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The Origin of Usurpation and Tyranny:

Nonagentic Anti-Imperialism of the Twenty-First Century and the Legacy of Chavismo

A Thesis by

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Orange, CA

Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in International Studies

August 2020

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A bold, black, handwritten signature consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke at the top.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a large, stylized 'C' followed by a series of loops and a final vertical stroke.

Dr. Tekle Woldemikael, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in black ink, written in a cursive style that clearly spells out 'Tekle Woldemikael'.

July 2020

The Origin of Usurpation and Tyranny:

Nonagentic Anti-Imperialism of the Twenty-First Century and the Legacy of Chavismo

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ABSTRACT

The Origin of Usurpation and Tyranny:

Nonagentic Anti-Imperialism of the Twenty-First Century and the Legacy of Chavismo

by Juan Andrés Bustillo

As Venezuela's Chavista regime presides over the country's descent into Latin America's worst refugee and humanitarian crisis in modern times, a mass exodus of nearly five million Venezuelans since 2015, the rhetoric of Western anti-imperialists and the regime itself has absolved it of any responsibility for the crisis and the increasing authoritarianism that led to it by abdicating the regime's agency to act according to its own free will. This paper develops the discursive concept of nonagentic anti-imperialism, a rhetoric that effectively absolves self-declared anti-imperialist regimes, from Castro's Cuba to Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka, of human rights abuses and democratic erosions by arguing that these leaders had no choice but to rule with an iron fist in the face of Western imperialism. Focusing on Chavismo, this paper analyzes the steps towards Venezuela's democratic breakdown taken by both Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro, the nonagentic anti-imperialist rhetoric that deflected the true intent behind these steps, and how those steps led the country to the manufactured disaster it finds itself in today. It concludes by positing that the legitimacy of supposedly anti-imperialist policies hinges not on the fierce rhetoric surrounding them but rather on the lived ends of the people affected by them.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
AD	Acción Democrática (Democratic Action)
AN	Asamblea Nacional (National Assembly)
AI	Amnesty International
CAP	Carlos Andrés Pérez
CAT	Convention Against Torture
CLAP	Comité Local de Abastecimiento y Producción (Local Committees for Supply and Production)
COPEI	Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (Social Democratic Party)
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CTU	Comités de Tierra Urbana (Urban Land Committees)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces)
FEVA	Federación Venezolana de Abogadas (Venezuelan Women Lawyer's Federation)
FPV	El Foro Penal Venezolano
GNB	Guardia Nacional Bolivariana (Bolivarian National Guard)
IACHR	Inter-American Commission on Human Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICG	International Crisis Group

PSUV	Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela)
RCTV	Radio Caracas Television
TPS	Temporary Protected Status
TSJ	Tribunal Supremo de la Justicia (Supreme Tribunal of Justice)
UNHCR	United Nations Human Rights Council
URD	Unión Republicana Democrática (Republican Democratic Union)

“Pero qué vamos a hacer? Aquí estamos. Luchando. Para qué? Para salir adelante. Para poner en alto a mi país.

“But what are we going to do? Here we are. Fighting. For what? To come out in front. To put my country on top.”

-Richard, Venezuelan *caminante*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to critically analyze the nonagentic anti-imperialist rhetoric surrounding the Chavista regime of Venezuela, espoused by both its supporters and its members, focusing on the lived ends of all members of Venezuelan society as opposed to the stated aims of the regime or its opponents, in order to better understand the ways in which the liberating principles of anti-imperialism have been exploited to uphold a regime that has systematically eliminated the freedoms it claims legitimacy on. Nonagentic anti-imperialism represents an ideological perversion of genuine anti-imperialism through which non-Western regimes and their supporters excuse increasing authoritarianism against their own people as the only recourse for survival in the face of real or perceived Western imperialism against the regime. Such rhetorical defenses strip these regimes of the agency to do harm to their own people, instead portraying them as victims who are simply doing what they must do to protect against a bloodthirsty West.

