

True and False in Venezuela

What's Going On?

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On April 17, 2014 there is a discussion/party to celebrate the beginning of a new journal, “Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics” at Black Coffee Coop in Seattle, Washington. The journal’s “Manifesto for Abolition” says, among other things, that: “Abolitionist politics is not about what is possible, but about making the impossible a reality.” and “In tension with struggles against and beyond academia, we recognize the desires of academics to survive within it, for the access to resources that inclusion can offer. Rather than accepting such desires as eternal necessities, we foresee that the success of abolitionist projects will change the availability of resources for intellectual activity as well as what we understand as a ‘resource.’ To help academics grapple with transgressing academia’s boundaries, our journal aims to provide some legitimacy within the dominant value practices of academia (e.g., publication requirements for hiring, tenure, and promotion), while simultaneously pushing the limits of those practices.” (<http://AbolitionJournal.org/>)

As Venezuela has become yet another site of social unrest, those of us in the anarchist milieu want to understand as much as we can about what is happening there. But, most reporting available in English is in articles in the mainstream, often right-wing press that vilify the Venezuelan government, and articles from left- and left-liberal sources that almost always uncritically praise it. However, we know from our own experiences and anarchist/anti-authoritarian history that the reality lies beyond both the spokespeople for the left and the right powerholders and aspirants to power. So we are always glad to get news and analysis from anarchists on the ground, who have long opposed both the Bolivarian regime and the political opposition favored by the U.S. government and mainstream media. *El Libertario* is one of those groups which have been critical of both the Bolivarian regime and the political opposition, as rivals in the worldwide capitalist system, not alternatives to it by any means.

In the midst of the flood of conflicting sources of information and analysis, one of the collective members of the new journal, “Abolition: A Journal of Insurgent Politics”,¹ George Ciccariello-Maher, recently wrote an article titled: “El Libertario: beware Venezuela’s false ‘anarchists’”.² It is not irrelevant that Ciccariello-Maher is an unashamedly Chavista government and “Bolivarian

¹ <http://AbolitionJournal.org/>

² http://roarmag.org/2014/03/critique-libertario-venezuela-anarchism/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=

Revolution” supporter, as is clear from his book, *We Created Chavez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, and several articles and interviews. Reading what he writes it becomes clear that we cannot take him seriously as a significant critic of centralized rule from the top down, nor as an advocate of anarchist goals or methods of egalitarian self-governance from the bottom up. The article is meant to convince us of the revolutionary credentials of the state he supports by discrediting *El Libertario* in the eyes of anarchists and anti-authoritarians, and to convince us that those “false anarchists” are endangering this good state and the gains made through it.

It is not surprising that a supporter of the Bolivarian state should object to the positions taken by anarchists who oppose the rule of that state. And leftist government supporters have a long tradition of resorting to smears about supposed right-wing associations and such to discredit anarchists who have expressed criticisms of “leftists” in power.

But, charges of inauthenticity don’t really deal with the disagreements between Ciccariello-Maher and *El Libertario*.

Part of the disagreement is over the question of whether or not an egalitarian and just society can be achieved through leftists taking state power. Those, like Ciccariello-Maher, who believe that it can, argue for supporting states run by elites that express leftist ideologies. This position is opposed by those of us who are convinced that taking the side of one government or of one political grouping aspiring to defeat another and rule and “reform” the state, has never led anywhere because “the enemy of my enemy” is not necessarily anyone’s friend ... and eventually, the reasons for disillusionment become unavoidable, perhaps years later... It is important to remember that the state now ruled by those espousing “Bolivarian Revolution” principles, no matter how many social welfare programs it may institute or how thoroughgoing they may be, is a government organized from above, not a society based on solidarity created by anti-hierarchical, horizontal relations.

Ciccariello-Maher glosses over this vital matter while claiming to be qualified to judge the authenticity of anarchists because he has “always been very close to the anarchist milieu and, while frustrated by certain anarchist blindspots,” ... is “influenced by anarchism as a doctrine of revolutionary struggle that understands the inherent contradictions of the state.” In providing this proof of his qualifications for judging who are “true” and who are “false” anarchists, he ignores the variety of tendencies and ongoing debates that reject being frozen into doctrines.

Ciccariello-Maher gives several reasons that he denigrates participants in *El Libertario*, and particularly the editor of their paper, Rafael Uzcategui as being “false anarchists”, including that they do not support the “Bolivarian Revolution”, and that they have asserted that the recent demonstrations in Venezuela are more than simply middle-class provocations which can be dismissed while the government suppresses them. He specifically targets Uzcategui’s article, “An anarchist perspective on the protests in Venezuela”, ROAR Magazine, February 22, 2014.³ While criticizing Uzcategui as an *El Libertario* “figurehead”, and for being of middle-class origin, and charging him with right-wing associations, Ciccariello-Maher doesn’t deal with Uzcategui’s assertion that in the interior of the country, popular sectors have been protesting due to lack of basic services, inflation and unemployment. Simply blaming the unrest in Venezuela on the right and U.S. manipulation, as Ciccariello-Maher does, ignores real difficulties related to the top-down structure of the state and the inequalities of social and material conditions this inevitably generates. To

³ <http://roarmag.org/2014/02/anarchist-perspective-protests-venezuela/>

deny or seek to discredit the news reports from various sources, including from Al Jazeera, which indicate that protests have taken place in several cities, and that there is dissatisfaction among more than the middle-class (whatever that may be defined as), is to refuse to deal with the reality on the ground. (With respect to this, also see the comments to both Uzcategui's article and Ciccariello-Maher's article on the ROAR website.)

