Beyond The Nation State: A Critical Look At Venezuela's Current Crisis

written by Brooke Anderson, Mateo Nube | February 24, 2019

Venezuela has made headlines in the last few weeks, as Venezuelan opposition leader and National Assembly head Juan Guaidó has declared himself interim President, throwing the country into turmoil. Current President, Nicolás Maduro has called the effort a coup. Meanwhile, thousands of people have taken to the streets on both sides, with a death toll of 26 and rising. The Trump administration, many Western European countries, and the right-leaning bloc of Latin American governments have recognized Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela. Meanwhile Russia, China and others are backing Maduro. A third bloc, most notably Mexico and Uruguay, are calling for a peaceful transition through new elections.

I recently sat down with my co-worker Mateo Nube, collective member of the Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project, for more political and economic context to the current crisis. In the interview, Nube unpacks the history and promise of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and beyond; the roots and early warning signs of the authoritarianism we're now seeing play out in Venezuela; the lost opportunity for Venezuela to leverage its oil money wealth toward a just transition away from extractivism and toward a regenerative economy; and the dangers of U.S. interventionism in the conflict.

Brooke Anderson: Your family came up under dictatorships in both Venezuela and Bolivia, so this is personal for you. Give us some context to how you come to the question of Venezuela.

Mateo Nube: My family has roots in Venezuela. We originally fled the Holocaust in the 30's and 40's and settled in Caracas [Venezuela] from Berlin. My mom grew up under Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the military dictatorship that really marked and traumatized Venezuelans. In turn, I was born in Bolivia in 1971 and spent the first 10 years of my life under military dictatorship there. So I'm politically steeped in resisting military authoritarianism and building social movements to not only overthrow the military but to redistribute wealth and power. So the Venezuelan context really marked my family and informed my political orientation.

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Brooke Anderson: What's actually happening on the ground in Venezuela right now?

Mateo Nube: The situation in Venezuela right now is dire and painful to witness. It is a mixture of a political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. The man who is controlling the state of Venezuela is Nicolás Maduro. He is the successor of Hugo Chávez, who led the Bolivarian Revolution for the last

two decades, prior to his death in 2013. Maduro is currently facing a challenge from Juan Guaidó, the current head of the National Assembly. Guaidó is arguing that Maduro is not a legitimate President and that the constitution dictates that he, Guaidó, is the next in line. This contestation coming from the opposition is largely the right wing.

Neither of these leaders has tremendous legitimacy. There are two men (representing two political factions) who are calling themselves President of Venezuela. They are both claiming power in a way that disrespects the constitutional process of Venezuela. We can definitely call Guaidó's move an attempted coup and unconstitutional. If we do, we also have to recognize that Maduro won the 2018 elections after banning the main opposition leader, Henrique Capriles, and multiple opposition parties from running and dissolved the opposition-controlled National Assembly in March 2017 through a stacked Supreme Court. If a right-wing political party had made these moves, we would have loudly denounced them.

Further, in the last 3 years the bottom has completely fallen out of the Venezuelan economy. Venezuelans are experiencing food and medicine shortages, serious austerity, hospitals with 12-hour energy blackouts, and hyperinflation. Let's take this in: 3 million Venezuelans have left the country in recent years. That is 10% of the population! This makes no sense in a country with ***the largest*** oil reserves on the planet.

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Given this backdrop, recent credible polls consistently suggest that a majority of Venezuelans want Maduro out. That does not mean that they want Guaidó in. It certainly does *not* mean they want a U.S. intervention. We need to be incredibly clear around all of those facts. A toxic cocktail of well-documented mismanagement and tremendous corruption at the hands of the Venezuelan state is a primary driver of this humanitarian crisis. Certainly, the U.S. sanctions that have been imposed in the last few years have been cruel and inhumane and need to be resisted. But it is a mistake to call these sanctions the primary driver of this crisis because they are not.

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Brooke Anderson: For those of us who are less familiar with the recent history of Venezuela, tell us more about how we got here.