The contention here is that the Chavista regime and its supporters have cloaked its failures in the rhetoric of anti-imperialism as a means of deflecting blame onto Western capitalist states for antidemocratic actions over which it has had more control than nonagentic anti-imperialists give it, such as the legalistic and violent repression of basic freedoms, the co-optation of legitimate popular movements from marginalized sectors, disastrous economic mismanagement, and the conscious construction of a kleptocratic ruling class that has overseen the transformation of Venezuela into an effective mafia state. These realities have culminated in a legacy now defined by the wholly avoidable manufacture of the single most devastating refugee crisis in the contemporary history of the Western hemisphere.

1.1 Literature Review

One of the few points of unity among anti-imperialists is the collective inability to agree on a concrete definition for imperialism in the face of constantly-developing global capitalism. Without an understanding of what constitutes “imperialism,” it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what “anti-imperialism” means. In his 1915 introduction to N. I. Bukharin’s 1917 *Imperialism and World Economy*, V. I. Lenin claims that the “scientific concept of imperialism” had been “reduced to the level of a cuss-word,” effectively losing the meaning Lenin had inscribed to the term in his own *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Bukharin & Lenin 2017, 148). These two foundational texts argue that the Great War is the logical culmination of capitalist hegemony –or “monopoly”– over the world’s productive powers after capital accumulation led to underconsumption within the national boundaries of the great powers. Imperialism, under Lenin’s paradigm, is the division of the colonial lands by imperial militaries in which finance capital is exported from the metropole to the colonies in the form of investments for the expansion of markets.

If these works were borne out of a need to return the concept of imperialism to the serious standing it merits among Marxists, then they succeeded only until global capitalism developed beyond the context in which they were written. Nearly seven decades later, world-systems scholar Giovanni Arrighi observed that the definition was, in the 1980s, as confused as it ever was because when developments in the capitalist world-economy came about in the form of “macroscopic anomalies,” “most Marxists failed to heed Lenin’s warning of the relative and conditional value of every definition - all more cogent in the case of a definition that

is avowedly historically determinate - and refused to abandon Lenin's characterization of imperialism" (Arrighi 1983, 16). Even those Marxists who were "most alert to the changing pattern of international capitalism" failed to disengage from Lenin's analysis when it became obsolete in the face of new developments, such as the fact that finance capital under the Bretton Woods system no longer requires the militaristic territorial division of the colonized world the way it did in Lenin's day. Arrighi attributes this to three possible justifications: the first is the need of some Marxist academics to pay tribute to Lenin in the form of ideological adherence. The second is the fact that there was not a widespread theory to replace Lenin's paradigm. The third is a false understanding that to abandon Lenin's theory is to proclaim an end to imperialism, clearly a non-starter with the might of imperial powers only increasing during the Cold War (Arrighi 1983, 17018). The unfortunate logical consequence of this undue adherence is a muddled theoretical environment in which the legitimacy of Marxist understandings of imperialism hinge on shaping history to fit it, not in allowing history to shape the theory.

One effort to counter this unscientific approach to historical analysis comes from Rohini Hensman in her book *Indefensible: Democracy, Counterrevolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism*, in which she moves beyond Lenin by suggesting an alternative view of imperialism that stays true to the context of Lenin's writing but is adaptable to new developments in global capitalism. In her critique of Lenin, she writes that

it conflates two distinct phases of capitalism – imperialism and finance capital – and this has created immense confusion on the left. The idea that finance capital and foreign investments constitute imperialism would lead to absurd conclusions; for example, that China is an imperialist power in the US, or India in the UK. Instead, *imperialism should be defined as political, and sometimes military, intervention in another country in order to install or keep in power a regime that acts more in the interests of the imperialist power than in the interests of any class – even capitalists – in its own country.* Its driving force is nationalism in

the imperialist country. Imperialism is opposed by struggles for national liberation, which constitutes one element in a democratic revolution – the people cannot rule themselves so long as they are ruled by another nation-state – but not the only one (Hensman 2018, 21; emphasis added).