Ciccariello-Maher's article does not deal with *El Libertario's* criticisms of Chavismo and the Bolivarian revolution as statist and dominated by top-down structures. It does not explain how a society in which the majority of people do not have any real say in their daily lives or control over their conditions of work can be considered "revolutionary". It does not question the continued strength of State agencies that maintain and guarantee the maintenance of hierarchy and submission of workers to bureaucrats in the state and the military and transnational companies.

However, *El Libertario's* position with respect to the state is not strongly divergent from that of other anarchists, including those from somewhat differing tendencies such as Shawn Hattingh of the South African Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front. In a well-researched article, "Venezuela and the 'Bolivarian Revolution': Beacon of hope or smoke and mirrors?", zabalaza.net, April 24, 2012.⁴

Hattingh documents the ways that the state continues to support and protect capitalism in Venezuela. Hattingh also notes that the Venezuelan government has pursued some quite neoliberal economic policies and has failed to challenge ownership patterns and the relations of production that define capitalism. He also explains that:

"In fact, many leftists have entered into the state. Through doing so, and despite what may have even been good intentions, they have joined the 'Bolivarian' section of the ruling class. Many hold top positions in state departments or parliament, and thus form a central part of the hierarchical state system. They have themselves, consequently, become part of the elite in the state who govern and give orders to others. They too, due to their positions, live in vastly different material conditions to workers and the poor. Being part of a few who have the power to make decisions for others, and the ability to enforce those decisions, creates a privileged position. As such, the centralisation of power, which defines states, generates an elite and a bureaucracy. The reason why the state generates a bureaucracy is because centralised bodies need information to be collated and gathered so that decisions can be made by a few who hold power in these bodies. The bureaucracy that emerges from centralisation also develops its own interests, like maintaining the power and material privileges it has. It is, therefore, precisely because of state centralisation in Venezuela that the size and power of a bureaucratic layer has been growing. It is for such reasons that anarchists have pointed out that the state itself generates a ruling elite and an unaccountable bureaucracy. This means states too cannot evolve into organs of direct democracy. As Bakunin stressed, when former workers or activists enter into high positions in the state they become rulers and get used to the privileges their new positions carry, and they come to "no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people" History has shown repeatedly that Bakunin's analysis was correct, and it is being proven to be insightful

⁴ <http://zabalaza.net/2012/04/24/venezuela-and-the-bolivarian-revolution-beacon-of-hope-or-smoke-and-mirrors/>

yet again in the case of Venezuela. History has also shown, and the case of Venezuela confirms this, when ex-workers and ex-activists enter into the state, and become part of the ruling class, they have few qualms about using the power of the state to attack the working class when their new interests diverge from those of this class. It is this too that explains why the 'Bolivarian' state, despite having (ex-)leftists in it, has often moved so swiftly and decisively against workers when the state's, or its capitalist allies' interests, have been threatened."

Hattingh goes on to discuss the contradictory aspects of "Welfare" programs in Venezuela as elsewhere, as such programs both improve the basic conditions of survival and leave intact the conditions of exploitation and domination. He reminds us that states both provide welfare benefits and are also part of the system that leads to social and economic inequalities which generate the need for welfare. The Venezuelan state governs in the interests of the "elite (especially a 'Bolivarian' aligned elite), whilst handing out some welfare to try to mask this reality and alleviate the worst impacts of continued class rule."

Also see a 2008 interview by Charles Reeve with two participants in *El Libertario* that deals with many of these issues plus some others: "The revolution delayed: 10 years of Hugo Chavez's rule".⁵

Contrary to Ciccariello-Maher's charges against them, examples of *El Libertario's* earlier refusal to support either the right or the "left" elites can be found in several articles, including the article: "Neither Chavez Nor Carmona: Self-management is the way", April 26, 2002,⁶ where we read:

"Due to the political crisis in Venezuela shown in the events of before, during and after April 11, the anarchists feel a need to show our position. To this end:

"1) The contradictory politics of Hugo Chavez have not benefited the poorest sectors of the country, in three years of management the indices of poverty, unemployment and social insecurity have increased. What's more, the Chavez government is repeating the mistakes and vices of previous governments. The alternative proposed by the different sectors of the current opposition that is trying to politically make use of the events of April 11 is, by no means, different or satisfactory.

"2) We energetically condemn any coup d'état, no matter where it comes from. We oppose the preponderant position the armed forces currently have to solve problems which should, [instead] be solved by the direct and active participation of the society itself.

