

21st-Century Socialism: Venezuela's Communes in Historical Perspective

Featuring George Ciccariello-Maher and Atenea Jiménez

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Kevin Young (moderator): The topic of Venezuela often triggers heated political arguments. In the twentieth century the country was dominated by capitalists, who toward the end of the century adhered to neoliberal economic policies: the privatization of resources, total freedom for business, and budget austerity when it came to public services and the general welfare. This began to change with the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez as president. The *Chavista* government, labeled a "dictatorship" by its opponents despite having been democratically elected, carried out a wide array of progressive reforms. Following a failed U.S.-backed military coup in 2002, and then an oil industry shutdown spearheaded by the opposition, the Chávez government took control of the state oil company and began financing social programs in sectors like healthcare, education, and housing, eventually under the slogan of "21st-Century Socialism." By 2012, the poverty rate had been cut in half. At the same time, the rage of the opposition and of Washington only increased. Neither the Venezuelan right nor the U.S. government have ever fully recognized the government's legitimacy. Both have made consistent efforts to overthrow and undermine the government through various means, both military and non-military.

The social and economic gains of the Chávez era have not been maintained under his ally President Nicolás Maduro, who was elected in 2013 after Chávez died, and reelected this past May. Although the social programs have remained in place, since then the country has suffered a deep economic crisis, with the currency (*bolívar*) losing value against the dollar, prices rising rapidly, and goods becoming more and more scarce. In the last two years the economy has seen an almost unprecedented rate of hyperinflation.

There are multiple causes of the crisis. Although Donald Trump blames "socialism," the biggest part of the problem has little to do with ideology. It's the result of a chaotic monetary policy in which the government has maintained a fixed exchange rate while limiting the access to dollars, causing the black-market exchange rate for the *bolívar* to rise drastically. In this context Venezuelans have sought to trade in their local currency for dollars, which has reduced the *bolívar*'s value even more. Imports have gotten more expensive and more scarce, exacerbating

inflation, and importing companies have increased the price of goods further on the Venezuelan market, basing their prices on the dollar's price on the black market.

This problem is not without solutions, but the Maduro government has not taken decisive action. It introduced a package of currency reforms in August, but it's unclear how much impact it will have. In part, the problem reflects the government's lack of economic knowledge. But it's also true that some powerful Venezuelans benefit from the crisis, making money off contraband, speculation, and corruption. The guilty include not only capitalists but also many corrupt Chavista officials.

On the other hand, the economic crisis also has roots that are not the government's fault. The most important structural cause is the historic problem of dependence on oil exports, coupled with extreme dependence on imports to supply the domestic market. When the global price of oil drops, as it did in 2008 and again in 2014, it causes major problems. Among the other causes of the crisis, we must also mention capitalist strikes – in the form of capital flight and the hoarding of goods – and the hostile intervention of the U.S. government, which is designed to accentuate the economic chaos. Even right-wing economist Francisco Rodríguez, a fierce critic of the government, argued last month that U.S. sanctions were making a bad situation far worse. He suggested that the sanctions that Trump put in place in August 2017 have prevented the state oil company from accessing credit, leading to a precipitous drop in Venezuelan oil production, even as world oil prices have risen.

Our guests will touch on the current crisis. But this event also takes a broader perspective. Whereas many commentators – on both the right and left – focus on the Venezuelan state and the opposition, there are other social forces in Venezuela who are arguably more interesting. These forces support socialism and many Chavista policies, but they don't want a socialism "from above." Rather, they want a participatory socialism in which ordinary Venezuelans make the key decisions and build revolutionary institutions from the ground up. These voices received some government support during the time of Chávez, who signed two important laws in their favor: the first in 2006, which promoted the formation of "communal councils" at the local level, and a second in 2010 to encourage those councils to form larger networks known as communes.

The idea of the commune has diverse historical roots, in Venezuela and beyond. Perhaps the most famous example was the Paris Commune of 1871, in which the French working class directly ran their city for 72 days. Our guests will be discussing the Venezuelan communes' historical roots, their ways of organizing, their revolutionary visions, and their achievements and challenges.

