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### The Bolivarian experience (from Venezuela through Bolivia): Plurinationalism and Community Empowerment.

By: Andrés Pierantoni G.

In the short time available for my presentation, I will try to provide some "traces" on two issues requested by comrades Mehmet Alí Dogan and Gran Özkan as of particular interest to this Congress and for which I thank their collaboration in drafting this paper: Plurinationalism and Communal Power.

In fact, both topics are interrelated as the two faces of the same coin: in Bolivia and Ecuador, the concept of Plurinationalism is intertwined with indigenous or Afro-descendant communities rooted to their "Pacha Mama" and traditions, as the Rojava communities are; the Venezuelan case, instead, is that of mostly urban, uprooted communities, similar to the Kurdish *ghettos*, e.g. in the Istanbul outskirts.

#### **Pluri-Nationalism in Bolivia and Ecuador**

One essential text to understand the thinking of Öcalan and the Kurdish progressive forces, “**Democratic Confederalism**”, proposes:

*"The democratic confederalism can be described as a type of self-administration in contrast to the administration of the Nation-State...In the long run, freedom and justice can only be achieved within a dynamic confederate and democratic process. Neither the total rejection and the full recognition of the State are useful for democratic civil society efforts. The overcoming of the State, in particular of the Nation-State, is a long-term process."*

Without any doubt, the “vanguard” to this end in Latin America, not only at community but also at country and State level, is the Plurinational State of Bolivia, as it can be perceived by simply reading certain articles of its Constitution:

**Article 1.** *Bolivia becomes a unitary State of law, **plurinational, community, ... democratic, intercultural, decentralized and autonomous**. Bolivia is founded on the ... **political, economic, legal, cultural and linguistic pluralism**, within the integrating process of the country.*

**Article 2.** *Given the precolonial existence of Nations and indigenous peasants and their ancestral dominion over their territories, their self-determination - in the framework of the unity of the State - is guaranteed, consisting of their **right to self-***

**determination, self-government, to their culture, to the recognition of their institutions and the consolidation of their territorial entities...**

**Article 3.** *The Bolivian nation is comprised of all Bolivian women and men, **nations and native peasants, indigenous peoples and the intercultural communities and AfroBolivians** which together constitute the Bolivian people.*

**Article 5.**

- I. *official languages of the State are Spanish and all the languages of the Nations and indigenous peoples, who are the aymara, araona, baure, besiro, canichana, cavineño, cayubaba, chacobo, chiman, that eija, guaraní, guarasu'we, guarayu, itonama, leco, machajuyai-kallawaya, machineri, maropa, mojeño trinitario, mojeño-ignaciano, moré, mosetén, movima, pacawara, puquina, quechua, sirionó, tacana, tapiete, toromona, uru-chipaya, weenhayek, yaminawa, yuki, yuracaré and zamuco (36 in total!)*

**Article 9:** *Purpose and essential functions of the State, besides other established by the Constitution and the law, are to:*

- 1... **consolidate plurinational identities.**
- 2... **encourage mutual respect and plurilingual, intercultural and intracultural dialogue.**
- 3... **preserve, as historical and human heritage, the plurinational diversity.**

**Article 98.**

**...cultural diversity constitutes the essential basis of the community plurinational State...**

A similar approach can be appreciated in certain articles of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador:

Article 1.- *Ecuador is a constitutional State of rights and justice,... unitary, **intercultural, plurinational** and secular. It is organized in the form of Republic and is governed in a decentralized way.*

Article 3.- *... fundamental duties of the State are to:... **strengthen national diversity in unity...***

Article 60.- *ancient, indigenous peoples, Afro-Ecuadorians and Montubios may establish **constituencies for the preservation of their culture**. The law shall regulate its conformation. **The communes which have collective land ownership are recognized** as an ancient form of territorial organization.*

Article 257- *in the framework of the political administrative organization, **indigenous or Afro-Ecuadorian constituencies can be established, which shall exercise the powers of the corresponding autonomous territorial Government, and shall be governed by the principles of interculturalism, plurinationality and in accordance with the existing collective rights...** Two or more districts administered by indigenous or multicultural territorial Governments may integrate and form a new constituency...*