In recognizing imperialism as a “political, and sometimes military, intervention” but excluding capitalist foreign investments, Hensman separates the two phases of global capitalism into their distinct categories. Arrighi’s third justification is then validated, since in abandoning Lenin’s overarching theory Hensman has in fact proclaimed an end to the imperialist stage. But by simultaneously declaring a stage even higher than that, she has not proclaimed an imagined end to global capitalism. It likewise would not have been accurate for Arrighi to make Hensman’s claim at the time of *The Geometry of Imperialism*’s writing in 1983, but Hensman is able to assert in 2018 that “by the mid-1990s, imperialism, which relies on militarism, had outlived its usefulness for capital” (Hensman 2018, 41). Here she marks the shift from imperialism to finance capital. Though far from a clean break from the old, as demonstrated by the 2003 U.S intervention in Iraq, this new stage saw a lessening of the national character of world-system hegemony. David Harvey points out a “peculiar feature” of the newly neoliberal world, guided more by supranational bodies like the World Trade Organization and World Bank, was “an increasingly transnational capitalist class of financiers, CEOs, and rentiers [looking] to the territorial hegemon to protect their interests and to build the kind of institutional architecture within which they could gather the wealth of the world unto themselves. This class paid very little heed to place-bound or national loyalties or traditions. It could be multi-racial, multicultural, and cosmopolitan” (Harvey 2003, 187). Having understood this, it becomes clear that to adhere to Lenin’s theory of imperialism today is to misread the postwar historical context

in which the transnational capitalist class has rendered obsolete the claim that the world remains in the imperialism stage.

What, then, does this new conceptualization mean for the anti-imperialist movements that have risen up against global capitalism in all its forms? It is no surprise that anti-imperialism has become as confused a term as imperialism itself. The two categories of anti-imperialism Hensman names are simply “genuine anti-imperialism” and “pseudo-anti-imperialism.” The former is easy to define– it is the opposition to all imperialisms (Hensman 2018, 21). Genuine anti-imperialism opposes imperialism not only from the traditional powers of the West, but also from non-Western imperialist powers; Russia’s invasion of Crimea comes to mind. Genuine anti-imperialists also support democratic revolutions and struggles against oppression in the non-Western world regardless of whether or not the West does. To make sense of pseudo-anti-imperialism, Hensman identified three different strands that comprise it: Western-centric, neo-Stalinist, and tyrants/imperialists. The first describes those pseudo-anti-imperialists who are only opposed to Western imperialism. Still stuck in a nationalist past where the Great Western Powers of Lenin’s age are the only forces capable of imperialism and oppression, they (perhaps inadvertently) are “oblivious to the fact that people in other parts of the world have agency too, and that they can exercise it both to oppress others and to fight against oppression; an Orientalism which refuses to acknowledge that Third World peoples can desire and fight for democratic rights and freedoms taken for granted in the West; and a complete lack of solidarity with people who do undertake such struggles” (Hensman 2018, 12-13). Then there are the neo-Stalinists, who will support brutal regimes supported by Russia (in its Tsarist, Soviet, or modern forms) in the same way that Western liberals supported brutal regimes

installed by the United States during the Cold War. The third “consists of tyrants and imperialists, perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and aggression, who, as soon as they face a hint of criticism from the West, immediately claim that they are being criticised because they are anti-imperialists” (Hensman 2018, 13-14). Hensman notes that while this claim should fall flat by its lack of merit, proponents of the previous two categories are likely to justify it because it validates their own perceptions. So argues Samuel Farber in his 2011 book *Cuba: A Critical Assessment Since the Revolution of 1959*, writing that

there is a widespread, and often less than fully conscious, attitude on the left ignoring or justifying the absence of democracy and the systematic violation of civil liberties in Cuba because of the revolution’s achievements, whether real or imagined, and particularly because of the country’s stance against US imperialism. This attitude, at least implicitly absolving the revolutionary leaders of any blame for their decisions, choices, and actions, has deep roots on the left and precedes the Cuban Revolution (Farber 2011, 6-7).

