

Left Media Coverage of Venezuela Questioned

Monday 6 May 2019, by [LANDER Edgardo](#), [PERIES Sharmini](#) (Date first published: 3 May 2019).

Prominent Venezuelan sociologist and intellectual Edgardo Lander says while it's correct to oppose U.S. intervention and interference, Left media should not minimize the responsibility of the Maduro government for the economic crisis

Edgardo Lander is professor emeritus at the Central University of Venezuela, and a fellow of the Transnational Institute. He is the author of numerous books and research articles on democracy, the myths of industrialization and economic growth, and left-wing movements in Latin America. For the last decade he has been preoccupied with another issue, which is fossil fuel economy and the environment.

Edgardo, before we sat down, you had a critique of the way in which The Real News has been covering the crisis in Venezuela. And you basically said it's been too pro-Chavista, and you can explain what you meant—or Madurista. And I argued that, you know, when there is military intervention pending, and the mainstream media, most of the media are toeing that line on behalf of the empire, there needs to be a counterpoint. And so I want to ask you, what is wrong with the way in which the left has been covering the crisis and the struggle in Venezuela?

EDGARDO LANDER: I realize and I agree with the fact that for the left in the United States, and for the left media in the United States, the single most important issue is to confront U.S. intervention. And that's sort of a question of principle, and a question of urgency. There is a real threat that has been announced again and again by Bolton, by Pence, by Trump himself, that all options are on the table. The possibility of intervention is there. Guaido has actually called for U.S. intervention, military intervention. So that's not something to be taken lightly. And there's an urgent need, and something that we, of course, from Venezuela greatly appreciate, that whatever pressure is put on the U.S. government and U.S. public opinion to confront this logic of intervention and imperialist regime change logic, et cetera, is something that's the priority.

However, in terms of not only the media, but the left, and how the left has been thinking, and basically thinking about the left in the case of Latin America, I think that the way the left has debated and thought about the experience of the progressive governments has been framed in Cold War terms. It's the notion that there is the good guys and the bad guys, there's imperialism and anti-imperialists, and nothing else, and you have to take sides, and that's it. There's no possible in-between reflection of the complexities of what's at stake. And that has severe consequences.

I always go back to comparing the current situation of the left in the world in relation to progressive governments to the way the Communist Party, so much of the intellectual left, especially Europe, dealt with the Soviet Union, with gulag, with Stalinism, with the fact that millions of people were killed; where that was a consequence of policies by a highly authoritarian government. And this was in this context of a dual vision, a zero-sum game, in which all the good guys were on one side, all the bad guys on the other side.

The refusal to criticize Stalinism, refusal to criticize the way the Soviet government completely destroyed any possibility of democracy in the Soviet Union, led to solidarity with a government, not to the people. The people were suffering the consequences. And if Soviet citizens were suffering the consequences of a very repressive government, they obviously would expect the left, their allies, who had been so-expressed so much solidarity with their struggle, to support them in the resistance against this violent, oppressive state. And there was no such thing. The majority of the left, especially the communist parties, either hailed praise on the glories of the Soviet revolution, or—that was the case with many intellectuals—they just didn't talk about the issue. And that's a grave mistake, and it has enormous long term consequences, because one has to construct the vision of alternatives to capitalism in ways that are attractive. I mean, we need not only an alternative to capitalism, but a better alternative. We need a society that's more democratic, where there's more participation, where women's issues are central, where the threats of environmental collapse are taken into account in a very critical, central way in terms of thinking about alternatives. We need alternatives that recognize cultural diversity, et cetera, et cetera.

So unless the, sort of, imagination of the possibilities of a different future are more attractive than capitalist society, the overwhelming consumerism of capitalist society will always triumph.

SHARMINI PERIES: Edgardo, are you suggesting that Chavismo, as a socialist project for the 21st century, has not triumphed in spite of the many of gains it has made for the poor in society?

EDGARDO LANDER: There's several issues here. First is what we see or think as an alternative. In the Venezuelan case, one of the severe problems that has led to the current crisis is the fact that the Chavez government in the first place identified socialism with state control, and many, many enterprises were nationalized and came under state control. So what happens? For the state, it became widespread in control of many, many, many activities, but it became weaker. It did not have the capacity to manage or deal with so many enterprises. It gave priority to ideological purity over technical competence in leading these enterprises. And as a consequence, a huge proportion—and when I mean huge, I mean the great, great majority of those corporations, or small companies, or whatever—went bankrupt, and they only subsisted, they only survived, as a consequence of money that was put on from the oil rent.