Mateo Nube: First, there is the *political* context that gave rise to *Chavismo* [the political ideology of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez] and the *political leadership route*that Chávez took which has deep implications for where we are now. Second, there is the relationship to oil and extractivism, and what I would call the *golden window of economic opportunity*, that was largely squandered and lost in the first decade of Chávez' rule.

Brooke: Let's start with the political context.

Mateo: The U.S. Left often ignores an instrumental part of this story: Hugo Chávez was a military man. Without a doubt, the first years of his presidency brought forth a tremendous amount of exciting state-supported experiments, many which innovated democratic forms of governance and worker control in Venezuela. Yet the fact remains that – in the early 1990's – Chávez first tried to come to power via a military coup. This is particularly salient in a Latin American context where most of us were still healing from the 20+ years of authoritarian military rule in the 1960's-1980's. We cannot lose sight of this fact: He used the military barracks to try to take power. Sure, he had a leftist political orientation, but *Chavismo* is born out of a belief that we can trust a wing of the

military to be shepherds of a revolutionary process. In my view, the roots of the authoritarian inclinations that came out of this process and metastasized over the years are very related to that fact. The armed forces was given a central role in the shaping of governance and economy of the country.

What arose, under Chávez, were two dynamics: First, a military and bureaucratic caste took hold of the most powerful economic institutions of Venezuela, most notably PDVSA, the state-owned oil entity. This fact is crucial and had long-term consequence. Second, the Bolivarian process became inextricably linked to a military *caudillo* – the charismatic military leader through whom most decisions needed to be made.

Not surprisingly, leaning heavily on an entity (the armed forces) that is authoritarian and vertical by design tends to generate authoritarian and vertical outcomes.

Military institutions – their worldview, their weaponry, their practices – are the anchor institutions of patriarchy. They serve and uphold the violent order that keeps patriarchy in place. Quite frankly, it depresses me that much of the Left has chosen to ignore this truth in relation to Venezuela. A strong patriarch and his army was going to lead us down the revolutionary path..and we were *okay* with that?

Brooke Anderson: You mentioned the dependency of Venezuela during the Bolivarian revolution on oil and resource extraction. What was this *golden window of economic opportunity* that you see as having been squandered*?*

Mateo Nube: When Chávez came to power, the opportunity was set for incredibly exciting choices. He was incredibly popular. There was political will: a majority of the people in Venezuela said, "Yes, let's transform our society for the better." There were U.S. machinations and right wing pushback, but surviving the failed 2002 right wing coup provided a new form of legitimacy for the Bolivarian process and for Chávez that led folks to say, "We can do so much here."

This is where the unique nature of this historic opportunity matters: When revolutions are set in motion and revolutionary governments arise, you almost never have a situation where the new leaders are sitting on a huge piggy bank. Usually, devastating war precedes revolutions and then capitalists flee with the remaining wealth and cash. This happened in Nicaragua in 1979 and in Vietnam and Cuba before that, to name a few examples. Venezuela in the early 2000's was an oil rich country with very high oil prices in international markets. The state was sitting on tremendous wealth. The country was not torn to shambles due to war. There was a lot of capital to be creative with. At that moment in time, the Venezuelan state could have made some very illuminating and exciting choices for other nation-states to learn from.

They could have said, "We know that a monoculture economy – a monocrop mentality – is unhealthy. We are a country who is 90% dependent on oil revenues. That is a huge long-term liability. We have a 10-20 year window to change that. We need to figure out how to diversify quickly. We need to build place-based economies within Venezuela, where we fertilize true place-based food sovereignty, foster place-based energy democracy, and model for the rest of the world *governance in place* that is bioregional in nature. In an age of accelerating climate change, that is the *only* path forward: an eco-literate, regenerative form of economic governance that can lead us away from dependence on oil. We will use our oil largesse very *wisely* and *strategically* to bring about this Just Transition, where we rebuild around truly regenerative relationships to our watersheds and energy sheds. We're going to play with this dynamic tension and we know there are serious contradictions but we need to wean ourselves away from this dependency and show the rest of the world what it looks like to return to right relationship with place."