Our first speaker is George Ciccariello-Maher. George is an organizer, writer, and radical political theorist. He is author of *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in*

Venezuela (Jacobin-Verso, 2016), a study of Venezuelan communes and the political dynamics of the post-Chávez era. He has also written a longer history of revolutionary movements in Venezuela entitled *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, published by Duke University Press in 2013. His third book, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, was published by Duke University Press in 2017.

George Ciccariello-Maher: Thanks everyone. It is a great pleasure to be here today. I want to thank the organizers of the Feinberg series, a very important series, for having me here today. It's a pleasure to participate in this series, but especially to be able to participate this year with the title "Another World Is Possible."

I will discuss today the parameters that make that other world possible. That other world is being created, right now, right under our collective noses, although many people remain unaware of this process. And this lack of awareness is directly related to the type of information about Venezuela that we receive from the media. Because when it comes to Venezuela, a lot is said but very little is actually revealed.

And we have heard about some of those aspects in Kevin's introduction. There is always talk about economic crisis and economic policies, political crisis, negotiations between the different political parts in Venezuela, strategies that are planned behind closed doors, elections and suspected fraud, street protests and claimed political prisoners, tit-for-tat foreign and domestic policies, death, hunger, Chavismo, the opposition...

What else is there? Despite all the efforts we have made – and I am using "we" here to include comrade Atenea, who is a key figure in the communal struggles in Venezuela, struggles that have been taking place for over a decade and through which we implement the idea of the commune in theory and in practice – despite all these efforts, the structure of the commune remains quite unknown. That is to say, not much is known about the popular power from below that is currently emerging in Venezuela. Politics' original sin, and consequently, political science's original sin, is their fascination with power understood only as state power. This entails a certain kind of blindness that keeps them from considering popular power, grassroots power, power from below. Such blindness contaminates all revolutionary struggles. Their vision meets its limits in the deemed potential of state policy. Limits that are, of course, self-imposed.

In order to understand and change the world, it is necessary to escape this voluntary myopia. As the distance between popular movements and the state in Venezuela grows bigger and bigger every month and every year, these issues become more and more important.

Today, I want to highlight two central issues. The first is related to understanding how the communal process is articulated in Venezuela, focusing explicitly on Venezuelan communes as

an anti-state horizon. Communes aim at a future non-state structure that entails the destruction of the current liberal democratic state.

The second issue is related to the present-day crisis, what this crisis means within the communal horizon, and what future possibilities this crisis may open. We are at one of the worst moments in the Bolivarian revolution. But a friend of mine, Gerardo Rojas, a militant revolutionary and coordinator of Venezuelan communes, tells me that it is in the commune where the vitality of this movement lies. He told me this some years ago, but I think the same energy still prevails in contemporary Venezuela.

In the last few years, the empty signifier *commune* has become the only political subject capable of unifying and mobilizing the Chavista radical left as well as the popular masses and movements that are identified with the process of change known as Bolivarian revolution. And that also surprised me because I went to Venezuela, about a decade ago, to discuss with the people who participated in them about these popular movements. Then, everybody talked about their involvement in this or that movement. But after a few years, I went back to Venezuela and people were starting to articulate their participation as participation in communes and communal tasks, not in popular movements.

To put it differently, nowadays in Venezuela, communal projects represent the core of what I have called “dual power.” Dual power is an alternative type of power that emerges from below and that signals the commune as its horizon as it projects a new territorial socialism.

However, the projects of the Bolivarian revolution and the project of the commune are very different, and it is this difference that I want to highlight. Because we would not understand anything at all, if we are not able to understand how the difference between commune movements and the communal state – the unification of these communes – is constituted.

Venezuelan communes have a long history that begins before colonial times. We can date and name the precursors of this political process. It actually starts a long time before the 1871 Paris Commune. There was no need to have Paris as an example to get indigenous people and *cimarrones*, or runaway slaves, to come together in communal structures in their struggles.