So this is an absurd situation. When you have functioning companies, when there were very few experiences of actual workers control, which weren't very successful, but there were some attempts, but most cases it was a bureaucratic state, central control, that led to a collapse of production. So these are the sorts of issues that have to be discussed in terms of what do we want as an alternative.

If we identify socialism with state control, then a majority of the population will simply reject this as an attractive political alternative, because it's seen the results. They've seen the results all over the place. I always say that the—that's where the left has a responsibility in relation to Cuba, for instance, because the level of state control in Cuba obviously led to really limited ways in which Cubans could take control of their own lives. The incentive to create not only economic activities, but intellectual, or artistic, et cetera, activities, were completely limited by the fact that everything was so highly, highly controlled by a central state. And this was recognized by the Cuban population for quite some time. They realized that they needed alternatives to strict state control. Latin American left intellectuals and parties were also aware of this. But since, thanks to the blockade, you couldn't criticize Cuba. It meant that you couldn't—not only not criticize Cuba, you couldn't contribute to the Cuban debate, because this was criticizing the Communist Party or the Cuban government.

So what happened? This unsustainable level of state control just went on and on and on and on, unless—until it became obvious that it wasn't viable anymore. Now the Cubans have recognized that.

The government has recognized. Now there's a new constitution. Now it's open to foreign investment. But it's taken so many years. And there's been so much suffering, unnecessary, because there was no debate. And the Latin American left that could have contributed to this debate was completely silent, because the solidarity was with the Cuban government, not with the Cuban people.

If we think about the experience of the progressive governments recently, we think about the experience of Nicaragua, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, they were, in these experiences, obviously mixed results.

SHARMINI PERIES: Edgardo, and yet, in a very short decade, under very difficult governing interruptions of various kinds, including coup d'états, there has been enormous gains realized by the poor and the working poor, such as housing, huge reduction in illiteracy, higher education, land rights, and so on.

EDGARDO LANDER: There were enormous advancements and gains in many areas. In the case of Venezuela, all that had to do with participatory democracy and popular organization. It was a really significant transformation of people's lives, and people's sense of dignity and capacity to have a say in their own lives, have a say on the future of the country. There was a very significant change in people's access to health, to education. And obviously this was a huge change in relation to the previous situations.

But at the same time, there were limits from the very beginning that could have been debated, and weren't. For instance, there was a deep contradiction between this active promotion of grassroots organization and the fact that these grassroots organizations, on the main were not really autonomous because there was political democracy at the organizational level, but there wasn't ever serious steps taken in the direction of economic autonomy or economic democratization. So these organizations were highly, highly dependent on government giveouts, government resources. And that has two major problems. One is the obvious situation we have now, in which once the government lacks the resources to hand out to popular organizations, popular organizations sort of wither away. They can sustain their work because it depended on these giveouts. But on the other hand, the possibility of achieving autonomy at a grassroots level, the notion of self-government, the notion of communes and community councils, and forms of self-government, are highly limited if they don't really have any sort of own source of generating income. And that really never happened, except for some exceptional cases. And those exceptional cases, or in some cases in the state [land], for instance, are the things that survive. Because they have their own, sort of, economic base. They have the possibility of deciding what to do with the land, how to do it, how to handle it, et cetera, et cetera.

So what I'm trying to say is that in this process of debating why there is a return of the right, why we have Bolsonaro, why we have Macri, and what's happening in a few other countries, we have to recognize that there were serious problems in these experiences, and the less we recognize self-critically what went wrong and why it went wrong, then we've refused to learn from experience. And if we've refused to learn from experience, then there's no such thing as critical thinking. Unconditional solidarity is not critical. And critical thinking can't be based on uncritical thinking.

And we have this experience of systematic uncritical reflection because these leftist governments are threatened from abroad. And that's it. End of debate. If the world is in, in terms of logic of Cold War, if it's in, in terms of imperialist, anti-imperialist, if it's in this very simplified confrontation, then that really severely limits the possibility of a more complex, nuanced comprehension of what the experience is of all 20th century socialism, or the experience of the progressive governments in the century. The fact that one sees problems, limits, sees corruption, sees inefficiency, sees conceptions

that lead to alternatives that are not what we thought when we're fighting for a freer society, et cetera, the fact that we recognize those and refuse to talk about them is just complicit with governments that have not carried out what they were supposed to carry out.

SHARMINI PERIES: So, as I said in the beginning, this is a seven part series, so please join me on Real News Network for part two of my conversation with Edgardo Lander.

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