



Venezuela's Outages and the Western Press's Confirmation Bias Problem

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Recent reports about Venezuela's ongoing infrastructural difficulties have given particular attention to such matters as electrical grid outages, which are said now to be chronic across the country. Much has been made, for instance, of President Nicolás Maduro's announcement this month that his government is implementing a three-day weekend to conserve energy resources.¹ Similarly, increasing attention has been given to the water shortage, which is said to be leaving Venezuelans without access for weeks on end.

The tone of these reports, like most of the coverage of Venezuela in the Western-controlled press, is laced with undercurrents implying that news of doom and despair is all that ever emanates from the South American country. In a special report for *USA Today*, for instance, Peter Wilson claims that President Maduro's recent moves have become necessary to "avert a collapse of the power grid."² A *Wall Street Journal* article claims "the nationwide water shortage is crippling Venezuela, leaving faucets dry and contributing to rolling blackouts."³ Words like *disaster*, *breakdown* and *ruin* adorn the prose of these reports and communicate a sense of ominous foreboding, as if Venezuela were about to fall into a dark hole toward the center of the earth. The implication is that as long as the Chavistas are in government all Venezuela news is bad news and that every last piece of it represents one last nail in the coffin of a failed political project.

But the truth is never as black and white as the Venezuelan opposition and western media paint it. If the Maduro government were as incompetent as these reports imply then its support would have plunged to nil long ago. Yet public backing for Maduro's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), though admittedly down significantly from the heydays of the Hugo Chávez presidency, has remained strong even during this time of downturn and scarcity. Even in the landslide defeat that it suffered in last December's National Assembly elections, the governing party still managed to win 5.5 million votes, hardly a negligible fringe of Venezuela's voting populace. How could it be that the governing party, which according to the mainstream discourse is

¹ "Venezuela's Maduro: Take Fridays off, curb blow dryer use to ease power woes," Peter Wilson, *USA Today*, April 8, 2016, Accessed April 8, 2016:

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/04/07/venezuela-gives-3-day-weekends-bid-ease-power-woes/82773040/>

² Ibid.

³ "Water Shortage Cripples Venezuela," Anatoly Kurmanaev and John Otis, *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2016, Accessed April 8, 2016: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/water-shortage-cripples-venezuela-1459717127>

plunging the country back into the dark ages, can receive 5.5 million votes even during a crisis for which it is being blamed? Such considerable continued support for the PSUV at such a time demands a reexamination of the media narratives about the situation that Venezuela faces.

Double Standards and Media Deceits

It is not that these press reports necessarily tell outright lies or even misrepresent the facts; there are more subtle ways to convey hidden messages about what the outside world should think about Venezuela and its government. Mainstream reporters and commentators use two principal tactics to distort the full picture of what is going on there. First, almost all of them seem to assume unthinkingly that *anything* bad that happens in Venezuela *must* somehow be the government's fault. The idea that there might be other legitimate explanations or that forces outside the government might deserve full or partial blame is often either ignored or automatically discounted as a desperate rationalization of the government to deflect from its own incompetence. What we see here is a self-justifying loop: something bad happens in Venezuela, therefore its government is incompetent, all alternate explanations are just attempts by the government to divert blame, thereby proving that it is incompetent. In critical thinking theory, this is called a *closed system of thought* since it has its own internal mechanisms to explain away conflicting evidence. In other words, since the view that the entire Chavista project has been a failure is taken as the starting point, all problems experienced in the country are made to fit that conclusion.

I seldom use personal anecdotes in my writing to argue a point, but in this case one particular experience is too illustrative to withhold. While last in Venezuela in 2014 I met with members of the pro-opposition think tank CEDICE in their Caracas office as part of a delegation to investigate the country's healthcare system. We met with them to hear the perspective of the other side and to engage with their criticisms of the government. Toward the end of our discussion a sudden power outage left us in darkness and cut short what was left of the meeting. Almost instantly, one of our hosts seized upon the outage to castigate Chavismo: "This is what we have the revolution to thank for!" she exclaimed, dramatically waving her arms in gestures of exasperation.