Article 318.- ... **The State will strengthen the management and operation of the community water management initiatives and the provision of public services, through the incentive of alliances between the State and community for the provision of services.**

If we read the Rojava “Charter” or “Social Contract”, we can see a similar approach: “... we, the people of the autonomous communities, together in the **spirit of reconciliation, pluralism and democratic participation** so that all can express themselves freely in public life... To establish this Charter, we declare a political system and the civil administration founded on **a social contract that reconcile the rich mosaic of Syria...**”.

### **The experience of Venezuela: the “Comunas” as cells of a new society and a new State**

Unlike Bolivia and Ecuador, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, while it is true that in its Constitution there is a whole chapter (VIII) of “**the rights of indigenous peoples**”, including the collective ownership of their lands, the indigenous people that still live in ancestral lands, and under ancestral rules and habits, actually are only 2.5% of the population (725.141 out of 28.946.101 inhabitants: census 2011); and the total rural population is only 11.2%, due to an oil based economy which rent was mainly allocated to the large cities and their nurturing ports (“nurturing” meaning imports of finished products and intermediate goods for assembly-type factories), thus concentrating resources and jobs in the country’s Center-North coastal strip.

In the ideology of Comandante Chávez the term “Comuna”, therefore, embraces not only economic, social and ethical-cultural aspects, as we will try to summarize hereinafter, but also that of “**socio-territorial equity**” (“*The Homeland Plan*”, 3.4.1) as indispensable tool for the population and budgetary resources reallocation towards the “Integral Development Axes”: i.e., the *Northern Llanero* axis (as per the “intermediate urban centres” project - just South of the a.m. coastal strip - proposed during the '80s by the GTZ, the cooperation agency of Germany: a “reference-country” for urban spatial distribution) and the Orinoco Belt (55.314 Km<sup>2</sup>. or 6% of the Venezuelan mainland, where the world largest oil proven reserves are).

Nobody better than Chávez, born and raised in a village of the “deep Venezuela”, acknowledged the cultural impoverishment and uprooting of values caused by the fast rural-urban migration and “urban ghettization”, which in Venezuela took place mainly in the second half of the last century.

In this sense, the concept of “Comuna” is both tactical and strategic: the latter being related to the a.m. “**socio-territorial equity**”, and the first to the recovery of the territorial and social sense of belonging & solidarity of rural villages, even in the midst of large cities, namely in their slums (referred to, before the Bolivarian Revolution, as “marginal”): “*the construction of socialism, our model. We must territorialize models*” insisted President Chávez in the so called “Golpe de Timón” (Rudder Struck). And in a recent document of the Presidential Council of Popular Government with the “Comunas”, in dealing with their relationship with nature, “*ruralization of the city*” and the “*re-green of life*” are mentioned.

In the same *Homeland Plan*, i.e. the legacy of Chavez projected to the future (2013-2019), for the **Great historical objective N° 1** (“*To defend, expand and consolidate the most precious good we have retaken after 200 years: national independence*”)

two General and Strategic Objectives are highlighted: “1.1.3 *To strengthen and expand people's power*” and “1.4. *To achieve food sovereignty*”.

Öcalan appeals for a “**return to the countryside**” (in order to recover the ancient Kurdish territory—flooded with dams and intervened in every possible way—but also to recover the socio-territorial fabric that allows the “back to the future” of direct democracy), shows that **the visions of Chávez, the Zapatistas and Öcalan all came together, from a similar background, both geographical (countryside) and historic** (“the end of history”: the fall of the Berlin wall and of the “real socialism”), and all have a similar “horizon”.

The concept of the “Comuna”, cross-through the whole Bolivarian Revolution project, becomes “*paramount*” in the last stage of Comandante Chávez life, under the slogan “**Comuna or nothing!**” at the last Council of Ministers on October 20, 2012 (after his last electoral victory: 55.07% of the votes with an historical abstention of only 19.51%) defined as the “***Golpe de Timón (Rudder Struck) for a new cycle of the Bolivarian Revolution***”.

