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Essay

Lessons from Venezuela on Countering Oppression

Mariana Olaizola Rosenblat[†]

Venezuela today is a dark microcosm of the promise of social change gone tragically awry. As a Venezuelan-American, witnessing the devastation of my country over the past two decades has shaped my views on movements that promise sweeping social transformation. It is primarily through the lens of this experience that I offer some reflections.

Venezuela in the 1990s had a broken political system that excluded the vast majority of Venezuelan citizens from meaningful participation in political life and the benefits of national wealth creation. When Hugo Chávez re-entered the political scene in the late 1990s, after being released from prison for attempting a coup d'état in 1992, he tapped into a reservoir of resentment that had simmered over decades of exclusion and inequality.

In the lead-up to his campaign, Chavez promulgated a manifesto entitled *Bolivarian Alternative Agenda: A Patriotic Proposal for Escaping the Labyrinth*, according to which Venezuela would transition toward a “Concrete Utopia” leaving behind the “old nefarious model based on imposition, domination, exploitation and extermination.” This new episode in Venezuelan history, led by “the Bolivarians, revolutionaries, patriots and nationalists,” would constitute a complete “restructuring of the State, of the entire political system . . . based on the principles of legitimacy and sovereignty.”

Fast forward two decades and we indeed find a drastically changed Venezuela. But instead of a Venezuela that has achieved social, economic, cultural, and political “realignment” ensuring equitable distribution of living standards, as forecasted in the *Bolivarian Agenda*, we find a country where, according to the United Nations, 94 percent of the 28.8 million people live in poverty; 300,000 people are at risk of imminent death because of the lack of essential medicine and the reappearance of preventable diseases; 1.2 million children are not in school; and 3.7 million people suffer from chronic

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malnutrition in the face of severe food scarcity and an inflation rate of more than 2 million percent.¹ Venezuela today is nothing short of a failed State.

Meanwhile, wealth inequality has only become more pronounced, with a new ruling class unabashedly siphoning off billions of dollars from state coffers and reaping epic profits from a revitalized narcotics trade. The impunity and unbounded opulence enjoyed by this new elite makes any profiteering practiced by the old-generation politicians—and so fiercely condemned by Chavez—look benign by comparison. That those in power continue to proclaim their allegiance to the Bolivarian project, particularly its aim to achieve human equality and wellbeing, is farcical and darkly ironic at best.

I believe Venezuela's demise raises important questions relevant to anti-oppression movements. While listening to participants at the roundtable that gave birth to this essay, I could not help but filter many of the comments and experiences through the lens of this personal experience. Certainly, I do not believe anti-oppression movements are doomed to produce the kinds of catastrophic results that have materialized in Venezuela, and I appreciate that there is a myriad of factors that affect the success or failure of a movement. With that proviso, I offer some reflections on three themes that emerged from the roundtable discussion: "identifying the oppressor as enemy," "the place of violence and hatred," and "visions or guiding principles."

Identifying The Oppressor As Enemy

A movement that seeks to counter oppression has to define the oppressor in some way. Some movements describe the oppressor as a "system of oppression" which may manifest itself in daily injustices that its members suffer or can relate to. Other anti-oppression activists take a personalized approach, fixating on particular individuals' actions and blameworthiness. When the oppressor is described as a "system," the target of action may not be very clear. On the other hand, movements that focus on specific individuals may miss the whole picture or even attack the wrong culprits.

The question of how to define the oppressor is of essential importance. One of the roundtable participants aptly pointed out that it is critical to distinguish between those who form part of the "dominant" group and those who, by themselves participating in oppressing others, are part of the "oppressor" group. Someone may possess the ascriptive characteristics of the oppressor group yet renounce all activities that support or sustain that oppression. At the same time, the distinction may not be clear-cut. What does it mean to support or sustain oppression? For those who take a systemic view of oppression, the mere fact of reaping the benefits of being in a dominant

1. Mark Lowcock, *Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Venezuela*, New York, UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS (Apr. 10 2019), <<https://reliefweb.int/report/venezuela-bolivarian-republic/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency>> (last accessed Apr. 14, 2019).

group without engaging in active resistance may make a person complicit in, and therefore a part of, the oppressive structure. Collaboration in oppression is a matter of degree, which could make for blurry lines of moral culpability. The narrative that Chavez promulgated in Venezuela was that being rich was “inhumane” and he personally “condemned all who were rich.” Within this framework, a wealthy Venezuelan, or even a financially comfortable one, was guilty of injustice by default.

Determining the bounds of oppressive conduct also has implications for a movement’s theory of change. Movements exist because they seek to create change, and to achieve their goals they must direct their actions toward those who can bring about that change. In contexts of oppression, positive change materializes when those who wielded power over others no longer wield that power. A movement’s success therefore depends on its ability to generate action that results in oppressors giving up their power over others.

However, not all oppressors wield power in the same way or to the same degree. In order to aim their activism at the appropriate targets, movements must develop a nuanced understanding of the categories, forms, and degrees of subjugation that constitute and maintain the broader structure of oppression. It therefore becomes imperative to break down the components of the structure, and to understand the forces that sustain it in terms of concrete, human action. As Gerald Torres has stated, “if institutions are abstracted from the people both who created and who run them, responsibility for the consequences of institutional action seems to exist nowhere.”² Conversely, a pick-and-choose approach that fixates on the most visible oppressors—either because they are high-level personalities or because they are individuals in direct contact with the oppressed—is likely to leave out swathes of participants in the oppression whose quiet complicity with existing power dynamics has to be challenged as well.

