

# The Dream of a Thing

## *Refounding the Economy of a Venezuelan Commune*

CHRIS GILBERT

*The world has long had the dream of a thing of which it only needs to become conscious for it to possess in reality.*

— KARL MARX TO ARNOLD RUGE, 1843

Probably the most famous saying of José Carlos Mariátegui, often seen as the founder of Latin American Marxism, is that, on our continent, socialism should be “not a copy or imitation but rather a heroic creation.”<sup>1</sup> Hugo Chávez liked to quote this phrase, using it in relation to the communal project that he was promoting in Venezuela, which he said was also a heroic creation. At least on one occasion, the late president brought Mariátegui’s phrase into dialogue with Mao Zedong’s claim that the people’s commune in China was to be “a creation of the masses.”<sup>2</sup> Chávez’s use of Mariátegui’s phrase broke with tradition. Over the years, the statement has generally been appealed to with emphasis on the essentially negative part of it (“not a copy or imitation”), but Chávez gave equal weight to the latter part, which focused on the construction of new social relations as a popular, constitutive act. He was surely right to do so. For what would socialism be if not an innovative creation of the people? Beyond the refusal to copy and imitate, Chávez saw that what was needed was a difficult but necessary collective effort of the masses that would involve their engaging in iterative experimentation – investigation, participation, and action – in building socialism.

The earlier preference for the first part of Mariátegui’s phrase is far from accidental. As a rejection of a kind of politics – expressed as an unwillingness to merely repeat the formulas of European socialism – the first part coincides well with the spirit of the 1990s and the rise of social movements at that time. In the wake of the crisis of real socialism, the *movimientismo* that dominated that decade typically went hand-in-hand with a rejection of politics or at least normal state politics. The anti-political zeitgeist of the long 1990s was clearly expressed in the (neo)Zapatista movement in Chiapas, which refused both the NAFTA trade agreement

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and state politics, and announced that they would change the world without taking power. Similarly, the *piqueteros* of Argentina would say about politicians, “¡Que se vayan todos!” (“They all should scram!”). However, a second, clearly distinct historical epoch and shift in emphasis came in the twenty-first century with the emergence of Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, whose movements both focused on taking power.

Hence, we can make a rough historical schema in which one decade based on the rejection and refusal of politics (no copies or imitations) gives way to a second decade of heroic and creative political construction. There are varied historiographical perspectives for interpreting this shift. Given the obvious contrasts, Zapatismo and Chavismo, like the *movimientismo* and Pink Tide of which they form respective parts, have often been seen as mere opposites, or else the Chavista movement will be presented as a savvy correction to the Zapatistas’ naïve anarchism (I myself have employed this problematic dualism). However, a more useful perspective would be to see Zapatismo and Chavismo as expressing two complementary principles of a deeply rooted endogenous emancipatory tradition in Latin America – on the one hand, the refusal of imposed political and social relations and, on the other, the determination to create and constitute new ones – both of which Mariátegui brought together in his two-part slogan, giving a role to each principle in the Latin American socialist project.

The rejection of imposed social and political relations and refusal to submit has a long history in the continent. This principle is expressed in the actions of the continent’s Indigenous peoples who, in diverse ways, fought, rejected, and refused the imposed colonial order. Other examples are the *marronage* practiced by enslaved Afro-descendants, or the bold decision of numerous guerrilla movements to, like the Zapatistas, “*ir al monte*” in rejection of the colonial or imperialist order. Yet the collective constitution of new social relations is a principle that is just as important. It is clearly perceived in Latin America in the community- and nation-making gestures that have taken place on varied scales and in different epochs. These include the self-governed Maroon, Palenque, Quilombo, and buccaneer communities spread throughout South America and the Caribbean; the anti-señorial project of the late eighteenth-century Andean communards of Colombia and Venezuela; and the proto-FARC’s highly effective “República de Marquetalia” – to say nothing of the rich and changing repertoire of Indigenous practices of resistant self-governance in the face of settler-colonial advances.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and we can see Chávez and Morales attempting to create new political and social relations very evi-

dently in their governments' constitution-making assemblies in 1999 and 2006 respectively, and subsequently in the communal project that the late Venezuelan president espoused in 2009. In fact, Chávez's politics in general was a clear expression of a non-deterministic materialism, which was based on the belief that, in the face of conditions that were not of their own choosing, people could make history by building a new and better society from the ground up. When Chávez riffed on and modified the central slogan of the World Social Forum by saying that "A better world is possible if it is socialist," part of what he meant is that a new world was possible if we *build* it and *constitute* it. In effect, if the Zapatistas had made history by articulating the refusal and resistance embodied in the first part of Mariátegui's epigram, then Chávez, by putting emphasis on the second part, was simply finishing the speech act that they had begun by expressing the determination to build something new: a new heroic and communal construction.



