has changed in Venezuela since 1989. Each of the authors also insists on the importance of field work in understanding Venezuela's movements in all their complexity.

These books all insist that to understand what has been happening in Venezuela it is necessary to understand the politics of the people is the core of the political community of Venezuela, and that the people are the driving force in Venezuelan politics.

By the end of the twentieth century poverty rates had risen substantially in Venezuela, with following monetary devaluation on February 18, 1983 (called Black Friday) (see, e.g., Maher p. 3-4; see also Roberts 2003, p. 59, Lopez Maya 2002), and neoliberal restructuring, poverty was spiraling out of control. But even with some increased protests at the time, nothing changed (see Lander & Lopez Maya 2005, p. 95). Because of the way the political system was constructed, the Venezuelan people were consciously excluded from participating in it.

Then came the events that would forever alter the course of Venezuelan history.

In the first few days of the second term (February 1989 – May 1993) of Carlos Andres Perez, a suite of neoliberal reforms and policies was announced by Perez (this came as a surprise to many, as he had been elected as somewhat of an anti-neoliberal, see e.g., Coronil and Skurski p. 295, 312). Shortly after, on February 27, 1989, Venezuelans woke up to around a 300 percent hike in bus fares (Coronil and Skurski, p.315). Venezuelans responded with days of rioting, leading to intense class warfare between the poor and the state, which completely altered the Venezuelan political landscape. According to official numbers, between 300 and 500 people were killed by state (and paramilitary) forces in the following week (see: Coronil and Skurski 1991, 325-326). Unofficially between 1,000 and 5,000 people were killed, and the attempted reforms were never implemented (Maher, p. 5; Coronil and Skurski 1991 p. 325).

The *Caracazo* (as these events are known), came at a moment when Venezuelan society was already highly polarized. Azzellini calls the Caracazo "a rupture in the continuum" of Venezuelan politics.

Pascual Marquina and Gilbert (2020) questioned one of their interviewees, Edgar Perez, a popular organizer from La Vega - a poor Caracas neighbourhood, about the Caracazo. "During those days, people, humble people, took over the streets — we made them our own …It was a totally spontaneous insurrection" (p. 160). Perez goes on to say "We affirmed our existence in a process of expropriation of the expropriators… It was us, the people from the *barrios*, doing justice, taking what was ours…" (p. 160) (see also: Coronil and Skurski 1991, p. 297, 315-319).

Indeed, Perez describes the Caracazo quite succinctly: "We are talking about two or three days when the people were center stage, and they corralled the political class and the rich" (Pascual Marquina & Gilbert, p. 160). I would suggest that, in fact, this "corralling" continues to this day, remaining one of the most important aspects of Venezuelan politics. Moreover, understanding the Caracazo also helps us understand the continued *Chavista* experiments in moral economy.

Pascual Marquina and Gilbert's *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle*: *Voices from the Bolivarian Revolution* is made up of 35 interviews with different people by two Political Science professors. It could amply serve either as an introduction to Venezuela's situation or form a consistently Chavista perspective as a complex series of primary documents on the revolution. For Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, the Caracazo was both "…an expression of our rejection of neoliberal policies, but it was also a move to access the promised land, the land of goods and merchandise…" (p. 160). Chávez's elections only cemented the social revolution, but the moral economy of 1989, echoed in the years since throughout Venezuela's political outburst in 1989, previous even to Chávez's election, the masses were unruly.

As in the case studies by Maher and Azzellini, the interviews in *Venezuela, The Present as Struggle* read as erudite interventions of not just a few Venezuelans in their own lives. This is where we can see that it is necessary to listen to the millions of Venezuelans who are involved in creating their own political order. Pascual Marquina and Gilbert's book exemplarily amplifies the voices of Venezuelans creating, constructing, and criticizing their system as it existed in 2019. This is the second such a collection, but it is the first collection compiled by Pascual Marquina and Gilbert. The interviewees in *The Present as Struggle* are from eclectic walks of life: from famous political analysists through to locally active Chavista activists. The interviews run the gamut showcasing the strengths and discussing weaknesses of Chavismo. Overall, the interviews seem to represent political conversations that could have taken place all over Venezuela, and that continue to take place today. As I saw in July 2018, these conversations like these occur on the streets, and in people's homes, work, and in community spaces and are clearly the continuation of much collective thought and discussion.