But how are communes defined nowadays? Formally, a commune is a group of communal councils. That is to say, it groups several political structures of direct participatory self-government under certain economic structures. The economic structures are known as EPSs (*Empresas de Propiedad Social*), or social property businesses. Social property businesses may be part of socialist economies in an indirect way, meaning that they are property shared between the state and a commune, or in a direct way. Direct EPSs are currently the preferred and most common form. This is a type of business that is run directly by communal parliaments – that is to

say, the people through their representatives in communal councils. And these parliaments make all decisions regarding what a commune will do. They decide what is produced, how it is produced, how much workers are paid, and if there is surplus, they decide how to invest it back in the community.

This communal practice conflicts with the Venezuelan state. The commune has come to be perceived as a radical pole and it is rejected and attacked by the more conservative sector of the state that features characteristics of Chavismo. The result is that, in theory and in practice, the commune represents an anti-state horizon, something beyond the idea of the state, despite their strategic alliances with some sectors of the current government.

I want to discuss an example of how this dynamic takes place: El Maizal commune in the state of Lara. For those who know a little bit about communes in Venezuela, El Maizal is very well-known. It is one of those big communes, that as you can guess from its name, produces corn. But the fact that it has been recognized by the state does not necessarily mean that it has a smooth relationship with the government. And that can easily be seen in the history of this commune. I need to talk about its history so that people can understand.

The inhabitants of this area came together and demanded the control of their land. They protested, insisted that this land should be theirs, that they had to own the land and start cultivating it, and that they intended to that communally. In that time, these lands were controlled by private companies. Surprisingly, one day, Chávez arrived in his helicopter and in a press conference, he declared that he would expropriate this land from the private companies that owned them. It was an incredible moment for the organizers who lived in that area, the commoners who were demanding the control over this land. But as the president left, the commoners realized that expropriating this land did not mean that the land would be given back to them. This land became property of the agrarian state company, CVAL. The commoners then had to struggle against the Venezuelan state. They had to struggle again, against the state this time, to be able to take the land and start producing from it in a communal way.

Well, as I was saying, this is not the story of one struggle but of two conflicts: the first against the private owners of the land; then, the second against the Chavista government. And only after these two battles were the commoners able to own their land, to cultivate it in a communal and democratic way. I repeat, just to highlight it, that they strove to cultivate that land in a democratic, participatory, and direct way. Their aim was to create a structure that allowed the people to participate in deciding what was going to be produced – in this case corn and other produce – [and] also how to distribute it, and how to use the surplus in ways that would have a positive effect in the community.

If you talk to the representatives of El Maizal, they will tell you that their enemies are dressed in red – meaning they are Chavistas. Their enemies are elected representatives and leaders, mayors, all from the Socialist Party. Since comuners are part of the Socialist Party, this means they waged an internal struggle within Chavismo itself in order to be able to progress. Why? Because there is a conflict between the type of government that is in place and anti-state communal structures – the communal non-state that produces locally, where decision-making takes place in a direct way and at a local level. This structure reduces corruption and the economic influence exercised by private sectors, but it also reduces the political influence exercised by the party and its Chavista leaders. Thus, it is a conflict that is perceived as a direct threat to the current government.

So, when many liberal voices in the international press, or American and Venezuelan scholars, talk about a communal state as something that is antidemocratic, even totalitarian, it is just completely absurd, because what we are discussing is a kind of government that is local and absolutely democratic, that is focused on everyday governance and that empowers the participation of everyone in the community.

How does this communal non-state confront the current crisis? This crisis, as was mentioned before, features different aspects: it has intensified in the last few years and months, and it is about to reach a breaking point.

What I mean to say, without being absurdly optimistic, is that we have learned how to make the most of crises. As Naomi Klein puts it, the right is very smart about it – they know how to take advantage of crises – but we are not as savvy.