It was these thoughts that came to mind when Angel Prado, the charismatic leader of El Maizal, Venezuela's best-known commune, invited my colleague Cira Pascual and me to a bar near our home in Caracas. There he commented to us, with a nervous laugh and in a decidedly unheroic manner, that he was having a "Deng Xiaoping moment." Prado had reached out to us late one night in early December 2023. The timing was right for catching up. Our investigations over the past two years had been focused on other, less well-known communes, so we had been more or less out of touch. We knew that El Maizal, famous for its huge corn fields and its cattle and buffalo herds, had entered a new epoch in the two years since Prado had been elected mayor of the township where El Maizal is located. We had gotten wind of interesting developments in the township, but did not know what was taking place on the ground, so we were delighted to get his call. In the bar's patio in the cool night breeze, Prado told us that, despite the numerous political and social successes at El Maizal over the past two years, the economic side of the commune was not working well. Over his third beer, he told us they needed to try something new – an "alternative communal economy," he called it.

To flesh out this idea, which he admitted was inchoate, Prado mentioned building cooperatives, using something of the model of Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST), yet he insisted that the new format would not involve private property, not even collective private property. He wanted to find some way of both ending the wage relation still in place at El Maizal and spurring productivity, and he envisioned

implementing this alternative form of production in pilot projects for pig farming, event services, and fattening cattle. Prado's reason for being in Caracas was that the following day he was going to fly to Brazil to participate in the graduation of some of El Maizal's youth from a course on cooperative management at the MST's Josué de Castro Institute. These five youths would come back to El Maizal in two weeks and attempt to guide the commune in building something new – *a heroic and popular construction*, I registered internally. Prado thought that, as Marxists, we would be skeptical about this change (and he was too). In fact, we were open to the proposal since we knew that not just El Maizal but many other communes in the country were experiencing a crisis that was, at least superficially, an economic one. Needless to say, our curiosity was piqued about the kind of alternative communal economy they might build in this flagship commune. A few weeks later found us taking the long car ride to El Maizal, crossing the stretch of dry lands and low mountains that lies between the capital and the commune in the week before Christmas.



Christmas is by far the most important Venezuelan holiday. In this Caribbean country, the holiday is not just a couple of days in late December, but reaches both backward and forward to often include more than a month of festivities. To get a sense of the duration of the celebrations, the twelve days referred to in the famous Christmas carol would have to be multiplied by a factor of three or even four. A foreigner could be forgiven for thinking that Venezuelan Christmas celebrations, especially since they involve the ample use of reindeer headwear, stuffed Santa Clauses, and plastic evergreen trees, are merely an imperialist cultural imposition, brought here by the oil companies along with baseball, birthday parties, and beauty pageants. Yet, in all four cases, Venezuelans appropriated these foreign practices, transforming and adapting them to existing traditions. Beyond the specifics of the cultural syncretism, perhaps the most important thing about the Christmas holiday in Venezuela is the festive break with banal normality that it represents. In sharp contrast to the modern and essentially capitalist perception of time as a linear succession of identical moments, precapitalist societies, both in Europe and the Americas, relied on a concept of time that is full, cyclical, and richly symbolic. Faced with the colonists' banal clock time, Venezuelans refused to go softly into that good night. As a tactic of resistance, appropriating and inflating Christmas beyond existing proportions allowed – and still allows – for an experience of the fullness of time to be revived during the

weeks of communal *hallaca* (tamal) eating and solidarity gestures that go with the Venezuelan form of celebrating the holiday.

