

Why Can't the U.S. Left Get Venezuela Right?

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As Venezuela's fascist-minded oligarchy conspires with U.S. imperialism to overthrow the democratically elected government of Nicolas Maduro, few in the U.S. seem to care.

Instead of denouncing rightwing violence that aims at regime change, many on the U.S. left have stayed silent, or opted to give an evenhanded analysis that supports neither the Maduro government nor the oligarchy trying to violently overthrow it. Rather, the left prioritizes its energy on lecturing on Maduro's "authoritarianism" and the failures of "Chavismo."

This approach allows leftists a cool emotional detachment to the fate of the poor in Venezuela, and clean hands that would otherwise be soiled by engaging with the messy, real life class struggle that is the Venezuelan revolution.

A "pox on both houses" analysis omits the U.S. government's role in collaborating with Venezuela's oligarchs. The decades-long crimes of imperialism against Venezuela is aided and abetted by the silence of the left, or by its murky analysis that minimizes the perpetrator's actions, focusing negative attention on the victim precisely at the moment of attack.

Any analysis of a former colonial country that doesn't begin with the struggle of self-determination against imperialism is a dead letter, since the x-factor of imperialism has always been a dominant variable in the Venezuelan equation, as books by Eva Gollinger and others have thoroughly explained, and further demonstrated by the ongoing intervention in Latin America by an endless succession of U.S. presidents.

The Venezuelan-initiated anti-imperialist movement was strong enough that a new gravitational center was created, that pushed most of Latin America out of the grasp of U.S. domination for the first time in nearly a hundred years. This historic achievement remains minimized for much of the U.S. left, who remain indifferent or uneducated about the revolutionary significance of self-determination for oppressed nations abroad, as well as oppressed peoples inside of the U.S.



A thousand valid criticisms can be made of Chavez, but he chose sides in the class fault lines and took bold action at critical junctures. Posters of Chavez remain in the homes of Venezuela's poorest barrios because he proved in action that he was a champion for the poor, while fighting and winning many pitched battles against the oligarchy who wildly celebrated his death.

And while it's necessary to deeply critique the Maduro government, the present situation requires the political clarity to take a bold, unqualified stance against the U.S.-backed opposition, rather than a rambling "nonpartisan" analysis that pretends a life or death struggle isn't currently taking place.

Yes, a growing number of Venezuelans are incredibly frustrated by Maduro, and yes, his policies have exacerbated the current crisis, but while an active counter-revolutionary offensive continues the political priority needs to be aimed squarely against the oligarchy, not Maduro. There remains a mass movement of revolutionaries in Venezuela dedicated to Chavismo and to defending Maduro's government against the violent anti-regime tactics, but it's these labor and community groups that the U.S. left never mentions, as it would pollute their analysis.

The U.S. left seems blissfully unaware of the consequences of the oligarchy stepping into the power vacuum if Maduro was successfully ousted. Such a shoddy analysis can be found in Jacobin's recent article, Being Honest About Venezuela, which focuses on the problems of Maduro's government while ignoring the honest reality of the terror the oligarchy would unleash if it returned to power.

How did the U.S. left get it so wrong?

They've allowed themselves to get distracted by the zig-zags at the political surface, rather than the rupturing fault lines of class struggle below. They see only leaders and are blinded to how the masses have engaged with them.

Regardless of Maduro's many stumbles, it's the rich who are revolting in Venezuela, and if they're successful it will be the workers and poor who suffer a terrible fate. An analysis of Venezuela that ignores this basic fact belongs either in the trash bin or in the newspapers of the oligarchy. Confusing class interests, or mistaking counter-revolution for revolution in politics is as disorienting as mistaking up for down, night for day.

The overarching issue remains the same since the Venezuelan revolution erupted in 1989's Caracazo uprising, which initiated a revolutionary movement of working and poor people spurred to action by IMF austerity measures. How did Venezuela's oligarchy respond to the

1989 protests? By killing hundreds if not thousands of people. Their return to power would unleash similar if not bloodier statistics.



In Venezuela the revolutionary flame has burned longer than most revolutions, its energy funneled into various channels; from rioting, street demonstrations, land and factory occupations, new political parties and radicalized labor-union federations and into the backbone of support for Hugo Chavez's project, which, to varying degrees supported and even spearheaded many of these initiatives, encouraging the masses to participate directly in politics.

Chavez's electoral victory meant — and still means — that the oligarchy lost control of the government and much of the state apparatus, a rare event in the life of a nation under capitalism. This contradiction is central to the confusion of the U.S. left: the ruling class lost control of the state, but the oligarchy retained control of key sectors of the economy, including the media.

