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REVIEW ESSAY

Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela, by George Ciccariello-Maher. New York: Verso, 2016. $20.95 U.S., paper. ISBN: 9781784782238.

Decolonizing Dialectics, by George Ciccariello-Maher. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. $23.95, paper. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6243-2.

Reviewed by Colin Mooers[1]

"On May 20th, 2018" an opinion piece in the *Globe and Mail* (Rosales 2018) lamented, Venezuelans "are poised to re-elect President Nicholas Maduro to another six-year term." Were this to occur, it would confirm a long-standing pattern stretching back nearly twenty years, in which popular left-wing governments have been consistently re-elected, if occasionally by slim margins. In gubernatorial elections held in October 2017, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) managed to win seventeen of twenty-three states, despite a deepening economic crisis which has shredded working class living standards and a ferocious anti-government campaign by opposition parties, the international media, various right-wing foundations and the U.S. State Department. "Chavismo," named after the late Hugo Chavez, who held the presidency from 1999 until his death in 2013, has proven remarkably resilient. Why have the Venezuelan people so consistently voted for the party of Chavez? According to the author quoted above, the only plausible answer is that "the current crisis has been used as an opportunity to manipulate the poorest people's needs for political support and discipline" (Rosales 2018).

One need not be an apologist for the Maduro regime, nor deny the real hardships being suffered by the popular sectors of Venezuelan society, to recognize how threadbare such denunciations have become. As one pro-government demonstrator recently observed, "It's a lie that they fire you if you don't show up. The vast majority of people are here of their own volition. Even if they were coerced to attend, who says they have to be so enthusiastic?" (quoted in Koerner 2018). It is simply an insult to portray the Venezuelan people as the passive pawns of the Maduro government. No other country in Latin America has witnessed the sheer combativeness and sustained popular insurgency as in Venezuela. The revolt against the old oligarchic regime began nearly thirty years ago – ten years before Chavez was elected president – in the great revolt of 1989, popularly known as the *Caracazo* – "the explosion in Caracas." As George Ciccariello-Maher observes in his short and informative book, *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (Verso, 2016), "The Caracazo marked the first of a series of Latin American rebellions against the spread of neoliberal economic reforms that would see presidents deposed and political parties collapse across the continent" (2).

In the 1980's the same movements that "made Chavez" had also established neighbourhood assemblies in various parts of the country to discuss local issues and revolutionary strategy at the national level. It was out this ferment that the first National Network of *Communeros and Communeras* was born. So, even though the Chavez government formally recognized and encouraged the expansion communal movement in law in 2006, the 45

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000 communal councils and 1500 communes that exist today are the product of decades of popular struggle from below. The communes take a myriad of forms – from government owned to those directly owned and managed by the commune. In the latter case, communal self-management anticipates a version of direct, participatory democracy, which in the minds of many *communeros* has become the measure of progress to socialism. In 2014, the movement established a national coordinating structure intended to defend gains already made and to push the movement forward. As Ciccariello-Maher stresses, "the communes embody both the present and the future of the Bolivarian process: with the commune, so goes the Revolution" (28).

In the countryside, it is easy to measure the success of the communes. Over a decade, ten million acres have been distributed to small farmers from public lands or lands deemed idle. The redistribution has benefited over a million *campesinos* or half the rural population. The *El Maizal Commune* has brought two-thousand acres under communal control. Moreover, it has shown that autonomous self-managed production of corn, coffee and milk can be *more* efficient than private production: state officials have confirmed that *El Maizal's* productivity per acres is twice the national average (91). Ironically, *El Maizal's* success has also garnered it enemies within the government who, jealous of its financial autonomy, have attempted to undermine its achievements. As Angel Prado of *El Maizal* bitterly comments, "We *communeros* share very little with the governing party" (92). Despite these tensions, Ciccariello-Maher argues, the uneasy alliance between the state and the communes remains essential given the relentless hostility of large landowners and agribusiness interests. The gradual consolidation of a national network of communes means that "we can begin to glimpse the emergence of a new communal state from below, just as the presidential council has begun to consolidate relations between the communes and the Bolivarian government from above" (99).

