

“Challenges to Implementing Prout in Venezuela”

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What challenges do we face as an institute working to raise awareness about Prout and implement its ideas in Venezuelan society? What makes the realization of Prout's vision for a new world so challenging? And conversely: What characteristics of the dominant culture and social systems make them so resistant to change? This is not creating an “us or them” construct, it is merely recognizing Prout's international character and the fact that many of us are working in foreign countries...

CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS



Historical Legacies

Looking first at the cultural uniqueness of the Venezuelan society we find ourselves asking who are the people that we are trying to help? Who are the people with which we are sharing this space and time.

1. Distrust of outsiders and foreigners
2. Lack of initiative and motivation
3. Low self-esteem that debilitates individual capacities
4. Lack of unity and willingness to cooperate

Our experiences: In a recent initiative to organize the agricultural producers in the region we found it very difficult to unite community leaders. Despite the commitments that were made to attend a meeting, not one person showed up. Residents of two small, neighboring villages showed suspicion, distrust and general apathy towards one another. This story speaks simultaneously about the particularities of the society and the challenges to building partnerships and trust with local communities, which is really universal since any grassroots development of this sort takes time, patience, understanding and sensitivity.

Nepotism, Bureaucracy and Corruption

...are small thorns in our sides, making processing documents and other more mundane civil matters very time consuming and tedious and bribes are often expected. There is a very real external social pressure to abuse positions of power and privilege and those who refuse to conform to this mentality are seen as ignorant.

The Modern Venezuelan

Understanding the nature of the modern Venezuelan is of great importance to our work, for example, in the planning and development of a basic Prout course, where we want to ensure that it resonates with the participants and that it brings them forward

at such a pace and in such a manner that is appropriate to their circumstances.

We find ourselves asking: what is ***machismo*** and how does it affect society? Machismo being the dominant masculine energy that is expressed through sexism, social competition and relaxed attitudes towards work, relationships and family. Venezuela has an extremely high birthrate and there are many single mothers with children from multiple fathers, which speaks to a low awareness or respect for birth control. These are not uniquely male or female issues, but rather there is a mirroring process going on. A dynamic network of expectations exists in society that is telling people how to act and behave, so these behaviors are perpetuated. Also, this is a matter of not knowing anything else, any other way of acting. Venezuelan society needs more role models. There are some shining lights, but it is a society that desperately needs more.

POLITICAL CHARACTERISTICS



Political Sensitivity and Hostility

Turning now to the political we see this realm of activity characterized by:

1. Extreme lack of communication between divergent political groups.
2. Climate of suspicion, hostility and animosity.

In spite of many benefits that have come with recent social and political changes, the triumph of the political Left has created deep divisions in Venezuelan society. Cooperation and communication between people and groups can sometimes be limited to those who share your political beliefs, which is normally a question of being “Chavista” (pro-government) or “Oposición” (anti-government). In this type of environment, maintaining the neutrality of the institute is important to avoid been politically labeled and thus isolated from any one sector of society.

Staff Changes in Government Ministries

Ministers and their immediate staff are regularly shuffled around, making it difficult to establish solid, ongoing relationships with the government offices that relate to our work. For example, over the years we've had to constantly reestablish our relationships within SUNACOOB, the government department that supports cooperatives. When I visited their office to present them with a copy of our documentary, which involved the collaboration of the ex-director of education, none of the current staff knew anything about us or the project.

Social Characteristics

The challenges within the social sphere are based on the expressions of the dominant capitalist culture and the supremacy of oil in Venezuelan society. Consumerism in Venezuela is highly irrational and excessive. We also see deeply distorted social priorities and although it is reducing slightly due to new government programs, there is still an extreme gap between rich and poor that divides the social



family. With it is resentment, greed and isolationism.

The discovery of oil brought with it the “**Dutch Disease**” (which is the neglect of non-oil manufacturing and industries, as well as agriculture) and a wealth of psychological effects. I ask, what does it do to the psyche of a people knowing that the same lifeblood that is propelling global capitalism forward, that is contributing enormously to the threat of environmental collapse is the same lifeblood that literally brings food to your table, politicians to power and doctors into your country? Venezuela is a nation whose survival depends on fueling the unbridled expansion of global capitalism and I believe that on a subconscious level many people have internalized the acceptability of unlimited growth based on polluting behaviors. Abundant oil wealth has also created the expectation that the state should be able to provide people with everything they need, which can lead to dependency and reduce initiative and motivation. We also see very low levels of environmental consciousness. There are severe problems with garbage

and littering, recycling is non-existent and engines idle all day long.

Those of us who are foreigners working and living in Caracas at times are faced with situations that challenge us personally, such as communication barriers, preconceptions of foreigners, crime and security and the effects of culture shock. I have been affected by all of these and can say that I’ve grown a lot because of those experiences.

THE CRITICAL DISHARMONY



Consciousness

Turning back to our original questions of what makes implementing Prout in Venezuela so challenging and what is it about the local society that resists this change. I feel that the critical disharmony arises from a lack of consciousness that is rooted in a very particular relationship with global capitalism.

The supremacy of oil, which has come at the expense of the development of other industries and other modes of survival, makes it hard for Venezuelans to conceive of the need or the possibility for new and alternative development models. Global capitalism doesn’t want the oil boom to end, it only seeks to consume and exhaust the supplies, so the message being transmitted to Venezuelans is that unlimited growth and consumption are not only okay, but unproblematic, even a national destiny.

There is still a tendency in Venezuela and throughout the world to wrongly equate anything with “socialist” ideals with the real life socialist experiments of the past and present and because of this opposition groups are quick to label us as ‘Chavistas’.

As is true in the spiritual quest, something really only makes sense once it is felt, knowledge only becomes wisdom once it is resonating deeply inside of you. Similarly, the ideas of Prout often fall on the deaf ears

of those whose core identity is still so deeply rooted in the dominant capitalist culture that such new ideas appear threatening and hostile to their best interests. For all of these reasons we Proutists have to remain vigilant, determined, yet patient because consciousness is the most difficult thing to change, but the struggle and the results of this path certainly yield the greatest rewards.