In Venezuela, it is not Santa Claus, but the Baby Jesus himself who miraculously (without helpers or sleighs!) distributes gifts to every household. Yet, when we pull into El Maizal Commune this December afternoon, what is on people's minds is a more down-to-earth form of distribution that is taking place in the lead-up to the Christmas holiday. This is the fledgling Communal Circuit's third delivery of food bags to the most active communes around the country. An aspiration of the communal project since its inception, the Communal Circuit system represents the Ministry of Communes' latest effort to link communes outside of normal market relations. Under the hot sun of the Venezuelan lowlands, we can see some of the country's prime agricultural production on display. There are packages of cacao powder from the Che Guevara Commune, "Ticoporo" cornmeal from the comanaged Leander mill in Barinas State, and communally produced Café Cardenal. These "*Hecho en Comuna*" foodstuffs are being stockpiled alongside fresh vegetables coming from the Andes and oil and rice the Ministry has procured from private producers. All of this is taking place in and around El Maizal's main building, which comprises both a headquarters and a warehouse that is now replete with the aroma of overripe peppers. Over the next couple of days, these sundry articles, coming from some of the most active communes in the country, will be sorted into bags that people in participating communes can obtain for around half the market price.

Since El Maizal is one of the communes best-equipped in terms of infrastructure and is centrally located, it has been chosen as the Communal Circuit's regional distribution hub. One by one, huge Belarusian flatbeds stacked with foodstuffs pull up to the warehouse. Producers from around the country come along with them, telling us their stories. One campesino from nearby Portuguesa State has accompanied a large shipment of *caraota* black beans. These dry beans, in neat packages that say "Comuna Río Auro," are in beautiful condition, and the sight of so much of this prized Venezuelan staple cannot help but inspire satisfaction, even without the photos he shows us on his phone of the well-tended and orderly fields they come from. Yet, the Río Auro communitarian is scrupulously honest, and admits that the production is merely "*arrimado*" (delivered) by small private producers to the Río Auro Commune. Somewhat later, we get wind that the Leander mill in Barinas – under combined state and communal management – is now buying most of the maize it processes from private producers. Coffee, too, is being purchased mostly from small private producers who have

joined the ministry's coffee circuit but have weak connections, or none at all, to functioning communes. Only the chocolate made by the stubborn and resistant Andean communards of the Che Guevara Commune seems to be sourced from a fully communal project.

This fortuitous window onto the state of Venezuela's communal economy coincides with what Prado told us some weeks ago in Caracas about the serious problems the country's most important rural commune is having with production. The sense of a general downturn in productivity is reinforced by what we are now told by the regional coordinator of communal circuits, Johander Pineda, whose position gives him a privileged viewpoint on what is going on in communes across the country. From under the shade of a small tree outside the warehouse, Pineda explains to us that maize production has unfortunately plummeted in all the country's communes this year. A late delivery of seeds from the Ministry, combined with the unfamiliar agroecological inputs called *bioles* that came with them, meant that more than 90 percent of the harvest was lost. This is what is behind the Leander corn mill's pivot to the private sector, since there is little raw material to be obtained from El Maizal or from the communes in Barinas. Beyond this, Pineda affirms that there is a general tendency taking shape throughout the Ministry's Communal Circuit project to sidestep the communes. On the ground level, the transactions to obtain and distribute goods might really be taking place between mayors' offices or state-run plants, on the one hand, and consumers on the other, with communes having a minimal or, in the worst of cases, merely ornamental, role. The Communal Circuit system seems also to have supplanted the earlier project of grouping communes together in "communal cities."<sup>3</sup>



The next day we begin inquiring about the commune's production and the new plans for an "alternative communal economy." We are interested in getting a handle on whatever changes in El Maizal's internal dynamics and social bonds might have caused production to fall off— which is what is partly motivating the commune's current search for a new direction in the economy. That is because, apart from the problems of logistics and inputs that Pineda described to us the day before, it occurs to us that there might be simply a lack of will and lack of interest that is hindering the commune's output. Perhaps exhaustion due to the arduous work of commune-building— in a context made more difficult by U.S. sanctions— has led to widespread burnout in the community. In effect, the problems that are manifesting as economic ones, we think, could also have significant affective and political dimensions. For example, it is hard to gauge

the impact of having the commune's charismatic leader in the mayor's office, since El Maizal has always been a very leader-oriented commune, and their longstanding go-to person for almost everything is now often tied up in other matters. This has to affect the commune on numerous levels, despite the benefits of having the municipal government under Prado's control. Nevertheless, the key aim of our inquiry is to get a better picture of the proposal for the new alternative communal economy and how it might work.