So, we should start by defining the current crisis. First, the crisis in Venezuela today is not a governmental crisis, but a systemic crisis. It is not a matter of decades or years. It is a matter of a century. We are talking about the historical development of an oil state that becomes oil-dependent. Second, this dependence results in being dependent when it comes to exports, that is exactly what happens in Venezuela. Money comes through oil sales, but it is then invested only in the purchase of imported goods: food and other things. A historical result of this process is that we have reduced our domestic production. We do not produce what people eat, consume. There is a lack of domestic production. Then, we get to the current crisis, when the oil price drops drastically and, among other things, there is no capital to purchase imported goods. Now we are facing a question: what do we do about this? When a country does not produce what it eats, and it has no means to purchase it?

It is in that very moment, in which communes become not only a possibility, but maybe the only possibility for producing whatever is needed and producing it at a local level and doing it democratically.

Nonetheless, acknowledging communes as non-state entities does not mean that we can ignore the state. What we have seen historically is a very strong dialectic relationship between popular movements, the communes, and the state. But there are moments, such as the current political moment, when we may say that a crisis is emerging between the bases, the movements, the communes, and the state. It is necessary for the state to start thinking about possibilities: how can we produce what the country needs? And for the comuners: how may they establish their political will in such a complex situation – when Chavismo and its opposition are both the comuners’ enemies? How can they progress in such a situation – when the enemy of my enemy is also my enemy? What may strengthen the political will to work towards the commune as a structure of government?

Inevitably, the struggle of the commune is an uphill struggle against all odds. But we can still look at the current crisis as a space of opportunity where there are strategies for building the commune. We have to support this process. We have to support those who have always saved the Bolivarian process, those who started it, who were part of the 1989 *Caracazo*, those who took the streets in 2002 to protect the government and demand that Hugo Chávez was restored to his position during the coup d’état against the government. These people are the same who have always saved the process. And we have to support them. As Venezuelan writer Aquiles Nazoa states, “I believe in the creative powers of the people.” It is time to put our faith in the commune. As Hugo Chávez himself said once: “commune or nothing.” Thank you.

Kevin Young (moderator): Our second speaker is Atenea Jiménez Lemón. Atenea has worked as a sociologist and organizer in Venezuelan popular movements since the 1990s. In 2009, she founded the Red Nacional de Comuner@s, the National Network of Communes. Since then the network has grown to include around 500 communes and 100 social movement organizations throughout Venezuela. She also founded the Universidad Campesina de Venezuela. She recently edited the book entitled *La toparquía comunera: Concreción de la utopía (Rule by Communes: Concretizing Utopia)*.

Atenea Jiménez Lemón: [I want to start by] locating the communes in their historical context. Where did they come from? Why and how do they represent an alternative to other organizational methods, such as capitalism and bureaucratic-authoritarian socialism? What do they represent in present-day Venezuela?

The communes emerged from a call made by Subcomandante Chávez in 2007. In 2005, people had started to put together communal councils. The communal councils, as a smaller space to solve neighborhood problems, problems which of course were smaller and more limited, which had to do with a street, with electricity in a building, with community issues related to services, without any vision of governing beyond this territory. In 2007 when President Chávez took

power and won the elections – reelection – he spoke of five guiding principles, the fifth principle being the outburst of communal power. At that point he started talking about communal cities. And then later he called to build up the people, build the communes. A constitutional reform was proposed and did not pass, which talked about the communes as geo-human cells. That is, it located the primary space of power near the people or from the people. Processes of building communes began all over the country. These processes generally came from territories with a trajectory of popular struggle dating from way back, even from long before Chávez came to power. These are environmentalist movements, movements of former combatants, of student activists, struggles against neoliberalism – all the popular movements came together in the commune.

And from there came the importance of the commune as the exercise of power that ties together a territory. When we organized a sector, we fought for that sector, which is an important and laudable thing to do. However, the difference with the commune is that the commune synthesizes all of the struggles of the people, the working class, working men and women from the country and the city, they synthesize and secure a territory, then rebuild this territory. Thus radical geography speaks of the construction of this territory socially. So these communes began to be built, and they began to blossom all over the country, it was basically a constituent project, what was called in one of the first meetings a commune as democratic exercise, participation, and it will be built on the principle of creating a permanent process of constituency. A process that will never end. Because the exercise of democracy, the construction of this common good, is inexhaustible, unending.