As we left the meeting, doubts about my enthusiasm for Chavismo cascaded into my mind: *What if everything I had come to know about this political project was wrong? What if I had unthinkingly swallowed its propaganda?* It was almost as if the outage were a divine intervention to prompt us to confront our own naivety and spark a reconsideration of our admiration for the Bolivarian process. *Surely this shows that the government is losing its hold on running the country properly*, I began to think. As the delegation continued its research, this event stayed with me and served as a continual critical current against anything pro-Chavista that I heard.

But fate again seemed to work to alter my perceptions. After the delegation's visit ended, I left Caracas for Cartagena, on Colombia's Caribbean coast, to relax in the city's colonial district. A few days into my stay a major power outage brought the entire city to a standstill. Yet the thought *this surely must be because of the wretched incompetence of Colombia's right-wing Santos government* didn't enter my mind. How could it be that even a faithful disciple of Chavismo could be so easily swayed toward reflexively

blaming the government for one isolated power outage in Venezuela during my two weeks there, yet doing so didn't even cross my mind when the exact same thing happened in Colombia, a country with a government for which I have far less ideological affinity?

In piecing apart this puzzle, we should turn to philosophy to improve our understanding. Philosophers have pointed out that the human mind is made up of countless assumptions, presuppositions and inclinations about a countless number of things. Our day-to-day experience is constantly being imbibed through this prism of conscious and unconscious molds. Obviously, what we read, see on television and hear on the radio forms a major part of this mix. The narratives disseminated by the media, therefore, become forged into the collective consciousness.

When the disseminators of information stealthily communicate a message long enough and uniformly enough, it turns into a cognitive bias. Since the input *Venezuela is in ruins and Chavismo is to blame* is what the public has been consistently told to think by the major information gatekeepers that inform our worldview, this premise comes to form a major part of our pre-conceived assumptions without us even knowing it, even for those of us who are comparatively more sympathetic to Chavismo. The input *everything bad that happens in Colombia is because it has an incompetent government*, on the other hand, hasn't been presented as a truism that requires no evidence in its support.

The second distorting factor that the Western media employ, for which my anecdote is also illustrative, is a tendency to present problems such as water shortages or power outages as if they are entirely unique to Venezuela. Both are in fact common across Latin America. Just this year a major electricity outage in Argentina left 190,000 people without power.⁴ Naturally, the newly elected right-wing president Mauricio Macri blamed it on the previous government of left-leaning Christina Kirchner, an accusation that the mainstream Western media faithfully repeated unquestioningly. In 2014 and 2015 there were power outages in Colombia, Mexico, Chile and Brazil that were significant enough to receive attention in the Western press.⁵ But who can remember frenzied warnings about these countries' imminent collapse into the abyss or stern heaping of blame onto their governments? One suspects this discrepancy might have something to do with the fact that these countries haven't confronted U.S. power as stridently as Venezuela has, nor been so radical in offering an alternative economic model. Since Venezuela has been singled out for criticism by the United States because of this unacceptable disobedience, the media follows suit by holding it to a standard that it doesn't apply to other countries in the region.

Giving the Government a Fair Hearing

In my last piece on Venezuela for COHA, I discussed how Western press reports

⁴ "Argentina: 190,000 affected by power outages in heat wave," Associated Press, February 19, 2016, Accessed April 12, 2016:

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11592234

⁵ Latin America, Power Outage on Google Map, Accessed April 12, 2016:

<http://www.mapreport.com/areastopics/l-d-o.html>

about Venezuela's economic crisis dutifully repeat the opposition's account of what is causing the country's problems while ignoring or dismissing by fiat the government's position. The same dynamic is at work in terms of the energy and water crises. As any government would, the Maduro government has sought to defend itself against accusations that it is solely to blame for what is happening. It has argued, for example, that the water crisis is at least partly explicable in terms of climate change and other trends in global weather patterns.

