

Venezuela 2008: A libertarian proposal for the current situation

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Positive transformations in society are produced by the actions of popular movements and not by governments. As has been clearly illustrated in the case of Venezuela, as well in other parts of Latin America, the will for change of the majority has been channelled and co-opted by a new bureaucracy which tries, by all available means, to tighten its grip on power. Since 1999 the survival at any cost of the new government has been its principle aim, and in the centralisation, militarization and personalisation that have been promoted under the euphemism 'revolutionary process', one of its principal tasks has been to pacify and co-opt the wide array of power structures and protagonists who, during the 1990's, struggled to end the domination of Acción Democrática and COPEI, the two political parties who successively governed the country since 1958.

Believing themselves to be represented by the executive bandwagon that came to power at the end of 1998, dozens of social movements who had rejected neoliberalism, the privatisation of public services, the various massacres carried out by the Army (Yumare, El Amparo, etc), and the diverse exploitative and exclusivist policies of previous governments, decided to give president Chavez their full backing, literally handing him a blank cheque. The oppressed peoples of Venezuela decided to set aside their own issues and demands in order to assume, as their own, the policies of the new regime. Thus similarly, community and grass roots organisations abandoned their own reflections and ways of doing things, their autonomy of thought and action, in order to internalize and repeat the discourses and logic of those who proclaimed to be working in the interests of the people.

After nine years of this government, aided by the greatest economic boom in the last thirty years and the support of all public authorities, we start to discover and corroborate the fact that nothing has really changed. That we have changed the names of our leaders but continue to be as oppressed as we ever were. That those that have sullied the word 'revolution', and other similar ideas, have managed our misery in order to secure their place in the elite of the rich and privileged. In contrast, others, disenchanted by the 'Bolivarian' project and blinded by rage, have moved from supporting today's oppressors to supporting those who oppressed us yesterday, apply the mistaken strategy of opting for the 'lesser evil'. And like their Chavista opposites they have mortgaged their freedom in order to be led by another faction who decide, from above, what tasks must be undertaken. We appeal to both groups: It is now time to recuperate our autonomy as a first step towards constructing real change.

What is autonomy?

Autonomy is the capacity to create our own working structures and ways of doing things, and to question that which we have inherited from history. The term is constructed by combining two Greek words 'autos' and 'nomos' which together mean literally to make one's own law. Autonomy, in political terms, is the possibility that human beings should be capable of defining, in a free way, their own projects in life, that it should be they who organise and decide, in the most democratic way possible, all of the elements that affect their daily lives, from work to sexuality, from how we use our free time to nutrition etc.

The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy, to live under rules that we don't decide. Authority educates us in servitude, as it is always others who make the decisions, and these measures, as well as the institutions that enforce them, are called sacred and unquestionable. An individual

starts to become autonomous when they begin to ask themselves if things must always be as they are, or if they could work better in other forms. Thus it is said that autonomy is an endless interrogation, that it not detained by anything, and that it even constantly questions its preliminary conclusions. If the State, Government, the Army and prisons are unjust, can they not be changed for something better? An autonomous individual never loses sight of the fact that the rules for the functioning of society are created by people, and that they can be substituted at any moment, by the very same people, when they plot against the common good. Individual autonomy is produced through free reflection and deliberation, made concrete through one's own thought, and through being the sovereign agent of one's self and one's actions.

A Russian revolutionary, Mikhail Bakunin, affirmed that the freedom of others infinitely elevates one's personal freedom. An autonomous individual understands that he/she cannot be independent if they live in an oppressive and unjust society, thus they organise with their counterparts in order to confront those who seek to limit the enjoyment of their rights and freedom. Autonomy proposes self-organisation, rejecting external influences, creating its own forms of organisation, that work for the objectives mapped out by the actual people involved. Thus it is that autonomous social movements are popular organisms that respond to the necessities voiced by their members, and not to the decrees of any authority. Because they develop in the margins of society, and against the institutions that dominate them, they realise practices of self-management and direct action. An autonomous social movement defines its own struggles which it does not defer, negotiate, subordinate or abandon due to any external influence. This doesn't mean that they can't coincide with other movements in the search for common objectives, but that these relations must be equal, preserving the identity of the different parts and strengthening, without any dilution, their original objectives. From another perspective, autonomous social movements generate their own resources, through self-management, thus rejecting the mechanism of subordination of subsidies from the government, political parties and businesses.

All governments need to control belligerent forces, thus they know that they need to reduce the autonomy of the group with the potential to generate real change. On creating by decree the so-called 'popular power', the current executive assures itself of channelling the efforts of those at the bottom of the heap in favour of reviving, legitimising and perpetuating the situation of domination, disguising it with pretty names. The resultant state organs, due to their fictitious independence and not having been born out of the peoples struggles, reproduce the vices of the State and of other oppressive institutions. All power, (be it State, municipal, military or popular), possesses an instinct for preservation at all costs, and sooner rather than later will create a new bureaucracy, as perverse as the one that has been replaced.

Autonomous struggle, now!

The creation of and experimentation with diverse organisational expressions seeks to generate, here and now, a different culture. Thus autonomy opts for a decision making process based in assemblies, direct democracy, in order to guarantee respect for diversity, slow down hierarchical structuring, authority and the loss of independence and sovereignty in the struggle. As we have alternative practices to those in power, the oppressed will struggle against hegemony as we construct, brick by brick, our own independent culture, a shared identity and imagination. In this process of learning the means should always be coherent with the ends.

The proposal for the current situation is for the creation of a constellation of diverse groups and autonomous movements, self governed by those involved, to fight for the conquest of rights that have been hijacked by authority: housing, worthwhile employment, health, education, personal security, public spaces and quality of life amongst other issues. Some recent experiences such as the indigenous and environmental movement against the mining industry in Zulia and the Committee of Victims in Lara are already moving in this direction. Then, for the creation of multiple spaces for survival and resistance that would be autonomous and completely free from the influence of government and private business, and that would be linked in a horizontal way and through leaderless cooperation. The existence of many social movements would counter the false polarization: neither chavistas nor opposition, these would be people struggling for their own rights and not for the privileges of those above.

The institutions of power will try to co-opt, without doubt, the free belligerence of the oppressed. But, on creating successive insurrectional situations through the autonomous movements, their connection, cohesion, amplification and radicalisation- due to the inability on the part of the government to satisfy their demands- will transform the movements of ephemeral revolt into revolutionary moments and generalised self-management. In this way the autonomous movements have the potential to transform themselves, through insurrection, into truly revolutionary movements. In this there are, however, no short cuts: no politicians with populist masks, nor strong leaders with 'earthen feet'. This is the lesson that we must learn from the disastrous 'Bolivarian Socialist government'.

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