*Building the Commune* is a slim but potent volume that invites us to engage with this country in which politics have been turned upside down. For his part, Maher suggests that the Caracazo was among the first "rebellions against the spread of neoliberalism" (p. 2). Maher further writes, in Venezuela, "…[T]he Caracazo led not only to Chávez's election, but also to a long and continuing experiment in radical democracy that continues to this day…" (p. 7).

Chavismo is not an uncomplicated thing, and Maher takes us through some of its various tendencies. His writing style transports us to Venezuela, where we can share in a *Sancocho* (communal soup) (p. 83-84), be immersed in the poorest neighbourhoods of Caracas (p. 43-44) and take part in upper class protests (p. 53).

*Building the Commune* also traverses the country to the border of two Venezuelan states, to a Commune called El Maizal. Maher defines Communes as "…new institutions of local self-government" (p.7), which he then suggests can be used and made to go beyond the local. Like all communes in Venezuela, El Maizal is constructed in the interstices of the state, in its case the two states of Lara and Portuguesa (p. 84-94). My own fieldwork also partially took place in *El Maizal*, a beautiful place of communal hope, with corn fields, cow sheds and runs, many areas of recovered vegetable cultivation, and a huge pork complex, all run communally.

Maher's book is clear on the larger themes of the purpose of mass movements, and their roles in constructing socialism. For example, "…the fundamental demand to control one's own everyday life, a search for the kind of collective power that Marx sought when he described the commune as the 'self-government of the producers'" (p. 22) is one key passage. Alternatively, Maher suggests this would mean that "Venezuelans would increasingly take control over their own lives. They would elect their own political delegates and police forces; they would decide what to produce and for who. Everyday people would be constantly involved in managing their local communities, and institutions would no longer stand above and apart from the people" (p. 24).

To be clear, all four authors practice similar methodological tools in interviewing and parsing the everyday lives of their subjects, the four authors are also logically consistent with each other's arguments, and all four political scientists would seem to hold similarly cogent positions.

In the longer volume *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*, Dario Azzellini launches into a discussion of different case studies from Venezuela. Like Maher, Azzellini describes the multiple tendencies and currents which came together within Chavismo in defense of the revolution's polarized participatory *protagonismo*. Protagonismo is a term that Venezuelans use to signify that the poor do not just participate in the system, rather they are the engine that drives how the system is structured.

That what has been occurring in Venezuela is polarizing, cannot be disputed. What Chavistas dispute is whether polarization is the fault of Chavismo or the fault of the capitalism that has bled Venezuela during the twentieth and thus far throughout the twenty-first century. Chavistas yet describe what has been occurring in Venezuela as participatory protagonismo. Participation has been a claim that allows Venezuelans to specify the involvement of the poor in a system that had long excluded them.

*Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela* goes on to examine institutional structures that people utilize at their workplaces to induce worker control, including cooperatives, attempts at co-management, and companies that are communally managed whose purpose is not profit but sustenance (p, 169-177) and similar communal projects and thus Azzellini reveals much work has been done in Venezuela around the topic of social property (p.159-172). Other attempts at worker control documented by Azzellini include worker's councils,

recuperated companies, and even (state led) efforts of nationalization (p.178-242).

Azzellini highlights discussions about how to define concepts like the masses/people (p. 23-33), processes of constituent power (p. 33-51), and the difference between social movements and popular movements. Like Maher, Azzellini examines the two key institutional structures that Venezuelans had begun to utilize to great effect: community councils and communes.

If the political occurrences in Venezuela since 1989 are accurately described as a revolution, what does this experience tell us about what revolutions are?

Trotsky's adage that "revolutions are the direct interference of the masses in historic events" (Trotsky 2008 [1932/1961], p. xv) would indicate the necessity of a high level of mass participation in a revolution. I would argue that in Venezuela, this adage has been shaped into common sense. For further example of this concept of protagonismo: The return of the social revolutionary wave in Venezuela during the weekend of April 11, 2002, which led to the unprecedented, the return of a President from a civil and military led coup d'état, only being one of the many examples.

