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Venezuela's anarchists and the three-way fight

editorial collective

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When Venezuela is mentioned in North America these days, it is almost always in reference to President Hugo Chavez, who is vilified by the mainstream press and adored by much of what passes for the left. Not surprisingly, the reality is much more complicated, as Michael Staudenmaier and Anne Carlson explain in their recent analysis of the situation on the ground, "Of Chavistas and Anarquistas: Brief Sketch of a Visit to Venezuela." However useful the information presented by Staudenmaier and Carlson, however, their piece deliberately limits its criticisms of the various political tendencies they encountered. Nonetheless, the complexity of Venezuela's social, political, and economic situation is precisely what makes the country a potential microcosm of the three-way fight.

The Venezuelan anarchists (especially those clustered around the Comisión de Relaciones Anarquistas or CRA) see themselves as participants in a tri-polar struggle of their own, and have long positioned themselves in opposition to both the Chavez regime and to the US-backed opposition, borrowing

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the phrase popularized in Argentina in recent years: “¡Que se vayan todos!” which translates roughly as “Get rid of all of them!” But both Chavez and the opposition represent wings of global capital, as the Venezuelan anarchists are quick to point out to less critical leftists both inside and outside their country.

Nonetheless, Venezuela is one of the most rapidly changing countries in a rapidly changing continent, and the future of Venezuelan society is up for grabs. Scenarios abound that include elements of fascism and anti-fascism. For example, the Chavista movement is a rough synthesis of several formerly competing left tendencies, but it projects some strikingly conservative perspectives on social affairs, and it clearly includes a strong authoritarian streak. It’s not difficult to imagine a version of Venezuela, perhaps ten years from now, where these aspects of Chavismo have purged the humanistic and decentralized tendencies. A South American Night of the Long Knives is hardly impossible, and there’s not even a guarantee that Chavez himself would survive such a shake-up.

Another scenario is less top-down but no less frightening: when oil prices begin to fall, limits will be placed on the social welfare programs that have fueled the popularity of the Chavez regime. Over time, the realities of the cozy relationship between Chavez and global (especially European-based and resource-extraction focused) capital will become more stark. This could easily foment a major schism between the grassroots of the Chavista movement and the leadership, with the former committed to fundamental social and economic change and the latter more loyal to Chavez and the regime. Many of the Venezuelan anarchists actually encourage this sort of split, but there is no way to be certain that the grassroots would be responsive to anarchist politics. Instead, we could witness a popular revolutionary movement toward the far right, which retains the cultural conservatism and authoritarian machismo of the Chavista movement.

Amidst these potential futures, the anarchists around the CRA provide a potential rallying point for the struggle against fascism, capital and the state. Their propaganda is widely distributed across the country (largely in the form of their newspaper, “El Libertario”), but they have only the most marginal presence in many key sectors of social struggle: there is almost no visible anarchist presence in any workplace struggle, nor is there much organizing being done in fast-growing newly industrialized cities like Ciudad Guayana. Further, while some of the best anarchist organizers in Venezuela are women, there isn’t much specifically feminist work being done.

The anarchists around the CRA have not weighed in on the question of “especifismo” that has occupied the anarchists of the southern cone for the last decade. This reflects both the differences between the two regions of South America, and the less precise or dogmatic ideological approach of Venezuelans across the spectrum, be they Chavistas or anarchists. This can be both a blessing and a curse, and it will be important to watch for new developments in the politics of the Venezuelan anarchists.

Of course, stepped-up US intervention in Venezuela could change everything about these scenarios, but then again it might not change anything. We don’t need to look far to find anti-US sentiment taking on fascist forms in oil-rich regions of the developing world. And again, all this is speculation, but it raises an important question left unanswered by Staudenmaier and Carlson: how prepared are the Venezuelan anarchists for a new and different sort of three-way fight?