In the late morning, we encounter José Luis Sifontes in Sarare, the biggest town in the vicinity of the commune. Sifontes is a good friend of Prado and a communal cadre who has worn many hats at El Maizal over the years. He is an important asset to this commune, with his long experience as a popular educator and his revolutionary background (he participated in the November 1992 uprising alongside the young Nicolás Maduro). Seated outside his home in Sarare's "Gloria Sur" housing project, he tells us that some people feel Prado is erring these days by being "very much a mayor, but very little a comunard." Sifontes himself is certain that Prado is nothing short of the best mayor that Venezuela has ever had. Everything that a mayor should do has been attended to: he has repaired the roads, fixed the street lighting, and got the local hospital up and running to deal with a huge backlog of medical problems that built up during the crisis and pandemic years. But was that really the idea when the whole team of earnest comunards at El Maizal threw themselves heart and soul into Prado's election campaign, having to do so twice in a brief time?<sup>4</sup> "Is that how Angel Prado should enter history," he asks us, "as simply Venezuela's best mayor ever?"

At the same time, Sifontes says that one cannot help but see how many people who were cadres here have physically and mentally moved away from the commune. Many have joined Prado in the municipal government's offices; that more refined world of air conditioning, desk work, and finer clothing. Others seem to have just drifted away. When we ask about the "alternative communal economy" that Prado wants to develop, Sifontes suddenly transforms into the popular educator that he has been in the past. Speaking slowly so that I can write down each of the words, he delivers the following explanation: "*It is an alternative form of relating to the commune in which some comunards will be given land and supported in productive processes.*" To make things even clearer, he deftly draws a map of the commune and adjacent lands, showing houses with small plots that will be built along the perimeter of El Maizal's main corn fields and grazing areas. These new family production units will not only generate a decent living for those comunard families, but also prevent stray cattle

from entering El Maizal's fields and help in controlling the prairie fires that have plagued the commune in dry months.

We are astounded to hear this. As grateful as we are for the clarity of Si-fontes's explanation, it is puzzling, since the plan seems so unambitious compared to what Prado had told us. However, this is just the first of the surprises in store for us that day. During the course of the afternoon, as we visit sorely underused production units – greenhouses, a cheese-making facility, and cattle yards – we will hear wide-ranging stories about the plans for the new alternative communal economy. Some communards of El Maizal tell us that what is under consideration is simply more communal production under a regime of strict social property. Others will subsume the new proposal to just making additional family production units.<sup>5</sup> Still others talk about some kind of mixed property arrangement involving individual or cooperative usufruct of communal land and productive means for specific projects. Each of our interlocutors tries to explain how the alternative model could be applied to one or more of the proposed pilot sectors: greenhouses, event services, the pig farm, and livestock fattening. In a more intellectual and abstract register, we hear from communard Lana Vielma, who is now working in the municipal government, that the model draws on István Mészáros's description of the socialist transition as resembling rebuilding a house from within. She says that if you want to “generate an economy that is revolutionary and socialist,” it must also be “a real and tangible alternative” that is sustainable both for communard cadres and for future generations.<sup>6</sup>

After hearing such diverse, almost Rashomon-like perspectives on the alternative communal economy, we initially are bewildered by the evident lack of consensus. However, we soon realize that the radical perspectivism of our interlocutors is surely because the new economy is something that has to be collectively constructed. Hence, its parameters cannot be determined in advance or from above, and to do so would even be contradictory. In fact, it is reasonable to suppose that Prado purposely invented the “alternative communal economy” phrase – like an “empty signifier,” if you will – so that others could begin to imagine it, filling the proposal in with their own content. This is what Chávez did when he put forward the idea of a Bolivarian constitution in 1998 and then “twenty-first century socialism” half a decade later. That is, he invited the whole people to exercise their imaginations in fleshing out these proposals with their own content. Rather than a mystery, the “alternative communal economy” is a question of letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend. It is an invitation to imagine, to project our diverse needs and desires, to carve a small hole into the pres-

ent through which we are invited to pass in our imagination. After all, a project that involves reconstituting the community's social relations, which is what Prado is attempting here, would mean little if it did not involve widespread participation – if it were not, as Chávez himself said, “a heroic creation of the masses.”