In Venezuela, ninety-percent of the population live in cities. This means that, while most productive communes are located in rural areas, communal organization has begun to colonize urban centres as well. The 2002 Land Law allowed poor urban dwellers in the great barrios that encircle most cities to claim title to land they had built on already or on unoccupied land. By 2016, nearly one million families had established ownership rights to urban lands through the land committees. Despite these gains, there exist real tensions within the urban collectives. Many are both armed to defend against crime and police repression and fiercely independent while others have drawn closer to the state through access to government funds. Some see the collectives as the bedrock of the Bolivarian project, constantly pressuring the government in a more radical direction, others remain suspicious of them as vectors of corruption and violence.

In his final speech, "Golpe de Timon" (Turn of the Rudder), Hugo Chavez declared that the future of the Bolivarian project would be decided by *la comuna o nada*, the commune or nothing. Ciccariello-Maher acknowledges that the political, cultural, and institutional obstacles facing the communes are immense: economic crisis, inflation, shortages, hostility from both the state and from the still dominant private sector. Ciccariello-Maher believes that the situation of dual-power which now exists in Venezuela cannot hold indefinitely. "As time runs out," he declares, "the future rushes to greet us …The time has come to bet it all on the communes" (134).

Overcoming the structural and political obstacles to Revolution is one of the central themes of Ciccariello-Maher's other recent and more theoretical book, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Duke University Press, 2017). Drawing on the work of Georges Sorel, Franz Fanon, and radical Mexican political theorist Enrigue Dussel, Ciccariello-Maher wants to rescue dialectical theory by grounding it in the problematics of race, nation, class and 'the people' in the colonial and post-colonial world. At the heart of Ciccariello-Maher's argument for a de-colonized dialectics is an anti-determinist conception of dialectics based on social rupture and combat – "leaps, leaps, leaps" (14) – in which the constraints of both capitalism and colonialism are blasted apart through the conscious, sometimes violent, intervention of the oppressed and exploited (49).

Ciccariello-Maher rightly argues that orthodox Marxism, long-influenced by the legacy of Stalinism, saw race, gender, and culture as secondary to class and the economically determined 'stages' of capitalist development. On this view, colonialism, including the slave trade, was conceived in narrowly economic terms; colonial conquest was about access to territory, resources and cheap labour to feed the engines of European capitalism. Which it was. But it was also about much more when examined from the standpoint the subjects of colonialism.

For Ciccariello-Maher, the history of colonialism demands "a radicalized dialectics" to "begin to think race, class and the nation anew" (49). Fanon, for example, struggled to reconcile race and class in the colonial context. He rejected the class reductionism of those like Jean-Paul Sartre, who prematurely enclosed "race within a predetermined dialectics of class" (66), and remained suspicious of essentialist notions of both black identity and nationalism. Instead, he argued for a non-essentialist concept of race as "co-determined by class" (87). What remained unresolved in Fanon's thought was how such 'co-determination' was capable of generating the kind revolutionary consciousness required for a decisive break with both anti-colonial nationalism and capitalism.

For Enrique Dussel, the flaw in traditional dialectics lies precisely in the belief that there exists an *internal* logic of class or race under capitalism that propels them toward revolutionary transformation. According to Dussel, the Marxist concept of "totality is inherently a colonial concept … openly hostile to alterity and difference" (Dussel, quoted in Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 109). Even those, like Marcuse, Adorno and Bloch, who eschewed the reductionist formulations of orthodox Marxism, remain "naïve with respect to the positive criticality of the utopia of *political exteriority of peripheral peoples*, the working- class woman, the oppressed youth and the dependent societies (Dussel, quoted in Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 114) The only category capable of capturing and 'stitching together' the multiplicity of struggles around class, race, and nation is that of 'the people' (Dussel, quoted in Ciccariello-Maher 2017: 103).

While he disagrees with the weight Dussel places on the concept of *exteriority,* as a kind of pure state of being beyond the strictures of capitalism – preferring the formulation "interiority-exteriority" – Ciccariello-Maher insists on the centrality of 'the people' as "a political project, to be projected as in a struggle against imperialism and capitalism" (120). What is important about Dussel's idea of 'the people' is that it "breaks with a narrowly Marxist focus on economic exploitation and the working class as the revolutionary subject, providing a new conceptual framework to accommodate the analysis of colonial economic conditions found in Mariategui, Fanon and others" (130). Ciccariello-Maher is aware that 'the people' is not always a progressive

force, that it can be seized upon by reactionary forces. That is why, in his view, 'el pueblo' must be "fabricated, constructed mythically and drawn together into a combative unity" (137). The *Caracazo* of 1989 embodied "a truly decolonized dialectics" by challenging both the exploitative relations of capitalism and the racialization of colonial bodies (141). The ongoing struggle in Venezuela thus represents a new type of dialectics, no longer grounded in the outmoded concept of a unity of opposites but rather:

