

The pro-Maduro left's blind spots: Against the 'nuancing' of Venezuela's disaster

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Steve Ellner's article, "'Neoliberal and authoritarian'? A simplistic analysis of the Maduro government that leaves much unsaid," written in response to Gabriel Hetland's piece "Capitalism and authoritarianism in Maduro's Venezuela" and published at *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, provides an opportunity to continue and deepen an important debate about Venezuela's current political situation and the direction of the Bolivarian government. I want to weigh in on this debate, primarily to respond to several of Ellner's arguments.

In my view, his piece attempts to dampen or minimise criticisms of the increasingly authoritarian and regressive course taken by the Venezuelan political system under Nicolás Maduro. His defence of the Maduro government also reflects a broader problem among some sectors of the left: a tendency to remain tied to decaying regimes, while lacking any ideas and imagination to chart out alternative paths that are both critical and rooted in popular struggles. Such political clarity is urgently needed in a world where far-right movements and authoritarianism are gaining ground.

Ellner's central argument is that criticism of Maduro should be more contextualised and nuanced, and that greater rigour is needed. However, his article simply amounts to a series of so-called "nuances" to Hetland's arguments that, in effect, justify Maduro's repression of workers, destruction of wages and implementation of a highly aggressive neoliberal regime. Paradoxically, Ellner's own arguments lack nuance. He makes glaring omissions on issues that are essential to any analysis seeking to avoid simplistic binaries, especially one grounded in solidarity with popular struggles. In the end, Ellner falls into the very trap he criticises. As for rigour, it is worth noting Ellner often fails to provide any of the data he demands of Hetland. In some cases, his sources are no more than

statements from Venezuelan government officials. For this reason, it remains necessary to carry out the work of critical nuance that Ellner claims to value — but unfortunately does not practice.

Sanctions as a tool to silence criticism and dissent

Ellner raises several key issues. For example, he argues international sanctions should be central to any analysis of the situation in Venezuela. I want to make my position clear from the outset: these sanctions are entirely condemnable, especially coming from a government such as the United States, with its long-standing tradition of interventionism and neo-colonialism. I would also add that this is an almost universally shared position on the Venezuelan left — diverse as it is — which has consistently rejected sanctions. In fact, these measures are broadly unpopular across Venezuelan society. Even some liberal scholars, intellectuals and opposition figures have spoken out against them, though others have not. The problem, however, is that Maduro's government has turned the issue of sanctions into a tool to suppress criticism and debate, and the perfect excuse to justify an ongoing series of economic and political abuses.

If we are going to talk about nuance and rigour in relation to sanctions, then it is only fair to ask whether these measures actually triggered the worst crisis in Venezuela's history, and to what extent they have shaped its course. Ellner refers to the sanctions imposed by the Obama administration in 2015, but those were limited to freezing assets and bank accounts in the US, as well as revoking visas and restricting entry for Venezuelan government officials and key figures. What he does not mention is that by 2017 — when the first sanctions targeting Venezuela's economy were introduced — the country's GDP had already plummeted by 31.9% from 2013, imports had collapsed by 81.76% compared to 2012, inflation was the highest in the world at 438.1%, and external debt had soared to a staggering \$148.3 billion.¹ In fact, the slow decline of oil production, along with the deterioration of numerous state-run industries and key agricultural sectors such as sugarcane and corn, began during the Hugo Chávez years. Something was already deeply wrong then, stemming from the deepening of Venezuela's oil rentier model during Chávez's government together with a disastrous administrative and economic management. This all unfolded at a time when Chávez enjoyed nearly 70% popularity and benefited from record-high oil prices, years of unprecedented revenues, control over state institutions, and significant regional influence and alliances.