Over the years that I have spent watching their work, I have often felt that both Prado and Chávez were guilty of a practice that in Spanish is called *huida hacia adelante*, meaning fleeing or escaping forward. In fact, I secretly developed a whole theory of *huida hacia adelante* as a form of leadership in revolutionary processes. The way you do things is to initiate a series of projects and, when these projects face hiccups and challenges, you simply move on to the next thing, leaving what seems to be a trail of unfinished, stagnated, or even failed initiatives behind you in the hurried pursuit of your larger strategic political goal. Rather than face the problems with what you have done so far – that is, hanging tight, or even returning to fix things, making sure they are done well – you move constantly forward, always upping the political ante with a Faustian gambler's double-or-nothing mentality. Instead of “Better fewer, but better,” as V. I. Lenin once recommended, it seems to be a matter of “Better more, even if worse.”

For people familiar with the vicissitudes of the Bolivarian Process, it is easy to see how Chávez himself operated this way with innumerable projects. Take subsidized food distribution. The Bolivarian Revolution's first project of state food distribution was carried out by the army in 1999 in the wake of the Vargas tragedy. When that proved too limited, Chávez made the MERCAL system consisting of shopfronts all around the country, with its own line of subsidized products including beans, pasta, cornmeal, milk, and sugar. This lasted for a half a decade, but when MERCAL turned sour because of bureaucratization and corruption, Chávez invented a whole new distribution system called Producción y Distribución Venezolana de Alimentos (PDVAL) in collaboration with the state oil company in 2008. When PDVAL literally rotted from the inside in a scandal involving thousands of containers left festering in Puerto Cabello, he jumped in 2010 to using the supermarket chain Abastos Bicentenario for subsidized food distribution. Witnessing this trajectory over the years, I always thought, with my crude instrumental rationality: *Why not just fix MERCAL, since all these projects do basically the same thing? Why always invent a new institution and not reorganize or purge the existing one?* The same could be said of Chávez's famous shotgun approach to making paragonovernmental

“*misiones*,” many of which, like Misión Cristo (a zero-poverty initiative) and Misión Negra Hipólita (addressing houselessness), are now almost totally forgotten, along with other abandoned projects of the revolution.

In nearly every respect a loyal follower of Chávez, Prado is no stranger to this political art. For example, well before the original territory of El Maizal Commune was consolidated in 2015, Prado was moving to take more land, venturing outside the commune’s existing boundaries with daring occupations of unused or underused haciendas in the neighborhood. True to form, before the ink was dry on any project he had begun, Prado was on to the next. Yet the most impressive example of Prado’s *huida hacia adelante* was the decision to become mayor of the Simón Planas township rather than slow down and get the commune in shape. If the truth be told, much of the commune’s production and even part of its productive means—essentially a whole pig farm—was sacrificed to finance his mayoral campaign. In a supreme example of exchanging economic capital for its political form, some three hundred pigs were slaughtered in the summer of 2021 on the altar of politics, their blood transubstantiated into much needed campaign funds, to facilitate the forward flight of this emerging Venezuelan leader. And all this is to say nothing of the human cost, the exhaustion of communal cadres in body and spirit, that was also part of the mayoral campaign.

Now, the best thing about long engagement with a revolutionary project is that it allows for self-criticism, and the most reliable source of self-criticism is, of course, experience. Over the years of my engagement with commune-building in Venezuela, I have come to understand that what I once believed to be merely *huida hacia adelante* is in great measure a form of anti-economism, even calculated anti-economism. In innumerable contexts, I have witnessed how Venezuela’s revolutionary culture is one that consistently puts politics in command and employs a playbook that is prefigurative, refusing to postpone emancipation from capitalism’s iron laws and its bonds on creativity, including the bonds of work-related drudgery, to some distant and merely intellectual goal. Instead, Venezuelan revolutionaries understand that, right now in the present, the human being is a “political animal,” and what is revolutionary politics but experimenting with new forms—trying, testing, inventing, and sometimes failing—while moving forward as one does so? Beyond that, what is socialism or communism but the overcoming of proletarian work, the sloughing off of capitalism’s chains, which can be prefigured by exercising the freedom to refuse and move away, escaping forward and inventing some new life option? Hence, what I once thought was “fleeing forward” may well be the necessary contrary of staying with the existing

order of things. Fleeing forward is a concrete breath of the future in the present, or a small portal through which the messiah passes – to use Walter Benjamin’s fine imagery in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.<sup>7</sup>