A key point is that this attitude is “often less than fully conscious,” understandable since the instinct of many on the left is to support antisystemic movements of a national or social character. Cuba is a prime example given the romantic image the small island has constructed for itself through sixty years of resisting aggression from the Global North as an outwardly Communist state. Anti-imperialists must not fall in the trap of justifying democratic erosions and violations of basic freedoms by similar regimes only to suppress the existence of democratic movements and calls for freedoms within those states. It goes without saying that this does not mean, sticking with the example of Cuba, that anti-imperialists must all of a sudden support assaults like the Bay of Pigs invasion or the US embargo against Cuba. It does mean, however, that anti-imperialists must advocate for an end to political repression within Cuba to allow

dissident movements to flourish from below and openly make demands of their government through assembly and the ballot box (DeCosse 1999, 27). This principle can be applied to any antisystemic government to ensure that popular power holds state power accountable rather than the other way around. None of this entails the proliferation of counterrevolutionary actors within a state nor does it open sovereign affairs to imperialist interventions. What it does entail, though, is an understanding that even in the face of opposition from the West, the leadership of anti-imperialist regimes continue to have agency in the direction of their state. Farber writes that Che Guevara himself admitted as much in an interview where he said that “Our commitment to the eastern bloc was half the fruit of constraint and half the result of choice.” Genuine anti-imperialism cannot justify political repression and cannot deny the agency of anti-imperialist leaders, pseudo- or otherwise, to act.

1.2 Themes

In keeping with the practice of recognizing the changing trends of world processes, it is similarly necessary to understand the post-Cold War face of antidemocratic regimes in a world where democracy has become close to ubiquitous. Whereas the authoritarian regimes of the past could be so unabashed by openly doing away with or repressing the exercise of democracy in a given state, those of today are more likely to operate performative democracy in what scholars Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way called in 2010 “competitive authoritarian” regimes. These are “civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary ways of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents...competition is thus real but unfair” (Levitsky &

Way 2013, 5). The veneer of democracy allows the regimes to claim a false legitimacy and deflect criticisms against it using the rhetoric of national sovereignty. With apparent democratic legitimacy on their side, autocrats can act unilaterally while positioning themselves as the voice of the people. It goes without saying, then, that whether or not a state is democratic demands an exploration of its institutions and the use of state power in facilitating free and fair elections. Complementing their analysis is the framework of the third wave of autocratization, coming into being around the mid-1990s up through today, in which “incumbents legally access power and then gradually, but substantially, undermine democratic norms without abolishing key democratic institutions” (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019). While brazen moves to restrict democratic freedoms are susceptible to opposition because of their ubiquity, the erosive effects of third-wave tactics make resistance to autocratization increasingly difficult.

Before applying competitive authoritarianism to Chavismo, it is worth exploring what Chavismo is and how this paper will use the term. Similar to “imperialism,” defining Chavismo is a challenge because there are as many definitions as there are utterances of it. For our purposes, “Chavismo” will describe the entirety of the Bolivarian Revolution at the governmental level, from when Chávez took power in 1999 up until today. An analysis of the legacy of Chavismo demands understanding it in its entirety, not picking and choosing the best parts or the worst parts. An argument can be made that it is unfair to essentially lump Chávez and Maduro together under the same banner, but the reality is that Maduro was handpicked by Chávez as Chavismo’s torch-bearer and to treat him as anything else will be misrepresentative.

