

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context.
Mikhail Bakhtin

THE PEOPLE AND CHÁVEZ IN VENEZUELA

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Interview by Ana Fonseca

Ana Fonseca: Hello and welcome to Radio Heteroglossia. I'm Ana Fonseca and our guest today is Dr. [George Ciccariello-Maher](#). He is a political scientist, writer and an Associate Professor of Politics and Global Studies at [Drexel University](#) in Philadelphia, United States. Today, we will be discussing his book, *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, published in 2013 by Duke University Press, which traces back the roots of contemporary political dynamics in Venezuela to the long-term history of Venezuelan social movements.

Dr. Ciccariello-Maher, welcome and thank you for talking to us today.

George Ciccariello-Maher: Thank you so much for having me on.

Ana Fonseca: I'd like to start by asking you about the inspiration that led you to write this book and what main points you hope people can take away from it.

George Ciccariello-Maher: When I began to conceive of the book, *We Created Chávez*, I was living in Venezuela and experiencing, witnessing the revolutionary process up close. This was around 2006- 2007 and it was the moment in which the revolution really began to take a much more radical turn. I was writing things for CounterPunch and for journalistic outlets internationally, and I began to realize that no one was really dealing with the essence of the question which is namely the fact that this was not simply yet another in a long line of

traditional populist movements or charismatic leaders or the sort of caricatured view of the *caudillo*. It was something very different and something that was very much driven from the grassroots, driven from the history of these social movements. It was a process, and remains a process in which these social movements and the revolutionary grassroots play a major if not decisive role.

Ana Fonseca: That brings us to my next question. Who created Chávez?

George Ciccariello-Maher: That's a good question. And if you go by the title of the book it's "we," but then this simply is to raise another question: "Who is the we?" In the subtitle you get a hint, namely it's a people's history. But this is again an answer that provides and provokes more questions: "What people?" And so, the first thing that I do is to begin to conceptualize the idea of "the people." This is an identity, popular identity that is controversial and especially among contemporary thinkers specifically Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno, Antonio Negri. "The people" is an inherently reactionary concept, it's a concept they understand to be unitary, homogenizing and centripetal. It draws together forces and eliminates their heterogeneity and ultimately stands as a buttress and a reinforcement for the state in their mode of thinking. This mode of conceptualizing popular identity, though, and the idea of the people has little to nothing to do with Latin American reality, in which the people is not a uniformly revolutionary force but in which it has always been at the heart of revolutionary movements. What I conceptualize - using thinkers like in the Enrique Dussel who thinks of "the pueblo," "the people" as a combative and divisive identity; for Enrique Dussel, the people represents the unity of those that are, as he puts it, "oppressed within a system and excluded from it that institutes a rupture within the political community as a mobile movement toward a radical new situation, a new arrangement of constituted power" - is that I begin to think through the history of the idea of the people as one that's really subject instead to a war of position in which people are fighting to control the ability to claim the mantle of "the people."

Ana Fonseca: I noticed that Franz Fanon's ideas are quite prevalent in your book, and Franz Fanon is known as one of the most prominent thinkers about post-colonialism, decolonization and colonialism. How we think of colonialism and its legacies. How can we translate that into

what we see in the different movements that led to the rise of Chávez? How can Fanon's ideas of decolonization and colonialism help us understand what we saw in Venezuela in the 1990s?

George Ciccariello-Maher: What's particular is the fact that Latin America of course achieved formal independence much, much earlier than the anti-colonial wave that Fanon is charting in the 1950s and 60s. But that doesn't change the fact that, in the words of Aníbal Quijano, the Peruvian radical sociologist, the question is not so much of colonialism as a political system but "coloniality" as a much broader and more lasting phenomenon. Latin America in that sense still suffers the very heavy weight of a coloniality that has structured its geography, its conceptions, its identity, its political institutions, its racial structure, its gendered structure and all of these aspects constitute a part of coloniality. So, the task is still very much a decolonial one. When you add to the fact that concretely Fanon is one of the most useful thinkers when it comes to thinking these transformative processes beyond the limitations of a rigid Marxism, then he becomes someone who's a very sharp diagnostician. So, for example, when Fanon is diagnosing the non-centrality of the formal working class in North Africa, we find the very same thing in Latin America. In Venezuela, in particular, where the formal working class is relatively small, relatively privileged and the driving force in many ways of revolutionary movements has been the semi-formal or the informal working class, *barrio* residents struggling in a situation much closer to what Fanon would call the "Wretched of the Earth" than say the oil workers in the state oil industry.

Ana Fonseca: And what would you say that it would be then the difference between coloniality and colonialism? In other words, when we talk about colonialism are we referring to the historical period and coloniality refers more to a state of mind, an ideology? What is the difference between the two?