"3) We declare ourselves opponents of both Left and Right authoritarians, as can be seen in the form of thinking and the acts carried out so much by the "officialist" representatives as of the opposition. They are all based on the simplifying the problems of the country, speeches based on social and political exclusion, closed door agreements, manipulating the media within its reach and using anti-democratic methods at its pleasure.

⁵ <http://libcom.org/library/revolution-delayed-10-years-hugo-ch%C3%A1vez%E2%80%99s-rule-charles-reeve-el-libertario>

⁶ <http://www.ainfos.ca/02/apr/ainfos00585.html>

“4) We reject the violations of Human Rights that took place during the Coup government lead by the businessman Pedro Carmona Estanga. The repression of grassroots protests, the taking over of community media, the arbitrary detentions and the witch-hunt undertaken, certify the dictatorial nature of the regime that tried to take over the country. Likewise, we cannot forget the accomplices and opportunists that recognised and welcomed the installation of this de facto government.

“5) We demand that the responsibility of the deaths which occurred on April 11 in the centre of the city be cleared up, as well as of those of victims in the following days in the west of Caracas. We support an impartial and non-governmental investigation, in order to clear the facts, indicate the murderers and make them responsible for their acts against society.

“6) The demonstrations of citizens that took place during those days are proof that active, conscious and responsible participation by the people influence the decisions of those in power and are the seed of direct and self-managed democracy. To this end, anarchists once again show our commitment with the cooperative, autonomous, and horizontal processes that lead towards the self-management of society that can solve its own problems and which also opposes the inequality that is caused by current globalised capitalism.

“Commission of Anarchist Relations, *El Libertario* (newspaper) Ellibertario@hotmail.com.⁷

Further examples of their refusal to support either the right or the “left” elites can also be found in 2012 in: “Revolution as Spectacle” *Fifth Estate* #387, Summer, 2012, Vol. 47, No. 2, page 35.⁸

“Faithful to our principles, the anarchist position is the rejection of the electoral farce, exposing the capitalist character of the conflict within the bourgeoisie and denouncing those sectors interested in more of the same as much as in coddling the state bureaucracy.

“As anarchists, opposed to the strategy of “the lesser evil,” we are committed to creating a truly revolutionary and transformative alternative, against the ambitions of the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD, electoral opposition to Chavez) as well as those of the Gran Polo Político (GPP, an alliance of parties and groups that support the government).

“This road is being followed from different directions by many people and organizations disappointed by the inconsistencies and corruption of the elite who promote political polarization in Venezuela.”

Ciccariello-Maher’s main response to the issues raised by anarchists is to say that “The bottom-line is this: you don’t win a revolutionary struggle by copping out the moment that some elements within the movement seek to monopolize the revolution by taking state power. Only by pushing on in a conflictive relationship with the state while exploiting the progressive elements within that state to defend the victories that have already been won in direct struggles against the right-wing bourgeoisie (the land expropriations, the worker-run cooperatives, the communal councils, etc.) can you begin to move beyond this populist state capitalism and really start developing the

⁷ Original version on <http://www.red-libertaria.org/sinfronteras/apr02/nichavezni.html>

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⁸ <http://www.fifthestate.org/archive/387-summer-2012/revolution-spectacle/>

kind of direct democracy, grassroots socialism or libertarian communism that many of us are dreaming of. But if you choose to bail out at the first sign of disagreement, you effectively give in and allow the monopolizing elements within the movement (in this case the Chavistas) to have the last say. Needless to say, such sectarian self-isolation ultimately only benefits our real enemy.”

In other words, according to Ciccariello-Maher, the only realistic and “revolutionary” response to whatever ails Venezuelan society and the “Bolivarian revolution” is for those who want change is to play the game by the rules defined by the state authorities, to work to reform the system from within, until...

This kind of argument is also meant to erode solidarity between anarchists by encouraging the idea that if the state attacks *El Libertario* and Rafael Uzcategui, and others who take similar positions, they are fair game, deserve what they get, and should not be offered solidarity by other anarchists. It serves to justify state attacks and attacks by state supporters.

One does not need to agree with every aspect of *El Libertario*’s analyses to recognize the importance of challenging powerholder elites and aspirants to power on the left as well as on the right. To acknowledge U.S. government or private interests’ responsibility for horrendously undermining and often helping to destroy social possibilities in Venezuela or anywhere else should not entail abandoning the ability to understand and criticize local forms of elite domination and exploitation.

It is one thing to disagree with and seriously debate the ideas and analyses presented by anarchist individuals or groups and another to charge those one disagrees with as being “false anarchists”. Disagreements deserve to be heard and seriously debated. But, George Ciccariello-Maher’s charges involve basic disagreements over whether self-proclaimed “revolutionary” elites should be challenged directly or supported as the lesser evil and cooperated with. This is the primary issue that needs to be addressed, rather than charging those he disagrees with as inauthentic or “false” anarchists, in an attempt to discredit them.

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