2. Nonagentic Anti-Imperialism

Competitive authoritarian regimes routinely fall back on Hensman's third strand as a means of evading criticism when their legitimacy is challenged, defending themselves by denying their own agency and their own choices. Western-centric anti-imperialists inevitably leap to the support of non-Western states that engage in this deflection. Though "anti-imperialist" rarely applies to right-wing regimes, their ideologues can fall into a similar pattern. A recent example is in Brazil, where President Jair Bolsonaro justifies his authoritarianism and hostility to the Latin American left by invoking the specter of the failures of the Pink Tide (Petrov 2020). In order to narrow Hensman's framework of pseudo-anti-imperialism to fit the scope of this paper and adapt it specifically to Latin America's competitive authoritarian regimes, the concept of nonagentic anti-imperialism will be introduced. It builds on from the first and third strands and applies them to supporters of the regime and to the regime itself, respectively. Specifically, it refers to the view that increasing authoritarianism is the only recourse available for non-Western governments faced with staunch political and economic opposition from global or regional hegemonic forces. Further characterizing nonagentic anti-imperialism is an excessive emphasis on ideology and an insufficient emphasis on the lived ends of people on the ground. Adherence to a certain ideology by a regime or resistance to imperialism becomes a more important indicator of political success to observers than the reality experienced by those living under the regime. This is why, for example, nonagentic anti-imperialists will quickly and accurately point to brutal violations of human rights by US-installed puppets in Latin America like Augusto Pinochet as evidence of their illegitimacy but dismiss the human rights argument as a "buzz

phrase” when applied to leftist regimes. Filmmaker Oliver Stone did as much in his propagandistic *South of the Border* documentary about Latin America’s Pink Tide while at the same time criticizing Colombia’s human rights record under a US-backed administration (Rohter 2010). The framework of human rights is far from impervious to critique from an anti-imperialist perspective, but to outright dismiss it as a “buzz phrase” only in its application to certain regimes as Stone did is self-evidently hypocritical.

Nonagentic anti-imperialism is plainly visible everywhere from academia to online discussion forums. In 1983, Arrighi wrote that “by the end of the 60’s, what had once been ‘the pride’ of Marxism –the theory of imperialism– had become a ‘Tower of Babel’ in which not even Marxists knew any longer how to find their way” (Arrighi 1983, 17). These next paragraphs will outline just how correct Arrighi’s analysis was by highlighting the writings of John Pilger, an influential nonagentic anti-imperialist working today; of Venezuelan state media outlet TeleSUR, a central mouthpiece for Hensman’s third strand of pseudo-anti-imperialism; and of the debate surrounding recent protest movements in Latin America, particularly in Chile, Ecuador, and Bolivia because they represent instances where right-left binary ideology demands stripping protesters of their agency to be angry at material conditions, instead blaming supposedly imperial powers.

John Pilger, an Australian journalist and documentarian, is a shining example of nonagentic anti-imperialism. For him and other Western-centric anti-imperialists, North American and Western European imperialism is the only form of imperialism and, at least in the scope of his analysis, solely responsible for the oppression of the non-Western world. This has led Pilger to support both oppressive regimes and imperialist regimes, always under the guise of

anti-imperialism. The gaps in the guise are perhaps clearest in his perspective of the Russia-Crimea relationship. In his 2001 book *The New Rulers of the World*, he writes that the West's "man in Moscow used to be Boris Yeltsin, a drunk who handed his country's economy to the West. His successor, Putin, has re-established Russia as a sovereign nation; that is his crime" (Pilger 2016, xvi). Though the book was updated and revised in 2016, two years after Putin's invasion of Crimea, he did not see fit to amend this statement— despite updating the previous paragraph to include commentary on then-Vice President Joe Biden's son's work for "Ukraine's biggest oil, gas and fracking company" as evidence of US imperialist aims in the country (Pilger 2016, xvi). In an article Pilger wrote for The Guardian months after Russia's illegal invasion of Crimea in 2014 titled "In Ukraine, the US is dragging us towards war with Russia," he argues that the only aim of Russia in Crimea is to fend off US and Western aggression "as they have done against every threat and invasion from the west for almost a century" (Pilger 2014). Hensman writes that "Pilger implies that Crimea has always been part of Russia when he says that in Crimea 'the Russians defended themselves.' This is simply not true," she argues, explaining how indigenous Crimean Tatars have been victims of Russian annexation, colonization, and aggressive militarism since at least the late eighteenth century (Hensman 2018, 8-9). She quips that Pilger's claim that a leased Russian naval base in Crimea is "legitimate" is akin to claiming that Guantanamo Bay is part of the United States because it is leased from Cuba. It is not difficult to imagine that Pilger's failure to amend his claim of Putin's sole crime in *Rulers* was less a lapse and more a doubling-down.