George Ciccariello-Maher: Coloniality certainly includes ideology and includes specifically the epistemological structures, the educational structures, the conceptions that were implanted in colonialism but it's far from being a merely super structural phenomenon, to put it in a way. It's something that's institutionalized. Educational systems, the structure of the state, the imposition of presidential systems in Latin America, even something Fanon diagnosed very well, namely

the “hypertrophy of the capital” where these economies, which are based around extraction in the first instance, create a geography in which the capital is overly important and is used to essentially draw resources out and send them abroad. So all of these things constitute elements of coloniality; all of which means that the struggle is more than simply one for liberation or independence. It's a much more substantial struggle that's going to last a lot longer.

Ana Fonseca:

Coming back to the point that you made earlier about the historical basis of Venezuela's social movements and how those historical roots help us understand *Chavismo*, in my reading of your book *Chavismo* seems to be understood in the context of an accumulation of dispersed popular forces after the defeat of the Venezuelan guerrilla war in the 1960s. How did such dispersed forces that we saw in the sixties encounter and connect with more unified kinds of movements such as *Chavismo* in Venezuela during the 1980s and 90s? What would you say were the advantages and disadvantages of the disperse nature of such struggles in Venezuela's history?

George Ciccariello-Maher: I see the contemporary unification around not only *Chavismo* but around a broader evolutionary process as very much the outgrowth of the guerrilla struggle of the 1960s. Not so much the victories and the accomplishments of that guerilla struggle but the counterintuitive accomplishments that grew out of the failure of that struggle. What you had after the guerrilla struggle especially in the 70s and 80s was very much, as you put it, a dispersal, the spreading out of different movements and the spreading out of people struggling over different questions that maybe had remained latent during the guerrilla struggle. Questions of race, questions of gender begin to develop in more fundamental ways. And so, in this dispersal, despite the fact that dispersal is at least on the surface of it a negative phenomenon, when it comes to revolutionary forces in this dispersal, in this process in the 70s and 80s, you had a significant enrichment of these revolutionary movements; their development, in terms of their conceptions, their understanding in terms of hegemonic struggle more broadly in society, but also in terms of their understanding of their own autonomy. You had, in other words, and in contrast to some other countries, the development of actually really powerful social movements that then could participate in a more active way within a recomposed unity.

What you have in the 90s, especially in the aftermath of the rebellion and massacre that was the Caracazo in 1989 and around the coup in which Chávez and others attempted to overthrow the government in 92, you had a unification of these movements around broader claims and broader demands which are popular demands under the mantle of “the people.” When that recompensation occurs, I would argue, you have a far better position having gone through and engaged in the development of dispersed autonomy. So, in some ways, and this gets to something that I make very clear I think at the beginning against the sort of caricatured horizontalism that says that social movements need to be dispersed or, in the words of Raúl Zibechi, that power itself needs to be dispersed, and against the verticalism that says that any dispersal is a bad thing. Instead, you have this historical dialectic of dispersal, enrichment, the development of autonomy and strategic revolutionary reunification.

Ana Fonseca:

What led to the unification or reunification of those formerly dispersed forces in Venezuela?

George Ciccariello-Maher:

What led above all were, I would call, “political events,” in the language of someone like Alain Badiou, or moments of sharp rupture that radically transformed and reconfigured all relations in society and sort of put very much on the agenda this question of reunification of a popular struggle. This is a different way of saying that in the 80s, much as is the case in many countries today including the United States, it seems very difficult to envision really radical wave of movements making serious claims for power, and yet that was the case for Venezuela in the 1980s before this massive rebellion, before this coup attempt in which suddenly things transformed. Now, this provokes a question about how unity emerges. And I think there's a renewed emphasis or at least a discussion around the question of leadership and people like Žižek and Jodi Dean are putting forward this question of the party, the leader as essential elements. I think I preferred to speak in terms of the way that unification can emerge around a variety of different institutions and questions. What is the unifying instance in this case? Well, it was Chávez stepping in, in many ways to fill a void opened in the historic continuum. But at the same time it could have been and it could have taken a number of different forms.

Ana Fonseca: How can we understand the relationship between guerrilla militants and the pueblo in Venezuela? Or, in what sense were the guerrillas representative of the pueblo or the people in Venezuela?

