

Radical Americas

Book review: George Ciccariello-Maher, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela*

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Book Review

George Ciccariello-Maher, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela*

(Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016), 138pp, £8.99 / \$14.95.

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‘Nothing says “enough” like a bus on fire’ (p.1). So begins George Ciccariello-Maher’s *Building the Commune*, a concise and compelling history of the experiments in radical grassroots democracy which have been taking place in Venezuela in recent years. The book is part of Verso’s Jacobin series, a fine young imprint which has produced several vital interventions including Melissa Gira Grant’s *Playing the Whore* (2014) and Peter Frase’s *Four Futures* (2016). Like others in this series, *Building the Commune* is an urgent and compelling addition to contemporary conversations and praxis.

Building the Commune does a great deal to illuminate two of the less-understood aspects of contemporary Venezuela: first, the often organic nature of grassroots formations which worked in parallel to chavista state socialism, injecting parts of the polity with direct or consensual democracy; and second, the technical definitions and characteristics of the parastatal entities which emerged under Hugo Chávez’s rule. We hear a lot about the former, and there have been some fine local studies, but Ciccariello-Maher paints a convincing picture of a patchwork of complementary (and sometimes contradictory) units which emerged in a defiantly bottom-up fashion. Of course part of the difficulty in attempting such a synthesis lies in the resistance of some entities to concrete definition, and here the definitional

and relational aspects of the book will be particularly valuable to non-specialists.

The first chapter defines the titular commune itself, in both legal and popular-imaginary terms. Communal councils were established in 2006, followed by the creation of communes (self-governing units which aggregated smaller existing units) in law in 2010. However, the move from legal creation into reality was rather slow. This was a source of frustration to Chávez during his last few months as president; he berated senior ministers over the failure to create a ‘communal culture’ in spite of the extensive provision of housing to those most in need (p.16). The scale of the project is huge: there are more than forty-five thousand communal councils. Many (though not all) have banded together into larger communes, of which there are already more than fifteen hundred. The communal councils are brought together with ‘social property enterprises’, which are effectively socialized units of production.

The Venezuelan polity is catastrophically divided, and the opposition are given a fair amount of space by Ciccariello-Maher. In fact some of the most fascinating parts of the book are to be found in these passages: the attempts of middle-class Venezuelans to cloak themselves in the rhetoric of massified street protest; the commonalities between *gocho* activism and the Tea Party or Trump base; and the concrete links between elements in the Venezuelan opposition, Cuban exiles and the U.S. right. One of the most striking cases is that of Ángel Vivas, a retired general and member of the international ‘Operation Freedom’ network; he called for wires to be hung across streets as a direct assault on ‘the criminal motorcycle hordes’, with deadly consequences (p.54). Chapter Three – ‘Counterrevolution’ – makes a convincing case that even the most ‘popular’ elements of the opposition remain ‘prisoners of the segregated urban geography they themselves produced’ (p.58).

That said, in the period since Chávez’s death there has clearly been a turn to more authoritarian political practice in central government, and while the determination of the *comuneros* to protect their radical advances seems strong, it is hard to know how resilient the communes will manage to be in any widespread future state–opposition conflict. A strong motivating factor in the linking-up of local communes into wider collaborative structures has been the simultaneous construction of both a defensible space and a lived alternative – the idea that ‘it is not enough to be a tiny island of socialism in a vast capitalist sea’ (p.18). It is worth remembering that even if one takes the Venezuelan government’s professed socialism at face value – and those willing to do so

represent an ever-shrinking constituency – the country itself faces the same problem.

While the opposition are given a good deal of space in the book, Hugo Chávez is not; in fact his near-absence is striking, and marks a welcome corrective to the bulk of the Anglophone literature on Venezuela, which revels in clumsy, broad stereotypes – caudillismo, dictatorship, populism. It isn't that Chávez is irrelevant – on the contrary, his final major speech is framed as a crucial intervention in defining his legacy as that of the communes – but this is a history from below. Where the state intervenes it is a difficult, contested process; the CVAL (Corporación Venezolana de Alimentos) has at times been a corrupt, capricious and exploitative organization, and meaningful land reform has depended on the capacity of those seeking it to push the process along, whether within or outside the law. Successive Venezuelan governments have struggled to hold militant groups in check, and the state monopoly of violence remains contested. Chapter Four – 'Militias and Revolutionary Collectives' – shows that these conflicts have sharpened since the narrow election victory of Nicolás Maduro in 2013.

The interpretation of Venezuela's recent political conjuncture – as characterized by an erratic, deep, imperfect democratic experiment – has wider significance. In broad regional interpretations, Venezuela's long phase of peaceful rule by main parties COPEI and AD under the Punto Fijo pact does not sit easily in a framework of contemporary dictatorships. Nor does chavismo dovetail neatly with any supposed 'wave of democratization' – and to be fair, its supporters do not claim it is typical of such a transition. However, Ciccariello-Maher's work certainly allows an interpretative framework whereby Venezuela moves from an elitist hybrid polity to a more egalitarian one under which grassroots democratic experiments have flourished in spite of state authoritarian practice and corruption.

Note

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