In the 1999 constitution, there was a broadening "conception of participation that, besides redefining political participation, encompasses social, economic, and cultural rights, with collective rights for specific groups" (Azzellini, p. 5). This form of participation is fully claimed by the Venezuelan masses, and wherein, in the view of the four authors, the Venezuelan masses have made this participation their foundation for a new Venezuela. Even with strong polarization throughout the country, as this review goes to print, I believe there is still strong unification behind the project of Chavismo.

One might argue that participation is not a sufficient threshold for a revolution, and Venezuela's experiences are also cases in point. All four authors illustrate that the concept of protagonismo, as defined by *Chavistas* is the direct action, control, and initiative of the broadly defined poor in Venezuela, and this concept has been Venezuela's strength, is central to the Bolivarian revolution, and is also a self-defined term expressed by Venezuelans to explain their situation.

*Building the Commune* contains a good description of the Communal Councils (CCs, also called Community Councils). "The building blocks for this new socialist democracy were the communal councils, established in a 2006 law" (Maher, p. 15). So, what are these institutions? According to Maher the CCs are "directly democratic and participatory institutions for local governance" (p. 15). Azzellini writes "The April 2006 law specified that CCs were to be autonomous bodies of popular power" (p. 96). He then quotes from the law itself:

> The communal councils in the constitutional framework of participatory and protagonistic democracy, are bodies of participation, articulation and integration between the various community organizations, social groups, and citizens, which permit the organized pueblo to exercise directly the detailed

> work of public policies and projects oriented to respond to the necessities and aspirations of the communities in the building of a society of equality and social justice (Azzellini, p. 96).

The point is that through organization, and protagonismo, the people can be responsive to and resolve their own problems.

Maher notes these structures became very popular:

> These councils …quickly numbered in the thousands as neighbours began to come together weekly to debate and discuss how to govern themselves. Whether in a dingy room adorned with little more than a poster or mural of Chávez or outside around a collective stew pot, the debates ranged from banal to engaging, from the local to the national and everything in between (p. 15).

Azzellini's numbers indicate that around June 2015 there were 44, 794 CCs (p. 94). We can see the importance of these structures, given that they are supposed to be working institutions (enabling communities to do projects based on need). They are thus predicated on empowering communities to make their own decisions. In addition, this decision-making process is based on the general assembly of the community.

*Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela* notes "The CCs skip over all the intermediate levels between central government and communities" (p. 97). As such, both "the mechanisms for their constitution, as well as the procedures for the formulation of projects and obtaining of resources, have been simple and fluid, with few bureaucratic mediations," (Azzellini, p. 97).

In this regard, Azzellini reveals that what has begun is a process wherein "Many communities began to discuss their problems and needs, formulate their own solutions, and administer their projects. This strengthened the social networks and the culture of participation in the communities" (p. 97).

As working bodies, the CC's must constantly study the conditions of the community, at every step along the way. Such social investigation is a key part of the process of formation and activity of CCs which have a specific role as problem-solvers for communities.

But it is not enough for the local to be organized into community councils: there needs to be an institutional structure that helps structure the cc's beyond being local. Anacaona Marín, a member of the Chavista *Alexis Vive Patriotic Force*. This organization can be found in the *Barrio 23 de Enero* in Caracas, and Marín in an interview with Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, says: "The commune is the historical subject; the commune and its people, the *comuneros*, that is where the revolution really begins" (p. 32).

It is quite true that the Venezuelan state still needs to change quite drastically for the communities to fully gain control over their own lives. I too heard the

same in my interviews with people involved in mass organizations during July 2018. I too found many people tell me that as M. Lía Grajales', a member of "*Surgentes Collective"* part of the larger *Chavista* movement, argues in an interview with Pascual Marquina and Gilbert.

> The state is a disputed territory and [entering it] is necessary if we want to promote popular interests, but state power is not in any way the goal. In any effort to build popular power, there must be synergy between the bottom and the top" (p. 56).