So far, the only electoral defeat of the Bolivarian Revolution (with a narrow margin: 49%) was in the Referendum for Constitutional Reform on December 2, 2007: almost five (5) years before that “Golpe de Timón”.

On January 6, 2008—one month after that defeat—at the N° 299 “*Aló Presidente*”, Chávez made the following self-criticism: “*We cannot go to the speed which we aspired with the reform, I prefer to reduce speed, strengthen the popular organization, the people's power, and when we're ready at a later stage... then speed up the march again... Now we must take care of body cohesion, cohesion of masses, parties, people, social movements... the Explosion of communal power. Certainly, the vision I had was that of the explosion relied on the Reform, so what is going to happen now it is not the explosion, it is the progressive increase...*”

And to get that “*progressive increase*” the answer was “*give more power to the people through the organization, duties and resources transfer*”, in line with of article 184—among others—of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: “*law will create open and flexible mechanisms for States (regions) and municipalities to decentralize and transfer to communities and organized neighborhood groups the services that they can manage...*”.

The above jointly with “*... the Socialist production model... in the creation of communal production units, for the transfer of productive power to the communities... I want that we choose in the country a few pilot projects, 20 or 30,... building up the Communal Council federations or “Comunas”, in each State choose a pilot project... and then we focus our efforts there, in order to get it as a model, a display cabinet...*” (N° 299 “*Aló Presidente*”).

To this end, considering that the “*fast-track*” option referred to in the Constitutional Reform could not be achieved (such reform to allow – among other things – direct annual allocation of government budgetary resources to “Comunas”...), a “corpus” of laws was then enacted, between November 2009 (new law of Communal Councils), March 2010 (the Federal Government Council law) and December 2010 (the “Quintet” of laws of the People's Power, Social Monitoring, “Comunas”, Communal Economic System and Communal-State Planning System) which, among other things, expanded from the local (Municipalities) to the regional (States) level (the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is “*a decentralized federal State*”) competence on

the following instances: Plan & Budget (from discussion and approval through monitoring) and Planning & Management of the territory.

Consistently with the above, the functions of parish authorities were substantially reduced by the reform of the Municipal law, the same month of December 2010, for those functions to be transferred to the starting "Comunas".

Going back to the a.m. "**Golpe de Timón** (Rudder Struck) for the new cycle of the Revolution", President Chávez made a balance of these legislative achievements and, at the same time, a self-criticism for not starting implementing them in the subsequent biennium (2011-2012):

— *"I think that we have a few new codes; I think we got a new legal architecture since the Constitution; we have laws of Communal Councils, laws of "Comunas", communal economy, laws of development districts; but we do not pay attention to any of those laws; ...in most of the small, medium or large projects that we are pushing for (homes, new cities, scientific development poles, agricultural development poles), ... there are no Comunas"*

— *"is it our target the railway? is it the road? or is it the **change of all the geographic-human relationship alongside those axes?**... from the point of view of capitalism, whom the road benefits to? To the capitalist, who now is going to get more cattle out of his land at a lower costs... Then, with roads what we are doing, from the traditional point of view, is increasing the gap..."*

— *"We need to partner with small producers, but we have to **implant** social ownership, socialist spirit, along the entire chain from agriculture through the distribution system and consumption... we must not lose sight... to **the core part of this project: we must not keep opening new factories that are like islands, surrounded by the sea of capitalism, because they will be swallowed by that sea**".*

And to this end, three guidelines were set:

- economic: *"these productive **implants** shall have policies of partnership among themselves in a cluster form, in order to increase their scale" (The Homeland Plan, 2.1.1.1)*