Ellner fails to mention this context, as well as the rather significant detail of the huge corruption scandals that drained public coffers and harmed the population. These include: foreign exchange fraud through Cadivi; multiple large-scale corruption cases within the state oil company PDVSA, the state food supply network PDVAL and the China-Venezuela Fund; various infrastructure project scams; and a long, ongoing list of other such examples. Ultimately, the widely-promoted narrative of an "economic war" was, in reality, the work of a network of actors that included government officials (sometimes at the highest levels), working in conjunction with international and business-sector elites. This process has continued under Maduro's government — something even authorities have acknowledged, with the arrests of several high-ranking officials (including multiple presidents of PDVSA) and the revelation of more recent scandals involving the oil company and the state's cryptocurrency regulator, Sunacrip, that entailed more than \$21 billion in uncollected revenue. Given the scale and continuity of this plunder, it is hard to see this as just anomalies or the work of a few unscrupulous individuals. A truly critical thinker must recognise it as a systematic and large-scale mechanism for the illicit appropriation of wealth.

Some may wonder how the Chávez government, which enjoyed huge popularity during the first decade of this century, sank to a disapproval rating hovering between 70-80% under Maduro. The immeasurable suffering of Venezuelans — soaring poverty, collapsed hospitals and basic services,

etc — stands in stark contrast to the luxurious, excessive lifestyles of the ruling elites. These elites have luxury apartments in Dubai or Europe, ride around in high-end SUVs, dine in gourmet restaurants, and throw extravagant parties. This reality is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Venezuelan people and embedded in the national imagination. It explains the widespread loathing of Maduro's government, the hollowing out of popular support, and the huge voter turnout for the July 28, 2024 presidential elections by a population desperate to end what they perceive as a nightmare. It also helps explain the protests that erupted on July 29-30 against electoral fraud — mobilisations that were primarily driven by working-class neighbourhoods such as Petare, La Vega, El Valle and Catia.

I watched in astonishment as these protests were criminalised by sectors of the international left who, with chilling ease, labelled them as demonstrations by “people from the far right,” thereby legitimising the brutal repression that unfolded in the days and weeks that followed. We have seen a similar criminalisation of popular protest under right-wing presidents such as Iván Duque in Colombia and Sebastián Piñera in Chile during the huge 2019 protests. If we are to talk about nuance, then there should be deep reflection on the reasons behind the huge public discontent in Venezuela. Followers and supporters of Maduro's government seem to always prefer to look for external scapegoats and criminalise dissenters rather than take a hard look at how and why they lost the support and connection with the population.

Sanctions have had a subsequent negative impact on the course of the crisis and indeed made recovery from Venezuela's economic free fall more difficult. But they do not explain the root causes of the societal collapse we have lived through. Nor the fact that this entire process has unfolded within a framework that both triggers and enables wealth appropriation, and that emerged from the heart of the Bolivarian government itself. The official sanctions narrative functions as a powerful mechanism for neutralising debate and criticism — and has unfortunately been adopted by a section of the international left to avoid confronting our reality.

Clinging to narratives of the past to justify the disaster of the present

There is a persistent tendency to cling to arguments from the Chávez government era — when oil revenue was widely distributed throughout society, the nominal monthly wage was US\$400, and popular participation in politics was encouraged — and transpose them onto a present reality that has dramatically changed. Several examples can be mentioned. Ellner refers to the communes, even though he himself acknowledges that under Maduro they were marginalised for years. He refers to a “renewed push” to support communes, but does not mention that this marginalisation was part of a broader process of demobilisation and hollowing out of popular organisation, which had very harmful effects, such as stripping the communal idea of its original meaning, with the concept reduced by Maduro to the CLAP food distribution system. Today, the commune proposal has been reinterpreted as an instrument to facilitate the state/government's territorial control within a political system that has evolved into a kind of neopatrimonial model.

When people talk about the “Bolivarian process,” we are no longer referring to a system based on a national-popular alliance with an emphasis on the most disadvantaged classes. That formula has been drastically reconfigured: the alliance with the military has multiplied the presence of security forces throughout the state, while priority is given to coordinating with the main national business federation (Fedecámaras), working with evangelical church elites, strengthening partnerships with US oil corporation Chevron and Chinese capital in the Orinoco Oil Belt, and supporting bankers and new elites born from within the so-called “revolution”. Importantly, practically all capitalists operating in Venezuela are profiting from the country's wealth under shamefully preferential

conditions, with generous advantages and without any restrictions or mechanisms of accountability. Laws such as the Anti-Blockade Law, the Law on Special Economic Zones, and the Law for the Protection of Foreign Investment, along with tax exemption decrees for companies, backdoor privatisations, Chevron's License LG41, and the agreements with the China National Petroleum Corporation, among many other examples, demonstrate this reality. What is striking is not that most leftist forces in the country — especially the most combative — have strongly opposed this surrender of national assets, but that the only left still supporting, and even applauding, all this is the pro-Maduro left.