As it turned out, Prado’s repeated efforts to refuse the current state of things and leave onerous bonds behind – including those of capitalism and its gloomy life options – had led a kid born in a scrappy hillside coffee farm to fulfilling the role of a somewhat bureaucratic Chavista youth cadre, then on to becoming a stellar communist, and most recently to transforming into the successful mayor of Simón Planas. Now, that same drive was leading him to a new experiment and new invention in the form of the “alternative communal economy.” When Cira and I, after a long day of asking questions, finally track this elusive communal leader down to his house perched on an elevation overlooking the commune’s fields, it is to return to the question of the new project. This time, however, as he explains to us again the idea’s basic outline – essentially, the search for a still-to-be-decided way of combining the commune’s overall socialist production with specific projects that mobilize personal responsibility, thereby ensuring motivation – it is now my old preconceptions that have passed to the scrap heap of abandoned things. I currently understand this to be an important new chapter in the “forward-flight-that-is-better-called-socialist-emancipation.” Most importantly, Prado invites Cira and me to join him in a closed meeting that Saturday, which will involve a handful of the commune’s most trusted cadres and the youth recently returned from Brazil, to discuss the plans for the alternative economy.



In one of his rare moments of reflecting on human activity in general, Karl Marx wrote that every human architect “raises a structure in his imagination before building it in reality.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, projecting, imagining, and dreaming are all qualities that can be identified with being human, and all are expressed in diverse kinds of playing and play-acting. The meeting that Saturday to determine the shape of El Maizal’s “alternative communal economy” begins with the play-enactment of a collective vision. Written on long strips of paper, words expressing socialist values such as *solidarity*, *internationalism*, *sisterhood*, *love*, and *equity* are given to all of those attending, who are assembled in a circle around a small potted sapling. A young woman crouches in a fetal position in the middle of the room, then slowly rises up to the sound of soft music. She is joined by others from the MST-trained youth group who enter the room and move forward, circling in front of us, swinging their machetes near the floor. They seem to be clearing the ground before us, while they engage in

verbal repartee across the circle with phrases such as “Land and people free!” and “To each according to their needs.” Next, they bid us to each step out of the circle and hang our paper strips representing socialist values on the tree branches. One by one we come forward, saying the words out loud. When the tree is completely bedecked with socialist values, we go back to the circle of chairs and sing a series of revolutionary anthems, including “The Internationale.”

That marks the end of the ritual and the beginning of the official meeting. However, the spirit of the meeting that now unfolds is still shaped, as if a spell had been cast, by the symbolic preamble that preceded it. That is because something new had already been made through our collective play activity. Indeed, the point of this kind of ritual action – a crystal clear example of what Brazilian revolutionaries call “*mística*” – is that by playing and dramatizing, we were making something as a group. Arguably, too, we were simultaneously *making ourselves*, who we are together, since in play activities of this kind, one is not only *playing by the rules* but also *playing with rules* of one’s own making. Play activity in such contexts thus serves as a concrete expression of our capacity to imagine and invent, and is a reminder of one of the primordial powers that we have: the power to collectively create and constitute social forms, up to and including a new and better society. In *Hamlet*, the title character uses a play-within-a-play called “The Mousetrap” to catch a king’s deepest thoughts, but play activity can also “catch” our shared imaginings. It can convert the most quotidian circumstances into a stage for human projecting and imagining, the collective “raising of a structure in our minds” before we make it.

This is exactly what was going to be attempted that Saturday morning in late December in a small, mostly forgotten, Macondo-like town of the Venezuelan hinterland. There, one fledgling mayor, a former construction worker called Mesías, the Argentine internationalist Belén Benegas, a greenhouse attendant named Yefo Pérez, a retired middle-aged reservist who stood at attention during the anthems, the studious Vielma from the municipal government, plus five young people fresh from a half-year course in Brazil, and two eager fellow-travelers from Caracas had come together to discuss the future of the commune. This diverse group, armed with little more than a thermos of coffee and a borrowed video projector, was now going to set about imagining how one could lay the grounds and rules for a new way of producing in a commune and world in crisis. It would be an effort to envision, to fill with content, the proposal for the “alternative communal economy” that was to be tested and tried in El Maizal and later offered as a model to other communes in the country. The proposal, a shared construction, would therefore be a sort of hypoth-

esis and pledge of the kind that, since socialism was the strategic goal, also necessarily involves a wager of hope.