> a tense unity … multiplication of local dialectics in Venezuela – popular, racial, gendered, class based – has also coincided with their progressive unification, stitched together in a combative tapestry, that, if singular, disintegrates outward toward the edges. (147)

What to make of all of this? While there is much that is appealing and provocative in these arguments – especially Ciccariello-Maher's insistence on a class-based understanding of 'el pueblo' – I am less convinced on two major conceptual points: first is the assumption that class, race, and nation have no *internal* structural basis of unity under conditions of capitalist colonialism; and second, that, therefore, an *external* political agent is required to 'stitch together' the apparently disparate ranks of the oppressed and exploited.

It is always dangerous to generalize, as Ciccariello-Maher does, from the sins of reductionist versions of Marxism to Marxism in general. There are currents within both feminist and anti-racist Marxism today that specifically reject the idea that capitalism can be understood in terms of class relations at the point of production. Rather, they emphasize that capitalism is a *system* of 'social reproduction' whose scope encompasses gendered forms of labour and reproduction in the family, racialized divisions within the working class as well as the policing of black and brown bodies in the broader society. In other words, properly understood, capitalism is, in Marx's own words, an 'ensemble of social relations', in which specific forms oppression and exploitation are interwoven with each other.

This suggests that the history of capitalism has been as much a process of *differentiation* as it has been one of *homogenization*; alterity and difference are as much constituent parts of its *internal* relations as the tendency to reduce everything to the commodify-form. A slightly more abstract way of putting this point would be to say that the dialectic of capitalism is constituted on the basis of a series of *internal* relations of identity and difference. In order to subjugate the colonial world, capitalism constructed a baroque ideology of race in which the colonized and enslaved were de-humanized, placed beyond the ambit of any enlightenment or religious conception of humanity. European capitalism certainly traded on similar racial tropes within its own borders. Irish, southern, and eastern Europeans were seen as inferior to northern, white Europeans and therefore amenable to specific forms of racialized exploitation. Colonialism generalized and intensified this system of racialized capitalism to entire continents and peoples. Colonial bodies could be subjected to super-exploitation involving a variety of labour regimes because they were ontologically excluded from the European idea of humanity. But if we look closely at this exclusionary ontology we find that race, class, and gender were intricately interwoven such that each category was defined in terms of the others. As Ann McClintock observes:

> the rhetoric of race was used to invent distinctions between what we would now call classes … the rhetoric of gender was used to make increasingly refined distinctions among the races. The White race was figured as the male of the species and the black race as the female. Similarly, the rhetoric of class was used to inscribe minute and subtle distinctions between other races. (McClintock 1995: 54–55)

A final point with regards to political agency. Ciccariello-Maher is no doubt correct in arguing that 'el pueblo' is a useful term for describing "a popular subject with a clear class content" (143). In most of Latin America an immense portion of the population works in the informal sector, sometimes combining such labour with occasional work in the formal sector. Women, indigenous groups, and youth form a disproportionate part of this highly unstable and precarious sector. While such groups fall outside the traditional definition of waged labour, their lives are tied by countless threads to the circuits of capital, from the products they sell in the marketplace to food and housing. Class, race, and gender inequality is built into the fabric of daily existence for these sectors of 'el pueblo'. The claim, however provocative, that an entirely new dialectics is required to make sense of these multiple forms of colonial oppression and exploitation, seems to me, misguided.

Equally problematic is the idea that class agency requires a force or will originating outside these social positions. Since Ciccariello-Maher rejects the idea of internal structural determinants he is thrown back on the necessity of a "strictly political" mythos originating somewhere beyond the actual social positions inhabited by 'el pueblo'. While the appeal of certain forms of voluntarism have become popular in recent years – in part due to the frustrating intransigence of capitalism globally – little is to be gained in solving the riddle of political agency by side-stepping the real constraints imposed by the structures of capitalism. But structures are also enabling of political agency and present in the daily battles and insurgent struggles that these two books so eloquently champion.

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