Pilger's work makes it clear that anti-imperialist principles do not guide his perspectives. They are guided by advocating for whatever side is opposed by the West, even if this requires

lying about the facts. How else can his explicit support for an open imperialist invasion be explained? In justifying Russia's settler-colonial actions as natural responses to US aggression, Pilger has effectively revoked Russia's agency to oppress in the way Farber described. The imperialist annexation of a sovereign territory suddenly becomes part of the struggle against what they would deem legitimate (read: Western) imperialism and aggression. This playbook, employed again in his pro-Assadist views, consists of excusing the erosion basic civil liberties, freedoms, democratic practices, and imperialist foreign policy in the name of combating real or perceived Western imperialism (Pilger 2015).

When nonagentic anti-imperialism becomes official state policy, government-run media is an obvious place to find it. And in Venezuela's case, the TeleSUR news agency is a one-stop shop. The original vision for TeleSUR when it launched in 2005 was a noble one, and an article in Jacobin magazine highlights that "the problem that teleSUR identified was a real one. Across the region, large television and media conglomerates nearly all had ties to the Right," including both Northern outlets like CNN and the BBC as well as Latin American services with strong ties to economic elites (Iber 2017). A Pan-Latin American counterhegemonic news service funded by Venezuela as well as the ideologically-aligned bloc of Venezuela, Cuba, Argentina, and Uruguay, modeled after and partnered with Qatar's Al-Jazeera was essential for the promotion of diverse viewpoints within regional democracies (Di Rico 2012). According to Uruguayan intellectual Aram Aharonian, who had fled right-wing repression in his native land and later became the co-founder and first director general of the network, "the idea was to see ourselves as we truly were" by breaking past "a colonial mentality as blond and tall and European, and some of us are, but we're also short, dark, Zambo, and Indian" (Carroll 2014, 195).

In the midst of a media war in 2007 spurred by what Chávez deemed to be unfair coverage, the outlet devolved into an effective mouthpiece for Chávez and his regime. Aharonian, who was forced out by his replacement and former Information Minister Andrés Izarra in 2008, denounced the fact that Chávez “installed himself in TeleSUR and took the reins,” turning it less “about promoting a Latin American identity...but serving Chávez’s domestic agenda and being a political instrument. That meant propaganda as rolling news” (Carroll 2014, 195). To miscoin a phrase, Chávez’s goal was to ensure that the revolution would be televised. The practice of nonagentic anti-imperialism that the regime had been engaging in for years had now morphed into rhetoric to be consumed by a captive audience. An example of this on the global stage is TeleSUR’s coverage of the Arab Spring, which actually caused Al-Jazeera to split away from the network. At the outset of the Arab Spring, Chávez’s, and by extension TeleSUR’s, actually supported the Assad regime’s crackdown on protests in 2011 and 2012 (Kozloff 2012). That support comes from Chávez’s fidelity to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad in the name of resisting the US empire, a position which led to the ideological covering of the Arab Spring uprisings rather than one focused on the people resisting oppression. The network is happy to criticize US President Donald Trump’s refusal to help the refugees but makes little mention of its support for the violence that forced the refugees in the first place (“US Accepted Only 11 Syrian Refugees So Far This Year” 2018).

The last example of nonagentic anti-imperialism can be found in the global response to protests in Chile, Ecuador, and Bolivia. The former two were massive, prolonged manifestations against neoliberal governments whose austerity harmed workers. A 3% increase in metro fares in October in Chile, previously hailed as an “oasis” of calm in a turbulent region, incited

occasionally-violent anti-neoliberal protests that have continued into 2020 (Phillips 2019). Chilean president Sebastián Piñera, a conservative billionaire, has offered tepid concessions including martial law, pension increases, and minimum wage hikes, but nothing has quelled the protesters. A referendum to draft a new constitution is slated for April 2020 (Cuffe 2019). Chile's role as a lab rat for neoliberal policies under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s and 80s was carried into the twenty-first century by democratic rule, defended against significant criticism by consistent economic growth that outperformed much of the region (Slobodian 2018, Kindle loc. 5595). As is now customary with neoliberal regimes, economic inequalities led to and were reinforced by social inequalities that divided the country sharply along class lines, creating the situation for a spark like the metro fare hike to inspire nation-wide protests all across the country" ("Counting the Cost of Neoliberalism in Chile" 2019).