George Ciccariello-Maher: That's a great question and the way I'd like to describe it is to say that the guerrilla struggle, especially in the 60s and 70s which is to say the classic guerrilla struggle, was popular in aspiration but never in constituency. In other words, it never actually managed to accumulate significant forces or significant sympathy from a large sector of the Venezuelan population. Yet, in many ways, and this is borne out in the later decades of history, what was being fought over and what was being struggled for and against represented the highest aspirations of what would become popular struggles in the future. Namely, the guerrillas were very early, too early in fact, in diagnosing the limitations of a representative democratic system that was being instituted in the 60s. Formal democracy was really established in 58. There was the first real election in a sustained democratic system in 59, and already by 1960 the guerrilla struggle started against that representative democratic system because it had turned very quickly to being exclusionary and repressive. The guerrillas were the first, in other words, to recognize what would come; namely the fact that that would become a very buffered system in which the people really couldn't participate and from which they would be excluded and ultimately repressed with increasing ferocity in the 70s, 80s and 90s. So the guerrillas really understood that and grasped that, and began to struggle over democracy; for a new and different kind of democracy. But at the same time, they did so and they made a whole number of what I would understand to be vanguardist errors. They didn't take sufficiently seriously the beginning point from which the popular struggles were themselves going to emerge and the need to sort of have patience with the people to work alongside the people to build mass struggles above all, and to use those as jumping off points for a broader popular struggle.

Ana Fonseca: The election of Chávez in 1998 and his failed coup in 1992 are conventionally considered as the main turning points in the history of contemporary politics in Venezuela. Your book decentralizes such moments and thus Chávez, by drawing attention to the dispersed nature of popular forces that we just discussed, in addition to two decisive events that took place before and after

Chávez' 1998 election, namely the 1989 Caracazo and the 2002 coup. What was the impact of the 1989 Caracazo and the 2002 coup on contemporary socio-political dynamics in Venezuela?

George Ciccariello-Maher: The impact of these two moments is really difficult to exaggerate. I understand the two to be what I call, “constituent moments.” In other words, this is not constituent in the sense that these were moments in which a bunch of legislators sat down and drafted a constitution. They were moments of direct constituent outbreak and rebellion an upsurge in the streets. 1989 was a response to a neoliberal structural adjustment package, a massively spontaneous rebellion of looting, rioting and rebelling that lasted nearly a week in Venezuela; yet, in which many organized elements participated in a coordinating capacity attempting to radicalize, generalize the calls being made in this rebellion, and that was really the moment that made everything else that had come since possible; these things that were understood to be impossible prior to that. 2002 was the moment in which Chávez was briefly overthrown by a U.S.-backed opposition, using the private media and prompting bloodshed in the street. He was taken out of power for just under two days and only returned to power, in which you really reflect, I think, on the fact that the reversal of a coup is nearly unprecedented, and the fact that this coup was reversed by the massive participation and mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people in the street tells us a lot about the process before and since; and it represented a moment of what some would call a multitude emerging in the streets; although I believe the concept of “the people” is a better one than the concept of “the multitude” in that that struggle in the streets is really structurally related to, and dialectically related to this broader coalescence of popular identity. 2002, Chávez's return to power, but it's not simply a question of him being returned to power, it's also a question of the constitution that was written off during the coup to be returned to force. And it's also a question of radicalizing the Bolivarian revolutionary process as a whole because almost as though a lesson was learned when Chávez's return to power on the wings of popular struggles and popping the militancy, he realizes just as the people realize that ultimately the force comes, the fundamental force comes from below.

Ana Fonseca: Indeed, your book provides a “history from below” and thus it serves as a window to come to an understanding of Venezuelan

contemporary politics more from the point of view of the people and non-state power or antipower. But you also warn about the “tendency to fetishize antipower.” I wonder if you can talk more about this.

George Ciccariello-Maher: Sure. And I think even, as a sort of *mea culpa*, in an attempt to de-emphasize the figure of Chávez it's entirely possible that this book in particular bends the stick too far in the direction of de-emphasizing Chávez and underestimating the powerful importance that he as an individual had. Now, the framework doesn't prevent us from seeing that. I don't think it simply draws the emphasis away toward popular struggles and popular intervention. The danger, however, is that if you do, as I put it, “fetishize antipower,” fetishize horizontalism, then we are left in a situation in which we can't actually grasp what happened in Venezuela. In practice, looking forward, we would tend to fetishize the very arrangements that had to be overcome for this new unity to be crafted. This great guerrilla theorist and leader who was involved in the 1992 coup and involved in the development of popular assemblies - barrio assemblies, these spontaneous institutions of self-government that emerged prior to Chávez being elected, this was in the mid 90s - his name is Kléber Ramírez Rojas, an old guerilla *comandante*, he said, “we have developed these horizontal organs of popular participation and this is crucially important. It's a major accomplishment in the face of the corrupt and useless representative two-party system. Yet, if we can't move beyond this, our own victories will turn into liabilities and they will undermine us because if we unify our forces and understand a way for revolutionary forces to come together on a broad front to overthrow and replace existing systems with a new form of power, then we aren't going to be able to accomplish much at all and certainly not a revolution.”

Ana Fonseca: Dr. Ciccariello-Maher, thank you very much for your time and for sharing with us your knowledge and views today.

George Ciccariello-Maher: Good to talk to you, Ana. Thank you so much for having me on here.

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