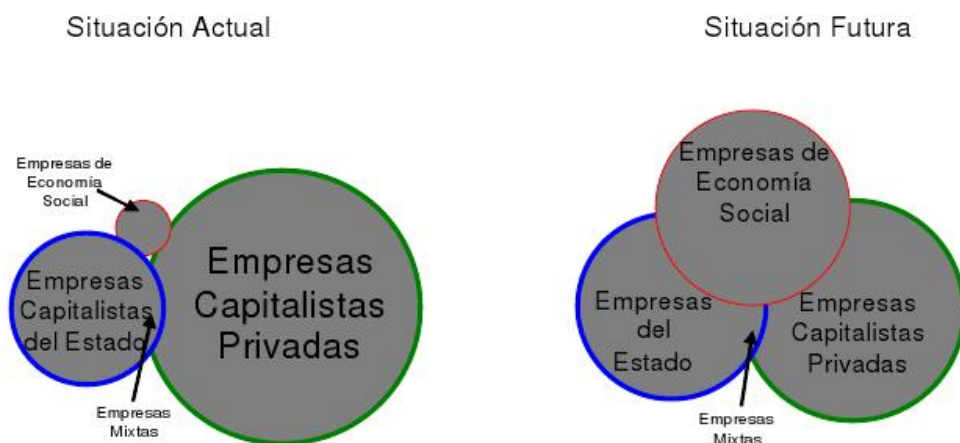
- the socio-territorial: *"to contribute to the socio-economic welfare of the environment where communities are productive, in a policy of **point** (i.e., the "implant") **and circle** (i.e., the socio-territorial environment), allowing the communities participation – and monitoring - in social and economic processes".(Ibidem, 2.1.3.4) and, finally,*

- institutional: *"a shared governance, a shared and joint agenda of actions which should be developed between the Government (at national, regional or local level) and the people's power expressed in instances of Comunas or of Comunas aggregation systems": see the Agreements of the Presidential Council of Popular Government with the "Comunas" (which we will mention later), which included the incorporation by President Maduro of that Council to the Federal Government Council, on last December.*

And President Chávez concluded his “**Golpe de Timón**” (Rudder Struck) as follows: “*The problem is cultural, comrades... Because the XXI Century Socialism, which resurfaced here as from the dead, is something new; has to be truly new, and one of the things new in our model is essentially its democratic character, a **new democratic hegemony**, that obliges us not to impose but to convince and from there... the media issue, the communications issue, the argumentation issue...*”.

And the central challenge, in this context, is how to achieve that Communal Territories not to be “swallowed” by the “sea of capitalism”, as the Vice-President of Bolivia, Garcia Linera says in his 2nd thesis: “*This accelerated globalization of production has resulted in the formal, external, subsumption of agricultural communal work, non-capitalist or pre-capitalist, under the command of a continuously breed capitalist accumulation, as a kind of perpetual primitive accumulation, which pushes explosively nations and indigenous people of Africa, Latin America and Asia to become nations, classes and knowledge base in capitalism, even if they are not Nations, classes and knowledge base of the capitalism. The State political indianism in Bolivia, the resistance indianism in Mexico or Brazil and in other parts of the world, indigenous and peasant struggles are an active visualization of this... contradiction of this new stage of capitalism*” (9 Thesis about capitalism, Left Forum, Pace University, New York, July 2013). The same García Linera further clarifies in his 8<sup>th</sup> thesis: “*...the struggle for the State power which is, above all, a matter of hegemony in the Gramscian sense, i.e. it is a political-cultural construction, not a simple occupation of State power...*”.

The complexity of the challenge of the “sea of capitalism” can be appreciated by this graph that we extracted from the “**First Nation’s Plan 2007-2013** (the Simón Bolívar National Project)” and which explains, to a large extent, the frustration and self-criticism expressed by Comandante Chávez in his “**Golpe de Timón**” (Rudder Stroke):



By October 2012 Chávez already envisaged that at the end of the day (2013), the share in the Venezuelan economy of the “*Empresas Capitalistas de Estado*” (State companies) would have been increased (to the detriment of the “capitalist private companies”), but not that of the “*Empresas de Economía Social*” (Social Economy Companies), still marginal despite being pivotal to the XXI century Socialism: as the base for a “***new metabolism for the transition to socialism***” which consists in

*“promoting new forms of organization of production that put the production means at the service of the society...”* (Homeland Plan, 2.1.1).