Prado is the first to speak. He makes a somewhat longish introduction, but his main aim is to pass the baton to the others who are participating. As a way of incorporating and acknowledging all those present, he mentions something about each person in the room, saying what they have been up to and why some have been less involved in the struggle. In doing so, he shows his awareness of the often very complex life circumstances, responsibilities, and economic necessities that might have drawn them away. The situation that has brought everybody together on the eve of the new year, he says, is that, despite El Maizal's good work in so many areas, production has fallen. In fact, there is serious stagnation and abandonment in most of the productive units. The new project that he has provisionally dubbed the "alternative communal economy" is essentially aimed at reviving the commune's production. Whatever is decided here in this meeting, he says, should take into account the successes in cooperativism and communal production elsewhere, in places such as Cuba and the Basque country, as well as in MST's and the Colombian insurgency's *campamentos*. As a way of transitioning to the next speakers, Prado reminds people that nothing important can be done by individuals. This is not the first time that an El Maizal comunard has gone to an MST school, but now there was a whole group who had gone together, and, as a *collective*, perhaps they could teach the commune something about what needed to be done. "We are not going to die as a commune," Prado says, "but we need to renovate through democratic means."

Now it is the MST-educated youth of the commune's turn to speak. The theater of *mística* behind them, the five speak in front of a PowerPoint presentation that shows the results of their collective brainstorming over the past couple of weeks about the "alternative communal economy." Taking turns, they stand before us and explain their ideas with a series of slides. A few initial slides show word clouds, with socialist values presented as visual poetry in multicolor typography. Next, an organizational chart shows how all of the various pilot projects—whether pig raising, event services, or cattle fattening—should be controlled by an assembly of the producers, and ultimately, the commune's parliament and general assembly. There should be committees and point people devoted to administration, accounting, follow-up, and procurement. The economic surplus is dealt with in another slide explaining how, after restoring the means of production and material inputs, 10 percent of the surplus from each project should go back to the commune. There is also a slide of bullet points that stresses

the need for the regular rendering of accounts, making and presenting production plans, frequent meetings, and, finally, the importance of rotating roles inside every socio-productive unit.

Even in their form of presenting, the five young speakers, who respectfully take turns and step forward to help one another when stuck, seem to be not just saying but showing us what they can do both as individuals and through solidarious teamwork. The question of rotating roles in the workplace is of special interest to them, and they come back to it more than once. Sensing reluctance among these young people to assume the most difficult and dirty jobs, Prado takes the opportunity to intervene: "I hope it won't turn out that you all are holed up in the office and no one wants to clean the pigs," he exclaims, provoking everybody's laughter. Having gotten people's attention, Prado tries to focus the group on what he sees to be the main Gordian Knot that needs to be cut: What has to be developed is a productive model that is still under the regime of communal property, as in Social Property Enterprises, but is partially given over in usufruct or *commodatum* to a group of individuals, such as a Family Production Unit. This more personally controlled part of the mixed system will provide an arena for fostering a sense of motivation and responsibility. Later on, he thinks, one can piggy-back the rest of the commune's production onto the impetus that has taken shape in these smaller projects.

Now that Prado has broken the ice, Benegas enters the debate, saying that in her view what is needed is: "a new method of work that generates conditions of economic stability for the families, the producers, and also the commune's bank." Prado agrees with this. The key, he thinks, is to find a way of forging some new social nexus, some inventive method of connecting people to production in a way that stimulates the individual or small group, and does so materially, but promotes communal welfare. Prado says that each of the pilot projects should be assumed from the perspective of not just *production* but also of *politics*, using the commune's established symbols and a discourse that emphasizes education, feminism, and internationalism. He also mentions the need to develop a mobile team of consultants to help the pilot projects with issues of efficiency and conflict resolution. There are just two years to achieve all of this before he might be replaced in the municipal government, Prado says, which he increasingly sees as just an "*ente financiero*" (financial entity).

With the meeting still in full swing, Cira and I learn that our ride to Caracas has arrived. Before leaving, we say some brief words of encouragement about a debate that seems to be growing in force and participation in the very moment we must leave. As we make the long return trip, I go on thinking about the viability of this project. Is it possible to invent a system that fulfills Prado, Benegas, and the youth's tensioned criteria that call for combining some space for individual motivation, on the one hand, with the realization of the common good, on the other? I feel that it must be possible, since here it is not Adam Smith's mystified "invisible hand" that is supposed to join the two, but rather a really existing *communal hand* that is charge with the task. Then there is the precedent: the meeting was taking place near the Sabana Alta village. It is a place that is replete with symbolism for El Maizal's communards, since it was there that, some fifteen years ago, a handful of the commune's founding member set up a "battle station" to plot the taking of land, thus laying the basis for a project that would bloom over the following decade to achieve well-deserved national renown. In fact, the formula they are looking for only looks impossible in the capitalist desert of ideas and life options, where social alternatives seem so scarce on the ground. Dig a bit deeper and one can see how complex but functional systems for achieving equity and coordinating labor in communal production have long been employed successfully in places as diverse as Basque villages, Andean *ayllus*, and Nepali rice farming communities.<sup>9</sup>