That was the historical opportunity that Venezuela had, which was unique. I really want to cry every time I think about it because, by and large, Chavismo chose to ignore that opportunity. Any thoughtful political economist at that time, of which I believe Chávez was, understood that oil prices wouldn't stay high forever, understood that a state dependent on a single resource is a tremendous liability, understood that being tethered to a US market for their oil was a liability. That they chose to stay on a status quo course in all of these arenas is a real tragedy. That is not to say that creative things were not done with that largess. Creative solidarity with Cuba, Bolivia, international social movements, and exporting some of the surplus to support social experiments in other countries in Latin America was and continues to be really laudable. But there was no effort made to diversify, to root in place. In 2019, oil revenues continue accounting for more than 90% of the Venezuelan economy. That is a tremendous failure in revolutionary practice and imagination.

This lack of early imagination, married to the corruption and mismanagement that was beginning to become entrenched in the hands of a military bureaucratic caste who was running PDVSA, sets the internal stage for the current crisis. We wouldn't have a full-blown humanitarian crisis in Venezuela now if a truly transformative, visionary economic model had been moved forth.

Brooke Anderson: I hear you naming the failure of Chávez and Maduro to leverage resources to move Venezuela away from extractivism and toward right relationship with water, land, and each other. In your opinion, is it simply that Venezuela needed a head of state with more commitment to ecological justice? Or is there something about governing at the level of the nation-state, not the bioregion, that lends itself to expediency with our precious resources?

Mateo Nube: We need a truly transformative shift towards local, living, linked economies that are place-based, and regenerative in nature. To do that, we need to think about what scale of governance makes sense – where we can still be in right relationship with our watersheds and energy sheds, to name two examples. The rapidly unfolding ecological and climate crisis demands that of humanity, and Venezuela was perfectly positioned to model this transition for other nation states to follow.

To be specific in one of these arenas – in every watershed on this planet where there is human settlement – we need to be very meticulous and precise in our understanding of the finite amount of water we have to dance with. Anything beyond that, we're going to draw the well dry. And if we pollute it, we draw the well dry in a more toxic form. That is an imperative. The equation is elegant and simple: No water, no life.

Bioregional governance – governance at the scale that allows us to be in sync with the natural boundaries of the living world – is the sweet and necessary scale at which governance allows us to build regenerative economies, regenerative food systems, regenerative zero-waste systems and so on. Some nation states are small enough where that level of federal governance possibly correlates with bioregional governance – for instance, Puerto Rico or Cuba or Belize – but that is one of the important conundrums we need to fully step into. Everywhere. Now.

Like most nation states, Venezuela's borders were drawn in an arbitrary manner. They do not align with the logic of the living world. So what I'm naming is that the opportunity that existed 15 years ago was for the Venezuelan state to take an eco-literate approach and think like "We're actually 7 bioregions within one. How do we reorganize such that regenerative and sovereign forms of food democracy, energy democracy, land tenure, transit systems, waste disposal, take hold?"

Venezuela was a big rhetorical backer of the international conference on the Rights of Mother Earth held in Cochabamba, Bolivia nine years ago. It placed itself at the front of the rhetorical pack calling for equity in international climate negotiations at the time, calling for the payment of a historic

ecological debt by the Global North. For the Venezuelan state to not walk itself back from that oil-dependent precipice, when it had the material resources to do so, is a failure.

As the Left, we have a moral and ethical responsibility to step into collectively owning that failure in Venezuela. Of course, we know that the U.S. government and international capital is going to resist hard and try to derail our efforts. That failure in Venezuela, however, is not solely due to U.S. interference. That particular shortcoming includes a lack of vision and willingness to step into this ecological moment, to recognize what time it is on "the clock of the world," as Grace Lee Boggs asks us to do. Venezuela represents a collective failure of the Left that we need to own, a lack of clarity and precision around how we really reorganize economy regeneratively and democratically. Yes, in the early years of the Venezuelan Bolivarian process, the State instituted exciting experiments that democratized some forms of economic production institutions, but by and large failed at thinking ecologically, failed at understanding the living world, failed at understanding what it means to reorganize governance and economy regeneratively, all of which had devastating long-term impacts on the Venezuelan people and threatens the possibility of real democracy. When you overlay that failure with the choice to turn over the oil state company to this bureaucratic and military caste that siphoned away so much of the wealth through corruption and ran the entity into the ground, coupled with a failed state policy of currency controls that has siphoned even more public money into the private banking sector, it's a recipe for what Gabriel Garcia Marquez calls a *Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada* [The Story of a Death Foretold]. I hate to say it, but this was predictable.