So the “Situación Futura” (Future Situation) planned in 2006 to be achieved by 2013, was (and still is) far from being achieved !

By an apparent paradox, on the other hand, in electoral terms the impact of the community project has been conspicuous: the first law of Communal Councils in April 2006 contributed to break the 60% votes barrier (52.6% were when Chávez was elected President in December 1998, then stabilized in July 2000 and August 2004 at 59.76% and 59.09%, respectively), while the “peak” of the votes achieved by the Bolivarian Revolution so far (62.88%) was in the December 2006 presidential elections (i.e., 8 months after the new law of the Community Councils was enacted and started being implemented).

The “reverse of the coin”, as mentioned with the “Situación Futura”, are the poor results in terms of shifting the economy from being a predominantly private & state to an increasingly “social” (Communal) one, due to the fact that community networks from the very beginning (2006) were asked to support campaigning presidential or regional/local elections, in exchange of government resources being allocated to them for social projects (e.g. housing).

The outcome, therefore, was positive in electoral terms, but poor in terms of structural changes.

The “electioneering paramountcy”, however, was a “must”, namely after the April 2002 coup d’Etat and the strike in the State oil company (2 December, 2002 through February 3, 2003), to keep neutralizing, by nineteen (19) electoral processes, internal and external harassment against the Bolivarian Revolution.

Here the first challenge: while performing an outstanding record of “Western democratic patterns” in terms of elections, structural changes were diluted or postponed, thus leaving the economy vulnerable – at present – to an even more aggressive “sea of capitalism”: fall in oil prices, US sanctions, etc.

A similar, even if not so tough situation, has been experienced by Evo Morales in Bolivia (who won January 2006, January 2010 and October 2014 elections), the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (November 2006 and 2011) and Correa in Ecuador (January 2007, April 2009 and February 2013). Unfortunately, that was not the case of Honduras (Manuel Zelaya: elected in January 2006 and ousted in June 2009) and Paraguay (Fernando Lugo: elected in August 2008 and ousted in June 2012).

In this sense, the alert in the “**Golpe de Timón**” (Rudder Stroke) is still there, as the last and main “*legado de Chávez*” (Chávez legacy): the need to transform the communal project from an oil-rent “drops” distribution mechanism to tens of thousands small Community Councils (attending not more than 400 families each, cloistered in the solution of a few tanks of water or of a staircase), to a mechanism of actual empowerment by the larger “Comunas” (several integrated Community Councils) of planning & management, sustainable socio-productive projects with surplus being re-allocated to the “Comunas” network, transfer of competences and resources, etc.

This “gradual increase” of “cells” (“Comunas”) and their aggregation systems, while displacing the old structures, would eventually allow the leap towards President Chávez main goal: the “**Communal State**”.

The complexity of this process can be appreciated from its social base: nothing further from the orthodox Marxist vision that a revolution greatly supported by “lumpen” sectors under a leadership that is cultural and “religious”, more than political and ideological, a leadership that offers to the “excluded” a new alliance with the State, or at least a fair part of its revenue as an oil-rich State, after the betrayal of Bolívar ‘social pact’ with slaves (freedom) and poor farmers (land to those who joined the ranks of the independence army), by the same Bolívar lieutenants, soon after he died in 1830. Same lieutenants then splitted the Bolivarian “Gran Colombia” into the Republics of Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia (from which Panama seceded by 1903).

That betrayal has not been forgotten by the Venezuelan people who, from time to time, fire back with “volcanic” outliers, like the last one on February 27, 1989 (the “Caracazo”: more than 3.000 victims), which gave momentum to the Chávez insurgency in February 2002 and to his electoral victory on December 1998. That same State, even with staff changes, keeps playing “*old and harmful practices*” (Homeland Plan, Presentation). The solution is to “**completely pulverize the form of State bourgeois we inherited... by the radicalization of a participatory and leading democracy**” (*Ibid.*), which is the communal power’s pivot: here is another challenge, the main one, perhaps.

