

### My Interest in Venezuela

Four years ago I started studying Spanish, more or less on a whim and as an intellectual challenge. For three of those four years I've have taken private lessons via video calling with several Venezuelan tutors, and have gradually become involved in their lives. There are five women in all. Four of them live in Venezuela, and one has fled with her infant and husband to Peru. Throughout this time I've been seeing the situation through their eyes, and though their stories are individual, they are united in their repugnance of Maduro – every bit as strong as the anti-Trump sentiment of anyone I know. During this time, I've begun reading histories of Venezuela, following the country closely in the news, and witnessing the hardships these women and their families are going through.

### The Response of the Left in the US

Sadly, much of the left in the US chooses only to see the situation through the lens of US imperialism and interventionism, which is fine, except they seem oblivious to Russian and Chinese imperialism<sup>1</sup>, and for the most part to the humanitarian catastrophe on the ground in Venezuela, and to the plight of millions of people who have fled the country, putting a strain on the all the countries they flee to. Or again, when it's a matter of right-wing Colombian paramilitary groups, the left is all over it. But when it comes to Venezuelan "colectivos" – paramilitary goon squads – they apparently could care less.

In this regard, the coverage of Democracy Now has been particularly disturbing. The focus and framing of every commentator and guest I've seen has been the US role. And indeed, several times in the interludes between segments Democracy Now has run propaganda videos showing Maduro in front of adoring crowds. In this respect their coverage is little different than that of RT. What they should be showing in an endless loop is footage such as you can see in **source #6**. I have lost all respect for people like Amy Goodman and Medea Benjamin, who have paid only the weakest of lip-service to the depredations of the Venezuelan government. In Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2011 DN had reporters on the ground reporting from the demonstrations. They have not invited a single voice (so far as I've seen) that represents the views of what is now the vast majority of the Venezuelan people across all class lines.

One is much better advised to turn to Al Jazeera (**source #9**) or France TV 4 (**source #8 and #10**).

For many on the left, history is an ideologically-driven morality play. If they can't paint the US as the primary demon in every conflict, they will either find a way to paint it so, or lose interest. In

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<sup>1</sup> Update: March 27, 2019 Russian landed about 100 troops in Venezuela to support Maduro. Democracy Now's response: Nothing. Not a mention. Imagine their outrage if it was the US that sent troops. But Russian meddling, Russian imperialism? "Meh", says Democracy Now. Galling, the hypocrisy.

this regard, you might check out John Oliver's routine from a show in May 2018 (**source #12**) following the elections in Venezuela. One line I liked was: "Accusing America of creating Venezuela's crisis is about as fair as accusing O.J. Simpson of murdering Princess Diana. I'm not saying it would be completely out of character, it just happens to not be true in this particular instance."

## Sanctions

Did US sanctions cause the economic collapse in Venezuela, as many on the left charge? No. Absurdly no.

In March 2015 Obama, signed and issued a presidential order declaring Venezuela a "threat to its national security" and ordered sanctions against **seven** Venezuelan officials. – my emphasis. (And by the way, these sanctions were condemned by other Latin American countries.)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States%E2%80%93Venezuela\\_relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States%E2%80%93Venezuela_relations)

In March 2017 Trump increased sanctions modestly, restrict trading of Venezuelan bonds sold by the government in the American financial markets to raise money. This might have some effect on Venezuela's ability to pay off its huge debt, but there is no direct link to hyperinflation and lack of food and medicine. Imports were not sanctioned - the oil industry lobbied against this.<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/world/americas/venezuela-sanctions-maduro-trump.html>

There is general scholarly consensus that Venezuela's economic collapse goes back to the Chavez years in which 1) he did not, while oil prices were high, set aside profits to rely on when oil prices dropped, and 2) he fired most of the people in the national oil company PDVSA who knew what they were doing, replacing them with political cronies. This was not ill-will on Chavez's part, but it was a huge, huge mistake from an economic point of view.

The most recent sanctions will have more bite, but of course they will not have caused the problems retro-actively. In the short term, if they are effective in getting Maduro to step down, I support them. In the longer term, I have problems with them.