And so all this process began to be built, in assemblies, in popular meetings, national meetings, sectorial meetings, very rich in the construction of socialism from the commune which also has a particularity in our country because in contrast to other socialisms, as mentioned in the question. For instance, contrary to bureaucratic socialism, which is a state that assumes the army, bureaucracy, the whole state, this socialism comes from the bottom, from assemblies, from the city and the citizenry, and how it aspires to develop its human potential, and of course it has differences which I would like to clarify – differences from other organizational models, the capitalist model, the capitalist case, and also socialism, other socialisms, or actually existing socialism as some authors call it. First is citizen participation. Citizen participation is total, there's full participation in the commune. Everything that is decided is debated, is considered and debated in assembly, and people reach agreements. There are no impositions in the commune. Generally, there are contradictions which are resolved through debate, through construction. If there is no resolution at first, they go on debating, but the key is the citizens' assembly as an instance of power. Direct power.

The other element is the territory, which is critically constructed from the social. When you are born in whatever country in the world, you are born in a territory, they tell you you're born in a

city, in a province, a district, and that's all. You don't have the right to change it. In the communes, the process is polygonal, the territory of the commune has been decided in debates with all the communities that conform the commune. There are a number of diverse communities which decided, democratically, to constitute a commune. This territory, they build it based on their cultural, political, economic relations, the functions they serve, life in the community – this is how the territory was built. This obviously does not occur in the other organizational models. Goods which are produced socially are then distributed socially. This is not only taken as an aim to be achieved. It is actually being built, being made, being exercised. One clear example is that of direct social businesses. These businesses produce a surplus, and they debate in assembly, and it is decided what direction to take and according to what concept. This exercise currently already exists in the Venezuelan reality. What we propose is that the whole economy, when it is built, should be dominated by the idea of the commune, not considering things as merchandise but, rather, in relation to their use value. Human needs will be the guiding principle, and the market will not be imposing aims and rhythms. Thus, life in a commune will be different. It will be what Kropotkin called “new life.” To this end, we are working on the idea of property, which we also have, but collective property, communal property. In capitalism, property is mainly private. In bureaucratic socialism, property mainly belongs to the state – state property. Workers have benefits. In the commune, we can call it a communal state or communal society, in this organizational model, we believe that communal and collective property can coexist with private property, because peasants for example are owners, and there are medium-sized properties and small properties. However, what predominates is communal property, we have communal lands, there are direct communal businesses, there are communal properties which are functioning as such in Venezuela.

Moreover, what I want to point out is that the commune, in Venezuela, breaks with the Leninist myth that if there is no revolutionary theory, there is no revolution. There is no revolution without revolutionary theory, said Lenin. Well, these comuneros who began to control the communes, many don't know who Lenin was. They've never read Lenin in their lives. Nor have they read Marx. There have been some comuneros who have, but for the most part, they are not familiar with Marxist theory. So what made many people look toward the idea of the common good, toward the idea of socialism? I believe it has to do with what Fidel [Castro] called class intuition. And also, as something that [Eduardo] Galeano said, that is the idea that nothing is closer to us than the idea of socialism, that it is an ancestral practice of ours, of our indigenous people, our aboriginal people, our peasants. And this is why the commune is born with greater strength, with more force, with impressive qualities unexpected in the Venezuelan countryside. In the city there were also notable experiences, but in the country the experiments are superior in terms of human and economic relations, and also for the value of labor, for the exercise of work, and the way our peasants, indigenous people, and country people interact culturally. In this, I believe there are elements worth studying from a sociological perspective, interesting as militant revolutionary aspects.

What [do] the Venezuelan communes do? What are their short term and long-term goals? What are their most important achievements and obstacles?