But the Western press instinctively scoffs at these statements regardless of whether they hold credence, often without examining the evidence. It's simply taken as given that the government must be making it all up. Anatoly Kurmanaev and John Otis, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, talk mockingly of how President Maduro "blames Mother Nature and sabotage by political opponents" and cite a Caracas energy consultant's repetition of the standard opposition line that "the real problems are corruption and a lack of government oversight."⁶ Of course, exactly what "corruption and lack of government oversight" the consultant is referring to apparently doesn't merit discussion, let alone whether he has any concrete evidence to support the accusation. We have all become so accustomed to this meme being taken as gospel and have read it so often that most people accept it robotically.

But again, a deeper investigation shows that the government's explanation is far less ridiculous than what the likes of the *Wall Street Journal* imply. The Grantham Research Institute on Environment and Climate Change at the London School of Economics, for instance, notes that Venezuelan government representatives have argued to the international community that access to clean water should be a human right. The Institute notes that this is "a reflection of the growing concerns over water scarcity as a result of climate change as well as opposition to some multinational corporations' strategies to privatize water resources and advocate for free market policies to manage water delivery systems."⁷

The reality is that there are good reasons to think that climatic factors are at least part of the reason for Venezuela's problems. Like much of Latin America, Venezuela relies on hydroelectric generation for much of its energy supply. The country has been experiencing a major drought that has been exacerbated by El Niño. It has caused problems for the country's major hydroelectric dams, including its largest, El Guri, which has critically low water levels. But in the minds of the *Wall Street Journal* writers, these inconvenient facts are offset by jeering references to electricity minister Luis Motta "hoping for help from above" after he posted "God is on our side!" on his twitter account.⁸

⁶ "Water Shortage Cripples Venezuela," Anatoly Kurmanaev and John Otis, *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2016, Accessed April 8, 2016: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/water-shortage-cripples-venezuela-1459717127>

⁷ Venezuela Country Profile, The Global Climate Legislation Study, Accessed April 9, 2016: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute/legislation/countries/venezuela/>

⁸ "Water Shortage Cripples Venezuela," Anatoly Kurmanaev and John Otis, *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2016, Accessed April 8, 2016: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/water-shortage-cripples-venezuela-1459717127>

“Rationing” and the “Free” Market

There are also contextual factors to consider, which often escape the minds of Western commentators. Rationing is often spoken of in disapproving airs as if the practice were the sole reserve of “authoritarian” socialist governments. But in reality rationing takes place in all societies, just in different ways. In so-called free market societies, energy and water are also rationed, but according to ability to pay rather than according to need. The consequence is that the poor and marginalized lose out. Estimates put the number of people in the United States who either lack access to clean water or have no running water at all, for instance, at between one and two million.⁹ This is not an insignificant portion of the population of the richest country in the history of humanity. As is often the case in the United States, historically oppressed groups are particularly hard hit.

For example, the founder and executive director of digdeep.org George McGraw writes in the Huffington Post that 13 percent of Native Americans lack access to reliable water.¹⁰ Likewise, according to the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, in at least six U.S. states between one and four percent of African Americans are without adequate water service.¹¹ The facts are hardly more reassuring in terms of electricity provision to historically oppressed groups. According to the Indian Country Today Media Network, an estimated 32 percent of all homes on the Navajo Nation Indian reservation lack electricity.¹² In addition, 31 percent of Navajo homes lack plumbing, 38 percent lack water services, 86 percent lack natural gas and 60 percent lack telephone services.¹³ Of course, one will never read about this in the *Wall Street Journal* since it would contradict its editorial line that the United States is the beacon of economic opportunity where “free” markets lead to prosperity for all.