The situation in Ecuador was similar, albeit less dramatic. After a cut in fuel subsidies by neoliberal president Lenín Moreno's government, indigenous-led protests rocked the streets of Ecuador for approximately two weeks, in which time a national state of emergency was called and riot police were brought out to control the largely peaceful protesters (Brown 2019). Contrary to Chile, indigenous leaders were able to form an agreement with the Moreno administration under which the protests would be called off in exchange for the government retreating from its IMF-backed package of austerity measures, including the fuel hikes by which fuel costs would have risen by approximately 30% overnight ("Ecuador Protests End After Deal Struck with Indigenous Leaders" 2019).

In both instances, the protesters of mostly working class and indigenous backgrounds were accused by the Latin American right of being manipulated or incited by the Latin American

left. Xenophobic propaganda tactics were employed as Venezuelan refugees and Cuban migrants were accused of being agents of their own oppressive governments sent to destabilize the seemingly more stable right-wing governments. One would think that such outlandish theories, conceived of as an ODD reimagining of Che Guevara's *foco* theory, have at least some backing in truth (Pentón 2020).¹ Analyses conducted about tweets regarding the protests found that the vast majority of them came from Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, the last remaining leftist strongholds in Latin America, with the conclusions being that this serves as evidence that these three regimes helped incite and maintain the working class assault on the Chilean establishment. The possibility that these tweets were shows of solidarity with protesters by other working class Latin Americans does not appear to have entered the discussion. Additionally, in the Quito airport, 19 Venezuelans were detained, supposedly on suspicion of espionage, but were released without charges. In Chile, around 50 foreigners, mostly Cubans and Venezuelans, some of whom appear to have participated in the protests, were exiled from the country for their illegal status. There does not seem to be any evidence that any of these individuals incited anything, making these claims nothing more than xenophobic, pro-neoliberal conspiracies (Dannemann 2019).

The case of Bolivia, despite being politically antithetical in many ways, shares significant themes with the previous two cases. After left-wing president Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president, ran for a fourth term (out of two permitted under the constitution he wrote himself in 2009) in 2019 despite Bolivians expressing in an earlier referendum that they did not want him to run for the then-illegal fourth term (though this was overturned by a loyalist Supreme Court which argued that term limits violate his human rights), his slight victory was

¹ Che Guevara's *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare involves setting a small vanguard paramilitary regime in a focused geographic area of popular discontent with the goal of instigating attacks from the *foco*.

largely recognized as fraudulent (Vicanco & Pappier 2017). To his credit, Morales accepted the claims and set up a second election in November, but protests exploded onto the streets days after his concession demanding his resignation (Johnson 2019). It wasn't until the military turned against him that Morales stepped down –with a proverbial gun to his head– and fled to Mexico (Kurmanaev 2019).

The protest movement and subsequent turn by the military were labelled by significant portions of the Bolivian-national and international left as a “coup” in the mold of 1954 Guatemala or 1973 Chile (Field 2019). Just as the right-wing of Chile and Ecuador dismissed out of hand the legitimate frustrations with neoliberalism, the left-wing dismissed out of hand the legitimate concerns about Bolivian democracy in the face of Morales’ disregard for term limits. The true reason for the protests, they argue, is that the Global North wants access to Bolivia’s lithium reserves, which they believe Morales was protecting from capitalist exploitation. While on its face this appears as if it would handily fit the playbook of the North, substituting lithium for oil, a cursory glance at Morales’ use of his country’s reserves demonstrates that he was far from an obstacle to global access to lithium. Morales had long talked about using the reserves to spur economic growth and had already signed billions of dollars in deals with Chinese and German firms to develop the mines. His decision to abruptly cancel a deal with the German firm ACISA was hailed on the left as proof that Morales is a dutiful obstacle to exploitation (“Bolivia Scraps Joint Lithium Project with German Company” 2019; Higgins 2019). What this analysis chose to ignore –an appropriate term given the focus leftist media claims to give the working class– is that he cancelled it because locals in the region where the ACISA facilities were set to be built protested because they did not believe that they would see the benefits promised to them