In this respect, it has to be mentioned that the Öcalan Democratic Confederation scheme, as far as “*the application of democratic decision making processes from the local to the global level*” is related, cannot be mechanically applied to the Venezuelan, Bolivian and Ecuadorian realities because the main resources in these countries—and in most other Latinamerican ones—don’t come from the people labour, as in the main Kurdistan areas, but from the rent of natural resources which can only be exploited by large corporations: multinationals or State ones. See the similar and complex situation of South Kurdistan, where a large part of the population lives with the oil rent distributed by the Barzani and Talabani governments.

On the other hand, fresh agricultural produce instead of an industrialized one, satisfying basic needs from the “circle” around the communities and not crossing Oceans, means not only a better rationale in social, but also in economic terms: sometimes not at the micro level (i.e., production costs of a small scale industry vs. a large one) but yes at the macro level (transportation and energy savings, less environmental impact, less infrastructural and social—e.g., health—costs, etc.).

This new vision of a sustainable development (that of Chávez, the Zapatistas, Öcalan and many others) eventually reached the General Assembly of the United Nations (under Father D’Escoto Presidency 2008-2009, with some of the recommendations of the “Stiglitz Commission”) and the same UNCTAD at its Doha Conference: “*we emphasize the importance of promoting local industries... that generate productive employment and strengthen local communities*” (Doha12).

Being aware of that challenge and of the legacy of Comandante Chavez in this respect, President Maduro deserves special attention to the General Objective 2.3.1.4 of the “Homeland Plan”: “*the consolidation and the accompanying of Popular Power*



*in the 2013-2019 period will consolidate the formation of 3,000 Socialist Comunas” to “groupe 39,000 communal councils, where 4.680.000 families would make life representing 21.060.000 citizens. I.e. about 68% of Venezuelan population in the year 2019 (30.550.479) will live in the Comunas aggregation sub-system”.*

By the last 1<sup>st</sup> April, when I boarded the plane to come to this Conference, we reached **1035 communes registered**.

Besides, as mentioned, President Maduro on last September installed the Presidential Council of Popular Government with the Comunas, for them to enjoy direct access to the top government structure: the Federal Government Council.

However, if we need to update the self-critical “Golpe de Timón” (Rudder Stroke), we still would say that, even if the quantitative growth keeps momentum (driven by housing schemes: 120,000 homes out of a total of 677,400 were built—since 2011 through last February—by the Communal network and 180,000 out of the 400,000 are to be built by it during this year budget), the *qualitative edge* is still below expectations (in terms of the Communal share in the Venezuelan economy, as mentioned before), even if this economic challenge is the backbone of both the Comunas and Communal Economic System laws.

Still, the “quality-impact” of the Chávez community project has to be considered by a social point of view, as a key contribution to the people self-confidence and consciousness process, namely for women: most of the Venezuelan Community leaders (from Community Councils to Comunas) are women, mainly housewives and single mothers. Chávez, as Öcalan, was a true “feminist” and, in his speeches, women role in the Bolivarian Revolution was always highlighted.

On the other hand, the strongest and more pro-active Comunas rise from where a history of struggle is skin deep: e.g., from the “*Máximo Vizcaya Socialist Comuna*” in the countryside Municipality of Campo Elías, Yaracuy State (one of the guerrilla areas in the 60s) to the “*Comuna Renacer de Bolívar*” (Bolívar reborn) in the La Vega parish, from where many left leaders came, of the capital Caracas city.

Perhaps this is the most important aspect, so far, of the Communal and the whole “chavista” project: for the people to get back their collective memory, uprooted for decades, similarly as for the Kurdish people, and where the State bureaucracy is still perceived by the Communal Movement as the legacy of what Chávez called the “***inherited bourgeois State***”.

And until that national “*bourgeois State*” becomes part of some South American “Democratic Confederalism”, consistent with our history and culture, no social emancipation project is workable, against local and “imperial” oligarchies, in any single South American country: in this, again, Chávez and Öcalan have a quite similar vision.

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