But who has control of the state if not the oligarchy? It's too simplistic to say the "working class" has power, because Maduro has not acted as a consistent leader of the working class, seeming more interested in trying to mediate between classes by making concessions to the oligarchy. Maduro's overly-bureaucratic government also limits the amount of direct democracy the working class needs before the term "worker state" can be applied.

But Maduro's power base remains the same as it was under Chavez: the working and poor people, and to that extent Maduro can be compared to a trade union president who ignores his members in order to seek a deal with the boss.

A trade union, no matter how bureaucratic, is still rooted in the workplace, its power dependent on dues money and collective action of working people. And even a weak union is better than no union, since removing the protection of the union opens the door to sweeping attacks from the boss that inevitably lower wages, destroy benefits and result in layoffs of the most "outspoken" workers. This is why union members defend their union from corporate attack, even if the leader of the union is in bed with the boss.

History is replete with governments brought forth by revolutionary movements but which failed to take the actions necessary to complete the revolution, resulting in a successful counter-revolution. These revolutionary governments often succeed in breaking the chains of neo-colonialism and allowed for an epoch of social reforms and working class initiative, depending on how long they lasted. Their downfall always results in a counter-revolutionary wave of violence, and sometimes a sea of blood.

This has happened dozens of times across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where the class divisions are sharper, where imperialism plays a larger role, and where the class dynamics are more variegated: the poor are poorer, there is a larger informal labor force, a larger section of small shopkeepers, larger rural population, etc.

Winning significant reforms under capitalism is incredibly difficult, even in rich countries; it is twice as difficult in former colonial countries, due to the death grip the oligarchy has on the economy plus the collaboration of imperialism, which intervenes in financial markets — or with bullets — to prevent the smallest reforms.

The example of Allende's Chile could be compared to Maduro's situation in Venezuela. Allende was far from perfect, but can anybody claim that Pinochet's coup wasn't a catastrophe for the Chilean working class? In Venezuela the counter-revolution would likely be more devastating, as the oligarchy would have to push back against decades of progress versus Allende's short-lived government. If it came to power the street violence of the oligarchy would be given the resources of the state, aimed squarely at the working class and poor.

Maduro is no Chavez, it's true, but he has kept most of Chavez's victories intact, maintaining social programs in a time of crashing oil prices while the oligarchy demands "pro-market reforms." He's essentially kept the barking dogs of the oligarchy at bay, who, if unleashed, would ravage the working class.

The oligarchy has not accepted the balance of power that Chavez-Maduro have tilted in favor of the working class. A new social contract has not been cemented; it is being actively fought for in the streets. Maduro has made some concessions to the oligarchy it's true, but they have not been fundamental concessions, while he's left the fundamental victories of the revolution intact.

The social contract we call Social Democracy in Europe wasn't finalized until a wave of revolution struck after WWII. Although Maduro would likely be happy with such a social democratic agreement in Venezuela, such agreements have proven impossible in developing countries, especially at a time while global capitalism is attacking the social democratic reforms in the advanced countries.

The Venezuelan ruling class has no intention of accepting the reforms of Chavez, and why would they so long as U.S. imperialism invests heavily in regime change? A ruling class does not accept power-sharing until they face the prospect of losing everything. And nor should Venezuela's working class accept a "social contract" under current conditions: they have unmet demands that require revolutionary action against the oligarchy. These contradictory pressures are at the heart of Venezuela's still-unresolved class war, which inevitably leads either to revolutionary action from the left or a successful counter-revolution from the right.

Thus, for a U.S. leftist to declare that either side is equally bad is either bad politics or class treachery. Many leftists went bonkers over Syriza in Greece, and they were right to be hopeful. But after radical rhetoric Syriza succumbed to the demands of the IMF that included devastating neoliberal reforms of austerity cuts, privatizations and deregulation. Maduro has steadfastly refused such a path out of Venezuela's economic crisis.

This is why Maduro is despised by the rich while the poor generally continue to support the government, although passively but occasionally in giant bursts, such as the hundreds

thousands strong May Day mobilization in support of the government's fight against the violent coup attempts, which was all but ignored by most western media outlets, since it spoiled the regime-change narrative of "everybody hates Maduro."

The essential difference between Maduro and Chavez will make or break the revolution: while Chavez took action to constantly shift the balance of power in favor of the poor, Maduro simply attempts to maintain the balance of forces handed down to him by Chavez, hoping for some kind of "agreement" from an opposition that has consistently refused all compromise. His ridiculous naivety is a powerful motivating factor for the opposition, who see a stalled revolution in the way a lion views an injured zebra.