As far as the general project of refounding this commune with a new social-economic system is concerned, which is what is being proposed here, the wider historical record shows that such refoundations are possible and real. The multilinear course of human activity, once shorn of the narrow economic determinism and teleological stagism that an essentially colonial social science has imposed on it – think of it as established power closing a thousand tiny doors of social possibility to keep the "messiah" out – is replete with innumerable acts of conscious renovation and reconstitution. In our hemisphere, deliberate collective decisions seem to be behind the dramatic changes that occurred in the Teotihuacan and Mayan civilizations in the first millennium CE, as with the relatively more recent forming of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) confederation in North America that brought peace to a territory larger than the United Kingdom. More directly pertinent (perhaps) to the project of socialist construction are the repeated waves of refoundation that have marked the Chinese revolution over the last seventy-five years, including the original "Deng Xiaoping moment" and the "Xi Jinping correction" that seems to have followed it in the current century. All

this is to say nothing of the historical precedents in the mountainous regions around El Maizal Commune, where Afro-descended *cimarrones* and Indigenous people joined forces to consciously forge new political and economic communal relations while resisting the settler-colonial powers. Properly viewed, the past is a palimpsest that speaks of the profound power of human groups to make and remake themselves.

The Caracas skyline, as we approach it on the way home, is already being submerged in a spectacular play of fireworks in anticipation of Christmas. It is a festive showcase of unpredictability and surprises that reminds one that even our most modern city is not immune to change, to the new, to revolution. The holiday fireworks so loved by the Venezuelan working class are part of an annual ritual combat that pits original freedoms and excesses against the spare inexorability of modern architecture and city planning; it is a play battle that deploys the unpredictable (climamen-like) swerves of thousands of bottle rockets, sparklers, and pinwheels against the banal stasis of capitalist modernity. Soon, the whole city will be lit up in a celebration of new beginnings, and new hope. I think that perhaps it is fitting that the final form given to the “new alternative communal economy” in the meeting we have left behind was not revealed to us. That way, we are left with the afterimage, seen through a still-open doorway, of the “dream of a thing” yet to be born through the communards’ collective work. What better way to express the ongoing possibility we have of constituting and reshaping our social bonds? If one wonders whether such a thing *could* be done, the answer is surely that it *has*.

## Notes

1. Mariátegui's actual wording is: “*No queremos, ciertamente, que el socialismo sea en América calco y copia. Debe ser creación heroica.*” However, it is often simplified as “*Ni calco ni copia sino creación heroica*” (“Not a copy or imitation, but a heroic construction”). José Carlos Mariátegui, “Aniversario y Balance,” in *Ideología y política y otros escritos* (Caracas: El Perro y la Rana, 2010), 271–72.
2. “Aló Presidente Teórico No. 1,” September 6, 2009, transcript at [todochavez.gov.ve](http://todochavez.gov.ve).
3. In 2020, the central government initiated plans to group communes into “communal cities,” with limited results.
4. Prado won Simón Planas's mayoral elections in 2017 running on the Patria Para Todos (PPT) party ticket, but the government annulled his victory, alleging that it was incompatible with his participation in the Constituent Assembly. In 2022, he ran on the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) ticket and won.
5. Family Production Units, frequently associated with communes, are a form of property established by the 2010 Organic Law of the Communal Economic System. The term refers to small family holdings that produce for their own consumption and that of the community.
6. See István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital: Toward a Theory of Transition* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 493.
7. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” appendix B, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 391.
8. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1995). See chapter 7.
9. Marcia Ascher, *Mathematics Elsewhere: An Exploration of Ideas Across Cultures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 128–37; Elinor Ostrom and Roy Gardner, “Coping with Asymmetries in the Commons: Self-Governing Irrigation Systems Can Work,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7, no. 4 (Fall 1993), 93–112.