## Hyperinflation

Some years ago the father of my friend, Andrea, bought their middle class house for what might be the equivalent of several hundred thousand dollars. Last year, he paid off his mortgage for

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<sup>2</sup> Since I wrote this, I found this article that makes a case for a stronger exacerbating role for the 2017 US sanctions, while still not assigning them primary blame: <https://venezuelablog.org/crude-realities-understanding-venezuelas-economic-collapse/>

the price of a hot dog!!!! This is not an exaggeration. Imagining yourself living in these circumstances. No one knows what anything is worth.

Early in 2018 the IMF was predicting 13,000% inflation for the year, which I thought was huge at the time, but now they're saying the actual inflation was over 1 million % . One factor in this hyperinflation was Maduro's decision to de-peg the Bolívar to the hated Yankee dollar, in favor of a scam-like crypto currency. I am told that there is not one economist in Maduro's cabinet. Last year they lopped off 5 zeros from the currency, and went about printing more money. This only poured gasoline on the fire of inflation.

### **Humanitarian aid**

Is this a political ploy on the part of the US? Yes. Giving the food essentially to Gaidó to distribute would increase his standing immensely - though I see no evidence that Guaidó would selectively give food only to his supporters, as Maduro has done for years. (The Nicholas Casey podcast – **source #5** - on *The Daily* is spot-on on this subject.)

Do Trump, Bolton, et. al. care about the people suffering in Venezuela? No. Do Russia, China, Cuba, Turkey care about that suffering. Not really. Do the vast majority of people in Venezuela welcome the aid? Yes, Yes, Yes. From their perspective, what they desperately need is food, medicine and other resources. The source is not important.

### **Finally**

In the case of Venezuela – and I can't believe I'm saying this - Trump is on the right side of history (though of course for the wrong reasons). Amy Goodman, Juan González, Glenn Greenwald, Medea Benjamin, et.al. are on the wrong side of history, just as much as were old lefties who continued to support Stalin after the purges. The Venezuelan people and their suffering is caught in between.

## **SOME SOURCES**

### **Articles**

1. Amnesty International summary

[https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-venezuelas-human-rights-crisis/?utm\\_source=FBPAGE-IS&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_content=2142891293&utm\\_campaign=Amnesty&utm\\_term=Making+the+Case+for+Human+Rights](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/02/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-venezuelas-human-rights-crisis/?utm_source=FBPAGE-IS&utm_medium=social&utm_content=2142891293&utm_campaign=Amnesty&utm_term=Making+the+Case+for+Human+Rights)

2. Nuanced editorial from the Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/27/the-observer-view-on-venezuela-consensus-not-conflict>

3. Opinion piece from Michael Reid

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/27/no-pity-for-corrupt-maduro-who-has-broken-his-country-democracy-must-have-its-day>

4. Foreign Policy that largely mirrors my views

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/28/the-left-keeps-getting-venezuela-wrong/amp/>

## Podcast

5. *The Daily Nicholas Casey* 2/11/19 25 min

Gives a decent historical overview of Venezuela and the history of US intervention in Latin America.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/11/podcasts/the-daily/venezuela-food-aid-maduro-guaido.html>

## Facebook videos

6. About 30 seconds of raw footage from the demonstrations on Jan 23, 2019. (Note: the protest in Caracas was probably twice as large as this, since the video only shows one of two main arteries that were filled with people.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=286877045280096>

## YouTube Videos

7. *Joanna Hausmann* 6 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEvHwiJWgAY>

8. *France TV 4 debate* 45 min

Vincent Ulive, Gustavo Rincon, Ana Quintana, Gregory Wilpert

<https://youtu.be/-bnRRDrPlcg>

9. *Al Jazeera debate* 12 min

Ricardo Hausman, Temir Porras

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQHKOKPuL8E>

10. *France TV 4 debate* 44 min

Alejandro Velasco, Natalia Brandler, Daniel Lansberg-Rodriguez, Michael Derham

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8\\_jw\\_wOZdK0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_jw_wOZdK0)

11. Report interviewing women from both sides in Venezuela. Note: People with the views of the Chavista women are becoming harder and harder to find. They also see themselves as a minority.

<https://youtu.be/PT2bWKv0C8M>

12. John Oliver – May 2018 – Comic commentary on the Venezuelan 2018 elections – 20 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYfgvS0FA7U>