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Regardless, it seemed to us that these unique circumstances presented an amazing opportunity for anarchists in Venezuela. In the US, it often seems that the biggest impediment to anarchist organizing is cynicism and irony. The situation in Venezuela is refreshingly different, because much of the population is not only open to the possibility of radical change, but seems actively interested in comparing alternative visions and strategies. It remains to be seen whether the anarchists in Venezuela have the numbers, the resources, the skill, and the fortitude necessary to have a noticeable impact on the ground.

Nonetheless, through efforts like El Libertario and projects like the community center, anarchists have a chance to change the political trajectory of Venezuela–and possibly even the continent.

[FE Note: This is a shortened version of an essay that can be found in several locations on the Internet. Some material is likely dated at this point, given the rapidly changing situation in Venezuela. Since the essay primarily has value as a first-hand account, and since we have not returned to Venezuela since it was written, we have not attempted to update this version in any way.]

In late 2004, we traveled in Venezuela, meeting many activists from many backgrounds. The foremost lesson we learned during our brief time there concerned the complexity of the social and political situation in the country, which is consistently over-simplified in the United States.

Where the mainstream media here portrays President Hugo Chavez as a near-dictator, most of the US left welcomes Chavez uncritically as the new Che Guevara of radicalism in Latin America.

North American anarchists, meanwhile, struggle to understand the situation, and are often torn between these opposing but comparably one-sided perspectives. Time in Venezuela demonstrated the inadequacy of both approaches. We visited three large cities and a similar number of small towns, and while we aren't experts of any sort on Venezuela, we feel qualified to draw some tentative conclusions based on our experiences.

Chavista Project in Practice: Rural Development

Much of our visit was spent with Chavista activists-turned-government-officials working on land reform and starting farming cooperatives. This group was working with a collection of families in the state of Bolivar, close to the Orinoco River in Southern Venezuela, who were interested in starting some sort of agricultural collective. The families were attempting to deal with the harsh aftermath of the failed anti-Chavez general strike of 2003, which had threatened their already precarious economic position.

We were invited to sit in on a meeting between the families and the officials. The meeting was hosted by one of the families, who offered the standard afternoon shot of coffee. The dynamic at the

meeting seemed to us a classic example of ships passing in the night: the Chavistas attempted to explain the value of incorporating as a cooperative under the provisions of the new "Bolivarian" constitution, while the families were more interested in making sure they had enough to eat.

The Chavistas outlined the bureaucratic process of establishing a cooperative, beginning with the full census of the community–how many men, women and children, as well as cows, chickens, and acres of land. The community was willing to comply, but one spokesman pointed out that no government had ever done anything for them in a hundred years living on land that wasn't legally theirs.

The government officials were sincerely interested in helping the community, but their political agenda seemingly kept them from seeing either the complexity or the patronizing aspects of this task, when, for example, they expressed shock that no one among the families had a copy of the constitution (devout Chavistas carry copies in their pockets at all times).

The Census

In fact, most people in the community were illiterate, which became clear when the head of each household was asked to sign a document authorizing the census: almost everyone "signed" the document with a thumbprint.

From our perspective, the census was one example of how the modernizing project undertaken by the Chavez government legitimates a higher level of intervention in everyday life than Venezuela has previously known. A much larger example is the media law enacted in late 2004, which aimed to weaken the power of the right-wing conglomerates that dominate mass media in Venezuela; the methods include the establishment of a regulatory apparatus that the Chavistas themselves say is modeled on the Federal Communications Commission in the US.

As for the families we met, the practical implications of this project may well be positive: the law allows them to take possession of their land, and obtain grants and low-interest loans that should improve their livelihoods.

laziness, among many others. Currently, however, the center benefits from the enthusiasm and dedication of many participants, from teenage punks to elderly veterans of the Spanish Civil War.

A different model is being developed more or less single-handedly by an anarchist we met in a small town in the western mountains. This highly dedicated organizer bicycles around selling plantain chips and a dozen or more copies of each issue of El Libertario in a town of only a few thousand people. As a result, anarchism probably has a higher per capita profile in this city than anywhere else in Venezuela. He also operates a small booth in the public market from which he sells anarchist literature, punk music, and other items.

During our visit, he was attempting to organize the other vendors to take over the management of the market which had been operated on a landlord-tenant basis that aggravated many of the vendor tenants. He initiated a small anarchist collective, made up largely of younger people new to anarchism, but interested in social change.

The dangers of a one man show approach are obvious: for now, at least, anarchism in this small town lives or dies with his effort alone, and the sort of anarchism developed there will tend heavily toward his own idiosyncrasies. However, the excitement he brings to organizing efforts will almost certainly lead to positive outcomes, at least in the short run.

Conclusions

The most amazing thing about Venezuela was the enthusiasm and generosity of nearly everyone we met, whatever their political outlook. People not only wanted to cook for us or- show us their favorite parts of town, they also offered their analysis of the political situation. Whether they were pro-Chavez or anti-Chavez (or somewhere in between), people displayed no trepidation about sharing their opinions with us. It was unclear how much this was a result of the changes wrought by Chavismo and to what extent it pre-dated it. Many people claimed the openness was a new phenomenon, while others argued that it has long been part of the "national character."

in the hands of the presidency, where the opposition would have been confronted as authoritarian extremists had they attempted the same power grab.

The advocates of this approach seemed to believe that the main task facing anarchists in Venezuela was to confront Chavismo as a fraudulent ruse aimed at distracting the country from a pro-capitalist and authoritarian shift in ruling class politics. Since we spent the least amount of time with advocates of this analysis, we won't speculate about the strategic implications here.