Brooke Anderson: You named that leftists ignored the early warnings. Why do you think that is? Is it about lack of rigor in our analysis? Or that there are so few examples to pin our hopes on? What leads us to miss the signposts?

Mateo Nube: That is a crucial question and one we need to invite ourselves and others to return to on a daily basis. I have tremendous empathy for this. We live under such desperate times that of course we want the wave of left governments in Latin America to succeed. It is imperative to build new forms of radical governance. We want alternatives because we need them. So when a mistake is made here or there, we're like "I'm not going to pay too much attention to this mistake because this larger political project is exciting and necessary." That impulse makes sense to me. It's OK to have some latitude. All grand experiments include mistakes. They actually need mistakes as these are often our best teachers, if we course correct appropriately. It's when, structurally, the signposts get louder and louder, when bad behavior becomes routine and patterned – that's when we need to take pause and make a frank assessment and be honest with ourselves. As in, "Yes, I want the Bolivarian Revolution to succeed. But, no, I can't willingly support a government that continually engages in graft and authoritarian tendencies. I have a principled responsibility to call that out."

I am continually gifted by the teachings of – and I am very young at this – what queer political thought offers us around how binary thinking injures us all. The U.S. Left is continually challenged not to fall into binary thinking and that's what has happened with Venezuela. Because U.S. empire has opposed the Bolivarian process from its inception, we feel the need to defend it unconditionally. That is a treacherous binary-based path.

Let's put it this way: if we are going to call out electoral fraud and the stacking of courts and repression in a place like Turkey, in a place like Poland, in the southern state of Georgia, U.S.A. – which is our political duty to do so, then we cannot ignore the parallels that have also been playing out in Venezuela.

Brooke Anderson: Can you give us an example where the U.S. Left held that complexity well?

Mateo Nube: Sure. My dear friend Gopal Dayaneni points at U.S. leftists in the 1940's who opposed

both the internment of the Japanese people on U.S. soil *and* the fascist and authoritarian nature of the Axis powers and the Japanese emperor. We can hold complexity and that's what Venezuela demands of us. We can say that Guaidó is orchestrating a coup, an illegitimate move that goes against the Venezuelan Constitution. And we can also call Maduro's legitimacy into question. *Both/and* thinking instead of *either/or* thinking. More than thirty people were killed on the streets of Venezuela, many by the state apparatus, during protests last month. That is not acceptable.

Brooke Anderson: The U.S. has a long history of interventionism in Latin America. Now the Trump Administration is positioning itself for a possible military intervention. What should the demands of the U.S. Left be of our own government in this moment?

Mateo Nube: We need to call for a non-interventionist, non-military path forward. The U.S. Special Envoy to Venezuela, Elliot Abrams, is a horrid man who was at the center of U.S. efforts to crush revolutionary movements in Latin America in the 1980s. So the intents and interests of the U.S. government are clear and cruel. We need to challenge both military intervention and sanctions. We need to support the self-determination of the Venezuelan people. We need to actively oppose the U.S. government's destabilization offensive in Venezuela.

Uruguay and Mexico are calling for a peaceful, negotiated transition and have articulated a thoughtful path forth. It calls for free and fair elections, which we know cannot happen in a week. The level of chaos induced by both sides trying to delegitimize the other makes that too hard right now. So, they're saying "Let's take 10 breaths and figure out what the timeline is on which new elections can happen."

We can stand against U.S. interventionism while acknowledging that Venezuelans are deeply polarized and that the Maduro government has mismanaged the state and brought its own legitimacy into question. We often denounce U.S. empire building, but don't criticize the Venezuelan state out of fear it will be used against us. But we are stronger if we stand in our principles and say both. We can hold all of that complexity and we are stronger if we do. That's my invitation to other leftists.

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