If we accept that involvement in the subjugation or exploitation of others is a question of degree rather than a black-or-white determination, to what extent should anti-oppression movements conceive of their oppressors as a single “enemy”? Relatedly, what role should hate and violence play in movements that aim to dismantle power?

Violence and Hate

Some forms of oppression are so insidious, debilitating, or deep-rooted that resort to force may be the only avenue to liberation. I am a pacifist by nature. However, witnessing my family suffer the unremitting cruelty of the Maduro regime in Venezuela has brought home the fact that some oppressors simply do not respond to peaceful appeals. There is no general prescription that can guide anti-oppression movements in determining when violence is necessary and warranted. My intuition tells me that violence should be used as a last resort, in particular when the oppressors themselves have engaged in grave forms of violence against the oppressed.

2. Gerald Torres, *Making Law in Betsan Martin*, Linda Te Aho and Maria Humphries-Kil, *RESPONSABILITY: LAW AND GOVERNANCE FOR LIVING WELL WITH THE EARTH* 240 (2018).

But what counts as violence? Persistent subjugation or discrimination that falls short of physical force may constitute psychological violence of a kind that could result in equal or greater injury than bodily harm. The violent nature and magnitude of subjugation is difficult to measure. Some forms of psychological denigration are particularly debilitating and noxious *precisely* because they do not manifest themselves in visible scars.

Moreover, a violence that is invisible can be internalized in potent ways, leading to the accumulation of rage and hatred among the oppressed themselves. In some cases, oppressed people turn to radicalism, simplistic binaries (“good and evil”), and sheer dehumanization of the other as a way to mobilize support and energize their kin. However useful or tempting this approach might be, it is important to recognize that it perpetuates the pattern of harm. The cultivation of hatred might also corrupt a movement from the inside out, obliterating all potential for compassion and “radical forgiveness.”

The potential for violence to perpetuate itself in a never-ending cycle of harm is what most worries me about this type of response to oppression. While acknowledging that the pain of oppression may naturally lead to indignation and antagonism, curbing inclinations toward hostility from the part of the oppressed may be the only way to open a space for the recognition of common humanity and dignity, and the possibility for redemption. Without this space, hatred is likely to lead to the reconfiguration of domination in perpetuity.

But creating this space is much easier said than done. If rational argument and civic appeals do not work, or do not prove suitable avenues to liberation, are there ways for the oppressed to vindicate their rights without violating the dignity of the other and further choking the potential for recognizing a common humanity?

Visions and Principles

Freedom, equality, justice. These are principles virtually every oppressed group strives for. Yet principles can do little more than provide the contours of an affirmative vision. A movement that promises “equality” or “justice” as the end goal is as unrealistic as it is unmoored. Recent experiments with communist utopias teach us that power is more readily replaced or inverted than redistributed, and that lofty manifestos easily fall prey to distortion. Chavez’s “Bolivarian” agenda is but one recent example.

An alternative to thinking of principles as end goals is seeing them as (incomplete) metrics for assessing a society’s respect for human dignity at any point in time. Through measurements such as the Gini coefficient, it is possible to gauge the level of material equality in a community. But material equality does not capture human wellbeing, and equal wellbeing is certainly not synonymous with respect for human dignity. Freedom and justice are even more difficult to assess quantitatively, although human rights provide tools to ascertain flagrant violations of those principles, too. As one

roundtable participant suggested, human rights can be conceived as road signs on the way to a less oppressive society.

Is there a concrete goal that anti-oppression movements can strive toward? If domination is the exertion of coercive power by some over others, then challenging domination should entail proposing an alternative system of human relationships governed by institutions where power flows horizontally rather than vertically—where, in the words of one movement organizer, people exercise power *with* others rather than *over* others. The potential for realizing this transformation likely varies from context to context, as not all forms of oppression are equally severe, entrenched, or longstanding. Identifying who the power holders are, confronting them with a clear demand that they relinquish power over others, and assessing their response may guide the determination of effective and appropriate strategies for activism. Crucially, having a clear theory of how power ought to be distributed and exerted could help prevent the reconfiguration of oppressive power in a new chapter of domination.

In the 1990s, when the Chavista narrative began to take hold, Venezuelan society came to understand itself in terms of poor *against* rich. Class inequalities had lingered for decades, and Chavez successfully tapped into longstanding resentment to disseminate an ideology that equated wealth with moral deprivation. This message resonated with a majority of Venezuelans. Two decades later, inequality is more pronounced and power is more ruthlessly wielded than ever before in the country's history. In another distortion of socialism, the oppressed became the oppressors and the majority of the Venezuelan people suffer the consequences once more.

In my hours of desolation, as I witness the destruction of my country and the suffering of my people, I think of how it could have been otherwise. How could another movement with a different message, method, and vision have carried Venezuela toward an alternate future? Although the past cannot be changed, the time may be ripe for a new generation to decide.

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