These three perspectives did not seem mutually exclusive: the most vehement anti-Chavez anarchists would acknowledge good aspects to the literacy and medical care programs instituted by the government, while those anarchists most optimistic about the prospects of Chavismo harshly criticized the government for successfully selling off huge chunks of the country's resources to foreign corporations. The divisions between the perspectives seemed to have more to do with the strategic approach that each encouraged.

Anarchist Practice in Venezuela: Two Examples

All the anarchists we met were involved in a range of practical work. In Caracas, in particular, the anarchists not only publish the newspaper El Libertario, they also maintain the community center mentioned previously. It has been open since November 2004 and serves as library, event space, meeting location, and study area for participants in the various Chavista-sponsored literacy programs. The goal of the center seems to be similar to that of many infoshops in the US during the 1990's: to provide an infrastructure for anarchist organizing, while creating ties between anarchists and other residents of the community.

The center may eventually face the range of problems experienced by US infoshops: confusion about long-term goals, tension between the anarchist-focused and community-focused aspects of the project, and frustration due to the painful dynamic between burnout and

The flipside, however, is an expansion of both state power and market relations; the families we met were far from fully integrated into the market economy, as their food production was largely subsistence-focused. Whatever the benefits of incorporating as a cooperative, the process seemed certain to draw them further into exchange relations, as a higher percentage of their agricultural product will be sold in order to pay off their new loans.

Chavista Project in Practice: Bolivarian Schools & the Misiones

Chavez has gained widespread attention through the implementation of reforms in the areas of education and healthcare. Many of these programs have been able to run successfully with the help of personnel, donated materials, and other resources from Cuba. These literacy and medical programs, called Misiones, provide services to poor and working class communities in all parts of Venezuela.

Mision Plan Robinson combats illiteracy by providing primary school education to adults. Mision Ribas takes this one step further, allowing graduates of the Plan Robinson program to obtain a high school diploma. Cuba provides literacy advisors, televisions for the classes, and literacy materials.

One striking aspect of the class we observed was the limited importance of the instructor; the class was taught by a video presentation that walked the students through the workbooks.

The workbooks also revealed a level of simplified patriotism that verged on indoctrination, a perception enhanced by the vast number of Venezuelan flags on display. At the same time, the participants in the program were clearly excited by the prospect of literacy and the possibilities it opens to them and others.

Another component of education reform is the establishment of Bolivarian Schools. These schools provide full-day instruction, including three meals, to students in communities throughout the country. The traditional school model only provides half-day sessions with one meal. The Bolivarian Schools also provide cultural and sports activities for the students. While the schools are touted

as being progressive, we were unconvinced after a half-day visit to one of them. The setting, in the mountains with beautiful views, was very conducive to learning, but the pedagogy was less impressive. The emphasis was on memorization and recitation, rather than on exploration, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving.

The educational aspects of the Bolivarian "revolution" hint at the possibility of real social change. Nonetheless, the pedagogy we saw limits the potential for social movements emerging within the education system, although it may have the unintended consequence of radicalizing traditional forms of youth rebellion.

Anarchist Perspectives on Chavismo

When not observing various Chavista projects, we spent our time with a variety of anarchists in several parts of the country. We were able to distill three distinct anarchist responses to Chavismo, which we labeled the lesser evil approach; the makes no difference attitude; and the grand distraction analysis.

We were able to distill three distinct anarchist responses to Chavismo which we labeled: the lesser evil approach; the makes no difference attitude; and the grand distraction analysis.

A number of anarchists we encountered, in small towns and larger cities, held the view that Chavez was better for Venezuela than the opposition would have been. These people were still anarchists–they opposed Chavez and his policies–but they believed that an opening had been created that held the possibility of fundamentally radicalizing the population as a whole. Their strategy was to push the populist and socialist tendencies of Chavismo to their furthest extremes, where the Chavista leadership would repudiate the logical conclusions of their own rhetoric. The intended result was a popular uprising in support of the best aspects of Chavismo, but against Chavez and his core leadership.

Chavez: Neither Better Nor Worse

One anarchist we met, for example, invited us to a meeting where a broad radical grouping decided that its next project would be to

push for the creation of neighborhood assemblies; these assemblies are allowed under the new constitution, but the group wanted them to have full decision-making power, rather than merely being advisory to the city council. Whether this project, or the potentially anarchist approach it represents, will draw the group closer to or further away from mainstream Chavismo remains to be seen.

The second anarchist analysis argued that Chavez was overall neither better nor worse than the opposition would be were it in power. In essence, it said, the masses of Venezuelans were wasting their time debating for or against Chavez, when in fact the true class interests of the majority cut across these divisions. From this perspective, a majority of the Chavista rank and file was potentially open to anarchist analysis and action, while a substantial portion of the anti-Chavista popular base was similarly accessible, despite the apparently stark divisions between the two movements.

In their work around a local anarchist community space (not unlike the infoshop model made popular in the US in the 1990's), these anarchists befriended both rank and file Chavistas and anti-Chavistas and attempted to build organizing ties with both groups. If successful, such efforts could strengthen the popular base of each movement and draw the two groups closer together, while undermining the relationship between each movement and its self-designated "leadership." This approach could have radical long-term implications, although it necessitates an uphill battle against the popular understanding that Chavismo and anti-Chavismo have nothing in common.

The third major anarchist perspective held that Chavez is actually worse for Venezuela than his right-wing opponents would have been at this historical juncture. The argument here is both economic and political.

First, due to his popular persona as a reformer and anti-imperialist, only Chavez could have forced through the range of petroleum and other resource concessions to multi-national corporations that have been approved in recent years, because these same maneuvers would have faced massive resistance had they been proposed by the opposition. Second, Chavez has used his social reforms (literacy programs, etc.) to cover for a massive centralization of political power