All three books take us through the need to break the capitalist state and discuss the need for something to replace this capitalist state.

All three books discuss building the communal state, this includes the four authors and many of the different interviewees throughout the three books do as well. They affirm the need to work towards ending this capitalist state. Maher, Azzellini and many of the interviewees also talk about the need to break capitalist relations, and thus the need to change the "system of production" from private property to one "rooted in social property" (Maher, p. 21), and thus have created a form of moral economy in Venezuela.

Each of the books point towards worrying trends in Venezuela. For example, interviews in Pascual Marquina and Gilbert, demarcated the hopes of the new Constituent Assembly (2017-2020) which could have deepened the revolution by altering the already revolutionary 1999 constitution and making it more radical. However, the assembly ended without engendering a new constitution.

The books also tell us about splits within *Chavismo*. One of the key splits within the larger movements is between the officials who would claim to be revolutionary and who are not and Chavismo of the base and masses, who constantly struggle to deepen the revolution against the officials. This has been a long struggle, with no clear winners as yet.

Also discussed in all three volumes is the fact that President Maduro is a contradictory figure, both on the side of the revolution, but also potentially aligned with counterrevolution. The authors, and the interviewees in each book, insist that Maduro's role is not as clear as Chávez's, that Maduro himself is less well understood, that some of his policies and decisions have been backwards, and that he is too lenient on the opposition. The revolutionary Chavistas quoted in these books and in interviews I conducted in July 2018, insisted that they support him, for now.

Notwithstanding internal issues for Venezuela, all the authors reviewed here identify the main problems facing Venezuela with external problems, the various blockades, sanctions, and the vicissitudes of global capitalist markets. It is not just that the price of oil has dropped: there is an economic war against Venezuelans.

The economic situation has gotten harder and worse since Chávez's untimely death in 2013, but since Chávez's election in 1998, these problems have long been evident. Imperialism has been gunning to help the Venezuelan elite re-take political power in Venezuela, ever since Chávez's election, and the elite have been trying themselves to re-gain power since 1989.

In my view, much of the deterioration of the standard of living for Venezuelans is due to the economic war against it, enacted since 1998. All three books identify the problems of state mismanagement in the Venezuelan case, but they reveal that as Venezuela remains as a capitalist state, even if the revolution has captured the state in quite a unique way, the nature of the Venezuelan revolution is a bigger problem for Venezuelans than state mismanagement.

In many ways, for the revolution there is not much the state can do against either capital flight, or open imperial blockade. Both of which have also contributed to the general unease created by billions of cash flows both leaving Venezuela, being taken away from the lawful government, and - some of which is then returned to Venezuelan soil through attempted coup d'état adventures- but what is lost is invaluable. Venezuelans are caught in these imperialist traps, but they are struggling to get out of these traps. Many have left Venezuela, but there are also those who have stayed and many who still believe in the project of Chavismo.

Between the structures of the CCs and the commune, Venezuelans have found tools such as differing and yet very similar experiences of a different moral economy to help each other out of the traps of imperialism and capitalism.

As an expert on the Bolivarian revolution and Venezuela's present political conjuncture (master's research project, main case study of my dissertation both in political science), I enjoyed and learned from all three books, which could also provide excellent introductions to the topic for a beginner. Mainly because, the three books get to the roots of the problems and success in Venezuela. Indeed, these three books all pack a punch, whether read individually or read together.

All three of these books were written between 2016 and 2020 and show readers the various dynamics at play: The rising arc of the Venezuelan masses, 1989-present, the dynamic reasons for their continued control of Venezuela, including their organization in community councils, and other forms of social movements, including communes. These three books illustrate the struggles of the Venezuelan people against capitalism, in their attempts at constructing moral economies, we can find the analysis and possibility to fulfil the need for humanity to move beyond capitalism. Conclusively, the authors show that the solution for Venezuelans is the need to end the misery that imperialism and capitalism impose on our lives, and the experiences within Venezuela show that this potential can only be achieved through building a collective moral economy.

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