Venezuelan expert Jorge Martin explains in an excellent article, how the oligarchy would respond if it succeeded in removing Maduro.

- 1) they would massively cut public spending
- 2) implement mass layoffs of the public sector
- 3) destroy the key social programs of the revolution (health care, education, pension, housing, etc.)
- 4) there would be a privatization frenzy of public resources, though especially the crown jewel PDVSA, the oil company
- 5) massive deregulation, including turning back rights for labor and ethnic-minority groups
- 6) they would attack the organizations of the working class that came into existence or grew under the protection of the Chavez-Maduro governments

This is "Telling the Truth" about Venezuela. The U.S. left should know better, since the ruling class exposed what it would do during the Caracazo Uprising, and later when they briefly came to power in their 2002 coup: they aim to reverse everything, using any means necessary. The documentary "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" is still required watching about the 2002 coup.

Maduro may have finally learned his lesson: Venezuela's crisis has forced him to double down on promoting the interests of the poor. When oil prices collapsed it was inevitable the government would enter a deep crisis, it had only two choices: deep neoliberal reforms or the deepening of the revolution. This will be the litmus test for Maduro, since the middle ground he sought disappeared.

Rather than begging for money from the International Monetary Fund —which would have demanded such Syriza-like reforms — Maduro instead encouraged workers to takeover idle factories while a General Motors factory was nationalized. A new neighborhood-based organization, CLAP, was created that distributes basic foodstuffs at subsidized prices that benefits millions of people.

On May Day this year, in front of hundreds of thousands of supporters, Maduro announced a Constituent Assembly, an attempt to re-engage the masses in the hopes of pushing forward the revolution by creating a new, more progressive constitution.

It's true that Maduro is using the Constituent Assembly to overcome the obstruction of the

oligarchy-dominated National Assembly — whose stated intention is to topple the government — but the U.S. left seems indifferent that Maduro is using the mobilization of the working class (the Constituent Assembly) to overcome the barriers of ruling class.

This distinction is critical: if the Constituent Assembly succeeds in pushing forward the revolution by directly engaging the masses, it will come at the expense of the oligarchy. The Constituent Assembly is being organized to promote more direct democracy, but sections of the U.S. left have been taken in by the U.S. media's allegations of "authoritarianism."



Nicolas Maduro (L) and Hugo Chavez (R)
(Source: [Megazip](#))

If working and poor people actively engage in the process of creating a new, more progressive constitution and this constitution is approved via referendum by a large majority, it will constitute an essential step forward for the revolution. If the masses are unengaged or the referendum fails, it may signify the death knell of Chavismo and the return of the oligarchy.

And while Maduro is right to use the state as a repressive agent against the oligarchy, an over reliance on the state repression only leads to more contradictions, rather than relying on the self-activity of the workers and poor. Revolutions cannot be won by administrative tinkering, but rather by revolutionary measures consciously implemented by the vast majority. At bottom it's the actions of ordinary working people that make or break a revolution; if the masses are lulled to sleep the revolution is lost. They must be unleashed not ignored.

It's clear that Maduro's politics have not been capable of leading the revolution to success, and therefore his government requires deep criticism combined with organized protest. But there are two kinds of protest: legitimate protest that arises from the needs of working and poor people, and the counter-revolutionary protest based in the neighborhoods of the rich that aim to restore the power of the oligarchy.

Confusing these two kinds of protests are dangerous, but the U.S. left has done precisely this. Maduro is accused of being authoritarian for using police to stop the far-right's violent "student protests" that seek to restore the oligarchy. Of the many reasons to criticize Maduro this isn't one of them.

If a rightwing coup succeeds in Venezuela tomorrow, the U.S. left will weep by the carnage that ensues, while not recognizing that their inaction contributed to the bloodshed. By living in the heart of imperialism the U.S. left has a duty to go beyond critiques from afar to direct action at home.

Protesting the Vietnam war helped save the lives of Vietnamese, while the organizing in the 1980's against the "dirty wars" in Central America limited the destruction levied by the U.S.-backed governments. In both cases the left fell short of what was needed, but at least they understood what was at stake and took action. Now consider the U.S. left of 2017, who can't lift a finger to re-start the antiwar movement and who supported Bernie Sanders regardless of his longstanding [affection for imperialism](#).

The “pink tide” that blasted imperialism out of much of Latin America is being reversed, but Venezuela has always been the motor-force of the leftward shift, and the bloodshed required to reverse the revolution will be remembered forever, if it’s allowed to happen. Their lives matter too.

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