To address the communes in Venezuela, let me start with a distinction between communes as they are created by the state, by the party, and communes which are born through popular initiative. This distinction is important because it impacts the objectives that are proposed which are different both in their scope and in their limitations. In communes that came about through the efforts of the parties, the State and the Government, their objective was focused on the management of government programs: mainly social programs such as housing, education, now the CLAPs [Local Committees for Production and Distribution] which are food programs, water management, services, garbage collection, they are, let's say, a type of commune which is considered an appendage of the state and generally executes programs associated with government. But they don't have their own agenda, or popular initiatives to transcend these programs, and have no vision in terms of changing existing conditions.

The communes which are called insurgent – which are communes that come directly from the popular movement, on their own initiative, popular initiatives – have the long-term goal of pulverizing the bourgeois state. They are communes that have the clear idea that the existing bourgeois state oppresses and dominates the working class, all the people of Venezuela. So they have this destruction as a long-term goal, so that a process can begin of building a new form of government, a new form of state – a new form of government that was already prefigured by Simón Rodríguez, which is toparchy. Government based on the place, the inhabitants of a place, and of all places. How the inhabitants of a place take power unto themselves. How they learn to govern themselves. And there are examples of government exercised by these new communes.

What things are these communes doing? They have created a university, for example, a peasant university, to start to understand and generate knowledge from the ancestral and the scientific, for example. How new knowledge is founded, for example. It's not in a university classroom, where there are students who don't know and a professor who knows. No, from the exchange of knowledge. These communes have created, for example, communal currency. From an economic standpoint, they created currency, communal banks, where people can save, and associated with this bank they can get credit, where the resources of the people themselves, their savings generate credit. No longer just receiving from the state, because the Venezuelan state provides for the communes through various programs, but also these communes take on other initiatives. I don't mean that the social programs proposed by the government and the state are not taken up by the insurgent communes. They take them up. But there is a different relationship between powers. There is a relationship of independence, sovereignty, their own agenda, a popular exercise with an agenda established in assembly, and not being an extension or replica of the

existing state. And there is another long-term objective which is building a new communal society where the common good prevails.

[There is] a wide variety of productive, economic, and financial processes. For example, there are communal cities, for instance in the state of Sucre, where they're constructing a bank that has all the instruments of a commercial bank but functions as a communal bank. So you can have a credit or debit card, and transfers via the Internet, except that the owners aren't private interests in some random place in the country, but rather it's the comuneros themselves who are the owners of this bank. And the action, let's say the *doings* of the commune, is invisibilized in qualitative and organizational terms. It is even proposed that communal cities take on everything that a city does, and much more than a city, this local government which is the closest to the people, up to now, how the commune in the exercise of direct democracy takes on all these processes including participatory budgets within the territory, and it starts creating productive processes, which involves social relations that are totally different from what we have seen so far and from what the world knows. It is power assumed directly by the people who live in this territory and construct it socially.

What vision of the future inspires the comuneros? What is the idea of a just society and how is it reflected in practice?

The Venezuelan comuneros have a vision of society where everyone has access to free, quality health and education, all the basic services, and to food especially – there is an emphasis on agro-food sovereignty, food free of toxic pesticides – and the territorial sovereignty of our country. It is only possible if we build the communal government. If all these communes integrate and harmonize, and build a national articulation, and beyond that, assume all the processes of life which are currently managed by someone else: the state, the various powers. This new government by commune, by the people, will govern itself, will assume all the processes of life based on the common good. This is the idea of a just life. It is impossible unless we govern ourselves. For this of course it is vital to defend the territory, which is a key element and the subject for another talk. But to take over the government, to have a communal government, to have a new society, the communal society, the element of security is fundamental. Building, based on who we are, our culture, our history, a government that resembles us. This is our idea of a society, a government that resembles our people. Where there are neither exploiters nor exploited. Where there is no domination and where you don't have a few benefiting from everyone else's work, where we are in the exercise of life. The commune takes over all the processes of life. And of course this is a long-term task, which many people are committed to working on. The idea of common good, and of a just society.

Transcription by Jill Remillard; translation by Jeff Diteman and Elena Igartuburu