⁹ “More than 1 million Californians don’t have reliable access to clean water,” Haya El Nasser, Al-Jazeera America, April 6, 2015, Accessed April 9, 2016:

<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/6/more-than-1-million-californians-lack-clean-water.html>; “Not All Americans Have Enough Access to Water,” Katti Gray, The Root, March 17, 2010, Accessed April 9, 2010:

<http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2010/03/american-blacks-without-enough-access-to-water.html>

¹⁰ “This Is What it Looks Like to Live Without Running Water in America,” George McGraw, HuffPost Impact, August 20, 2015, Accessed April 9, 2016:

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-mcgraw/live-without-running-water-in-america-b-8011310.html>

¹¹ “Not All Americans Have Enough Access to Water,” Katti Gray, The Root, March 17, 2010, Accessed April 9, 2010:

<http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2010/03/american-blacks-without-enough-access-to-water.html>

¹² Not Alone In the Dark: Navajo Nation’s Lack of Electricity Problem, Alys Landry, Indian Country Today Media Network, February 11, 2015, Accessed April 10, 2016:

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/02/11/not-alone-dark-navajo-nations-lack-electricity-problem-159135>

¹³ Ibid.

Venezuela's Bolivarian project has attempted to resist and provide an alternative to the economic system that has long been forced on Latin America by the United States and has led to similar, and often worse, iniquities. Inevitably, issues have arisen that are easy to misrepresent to those who don't understand what socialism is or what it is trying to achieve. For example, to avoid leaving the poor without access, Venezuela delivers some public resources at cost (that is, setting price at no more than what they cost to provide).¹⁴ In the placing of human need above profiteering and prioritizing allocation in a socially just way, resources must sometimes be distributed in a manner that limits their use. But what is important is *how* and *to whom* they are limited. Again, rationing happens in the United States, but rather than, say, rationing water and energy resources to those most in need, like Native Americans living on impoverished reservations, they are rationed to wealthy corporations via "free" market mechanisms since they are the most able to pay for them. Why should, say, a factory producing cigarettes be allowed constant access to public resources such as water and electricity to power its machines just because its owners have the means to pay for them when society's most needy are denied these resources? This is exactly the kind of social and moral contradiction that socialism attempts to redress. Part of the reason that in the United States this conversation is not being had and the realities of poverty and racial injustice are not widely understood is that the corporations that have well-staffed PR and lobbying departments to advance their interests, whereas poor and mistreated minorities like Native Americans are weak and often without a voice in public affairs.

In April of 2015 a power shortage in Venezuela provided an example of how its government goes about allocating resources when times are tough. The media reported that President Maduro implemented a six-hour workday and imposed use limits on public departments and private companies.¹⁵ Sometimes forgotten, however, was that the limits on energy use applied to non-essential public services, manufacturing plants and offices. To an outsider living in a highly developed country like the United States this might seem very "authoritarian." But in a poor developing country (whose government, lest we forget, has been struggling to survive against violent internal opposition and the U.S. government's meddling) it makes sense to impose some carefully directed restrictions to ensure that essential public services such as education, health, security, and garbage collection, which were exempt from the limit,¹⁶ not be interrupted. It is important to remember that countries like Venezuela, which never really industrialized so they could join the ranks of "developed" nations, don't have all of the luxuries that the "first world" has, and therefore sometimes have to set different priorities as societies that are not easily understood from the outside, and therefore easily misconstrued.

Of course, the government's account of the situation shouldn't be accepted uncritically either. But keep in mind that, in Venezuela especially, not only are there two

¹⁴ Miguel Tinker-Salas, *Venezuela: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (OUP USA, 2015)

¹⁵ "Public sector to work six hours to save electric power," *El Universal*, April 28, 2016, Accessed April 10, 2016: <http://www.eluniversal.com/economia/150428/public-sector-to-work-six-hours-to-save-electric-power>

¹⁶ "Régimen venezolano ordena el racionamiento energético en las dependencias del Estado," *Infobae América*, April 28, 2016, Accessed April 10, 2016: <http://www.infobae.com/2015/04/28/1725338-regimen-venezolano-ordena-el-racionamiento-energetico-las-dependencias-del-estado>

sides to every story, but the very means by which we come to understand the issues are highly distorted by the ideological contours of the Western media and by the inherent ideological biases of the society in which we live. While the mainstream media's heavy bias toward the Venezuelan opposition's discourse is a function of the fact it reflects the interests of the U.S. government and corporate class (which in important ways controls the U.S. government), our own biases stem from the fact that, as Gramsci pointed out, our prevailing culture is based on this class's presentation of its own values and norms as "common sense."