Another example of the disconnect between an outdated narrative and the current regime is Ellner's insistence that we must not forget the role of the (traditional) Venezuelan opposition when understanding the "scope of the war against Venezuela." Undoubtedly, this opposition has played a part in the country's political decay — through certain insurrectionary cycles driven by its more radical wing having further degraded political life, and with its minimal grassroots organising and very few efforts to build real alternatives. What the author fails to explain is how the government ended up crushing not only the right-wing opposition — which lies in ruins, helping explain the rise of María Corina Machado — but also any political or social force that dared oppose it. This included intervening into and splitting traditional parties, such as Acción Democrática and Copei, to impose new leaderships handpicked by the government. The end result is the kind of "opposition" we now see presented to the public. It also included the persecution and imprisonment of union members, community leaders, social organisations and NGOs. Ellner should have highlighted the arrest of grassroots Chavistas and communal organisers, the use of torture in Venezuelan prisons, the crackdown on the Communist Party of Venezuela and the chilling effect of the "Law Against Hate." But on such sensitive issues, there are no "nuances" in his text — and that is a serious omission.

Ultimately, Ellner does not acknowledge that Venezuela today is not the Venezuela of 2017 or 2019. We face a different scenario today — one shaped by a system of power without any real checks and balances. Any analysis must evolve, just as history does.

Nuancing the destruction of a country? On the limits of the unacceptable

One of Ellner's conclusions — in my view quite striking — is that Maduro's mistakes were forced by Washington. This kind of argument reflects a Manichaeian outlook, in which a dark, malevolent force (the US) pushes Maduro into wrongdoing. Seen this way, the other side is not truly "bad," it is merely forced to act that way. It is the kind of reasoning you would expect from someone who follows a leader out of sheer faith. It is difficult to respond with reason to someone who portrays the Maduro government as a victim while failing to mention in the same article the victims within Venezuelan society — those produced by the regime's decay and predatory turn. Ellner — and here I agree with Hetland — ends up constructing a narrative of justification. For example, Ellner justifies the new alliances with Fedecámaras and their policies, but says nothing about the deliberate destruction of wages or the persecution and imprisonment of workers.

Perhaps at the heart of all this is the question of the limits of the unacceptable. That there are things that quite simply no longer allow for nuance. That there are things that have come to embody the very worst of the horrors the left once spent decades denouncing. That today's geopolitical dynamics — as abominable as they may be — are not enough to "nuance" the barbarity and devastation of a country carried out by its own government, and in the name of nothing.

Those who advocate for a supposed "critical support for Maduro" are not far removed in their logic from those who might claim critical support for El Salvador's Nayib Bukele, Argentina's Javier Milei, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega or Russia's Vladimir Putin. In the end, anything can be nuanced, anyone can be made a victim. Donald Trump, for instance, can be the victim of the US "Deep State",

Benjamin Netanyahu a victim of Hamas. The argument can be stretched to cover anything — but it always only serves to justify abuse. In the end, such a path can only lead us astray — into a world where we relativise barbarism and plunder, turning them into the new global “normal”. Once there, the left will have lost its way forever.

Epilogue

One of the many questions that can be raised about Venezuela is this: if that section of the international left that supports the Maduro government is fully aware of the regime’s abuses and corruption but considers it a matter of “honour” to not support traditional opposition leaders or parties, why not instead dedicate their energy, resources, support and advocacy to strengthening a left-wing opposition that might someday challenge for political power? If it is truly about preserving a leftist identity with integrity, why not build bridges with sections of the left opposition inside Venezuela? Why not help develop an alternative that is not neoliberal, but rooted in popular demands — a political project with national reach, capable of uniting diverse organisations and defending wages, workers, popular sovereignty, public education, and other historic demands?

These questions seem crucial to me and open the door to other much-needed debates.