(Johnson & Palmer 2019). Tweets and Twitter bots were again cited as evidence of foreign interference (Spencer 2019). It should be noted that this Twitter-related claim appears to have more legitimacy on its face than the ones in Chile, though whatever impact they might have had was still largely in the service of winning international sympathy for the protesters. Regardless, the disregard by the left of Bolivians' real concerns for their democracy has been on full display. It remains to be seen if the unelected interim government of Jeanine Áñez, credibly accused of being a protofascist given her vocal stance on suppressing indigenous rights, will follow through with its stated promise of holding democratic elections, or if Bolivia will become the latest formerly-democratic Latin American state to fall into military dictatorship (Estes 2019).

What both the right and the left have fallen into here is the pattern of nonagentic anti-imperialism. The two sides of the binary share the same logic that “because there are no legitimate claims against the establishment I support [neoliberalism or left-populism], then any resistance to it must be manufactured by hostile outside forces.” This belief strips the protesters of the agency to be angry at their material conditions or the direction of their politics. The anger must be artificial. To seriously argue that the events in Bolivia are imperialist in nature proves Arrighi correct when he says that Marxists have lost meaning of the word and Hensman correct when she says that anti-imperialists are using the term to describe any sort of Western action in the non-Western world. These three events in late 2019 demonstrate that the stripping of agency to suit political aims is far from a partisan practice.

The prevalence of nonagentic anti-imperialism in mainstream discourse hints at the larger problem of a black-and-white view of US-Latin America relations. It is an admittedly difficult balance to strike between recognizing the inherently exploitative nature of the relationship and

recognizing that Latin American states are not powerless. To reconcile these two tendencies, the paper's focus will be on the lived ends of Venezuelans and Latin Americans affected by Venezuela's actions. Understanding the legacy of Chavismo in the country today is instrumental in determining the validity of the anti-imperialist rhetoric coming from the regime and its supporters.

The aim of this paper is not for the Latin American right to point to and claim that it is justified in its elitist critique of anti-imperialist movements. It is likewise not for the Latin American left to point to and feel justified in its apologetics for authoritarianism. It is for the region as a whole to recognize the lived ends of individual people, including the poor, women, and indigenous peoples, within a democratic system is the only measure of legitimacy. This is why this paper will look beyond left-right binaries, beyond fiery oratory, and beyond ideological aims when assessing the legacy of Chavismo and the validity of the anti-imperialist rhetoric surrounding it. This will mean understanding the world-system in which Chavismo exists, the extent of its power to act freely within that world-system, the reality of life under those constraints, and the disparity between Chavista goals and Venezuelan life.

3. Venezuela 1948-1998

The movement that gave rise to Chavismo was born in a Venezuela that was itself the product of deliberate creation almost as much as of historical flows and ebbs. The story of that manufactured Venezuela begins loosely in 1948 with the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez. During his ten year rule following a military overthrow of the country's first elected President, Pérez Jiménez and his administration worked towards the goal of modernizing Venezuela in the image of developed nations. That goal, supported by the United States, involved the reshaping of the physical image of Venezuela according to Pérez Jiménez's "pledge that nation and citizens would be born anew was not just a rhetorical conceit; in some policies it had literal consequences" (Blackmore 2017, 57) If the physical image of Venezuela was to resemble developed Western states, then the country's ethnic makeup was the place to start. Notions of biological determinism regarding black, indigenous, mulatto, and other non-white Venezuelans led to migrant labor programs that took advantage of the massive postwar emigration from Europe. Development was meant to come through the miscegenistic cleaning of Venezuela's bloodline, a policy whose success has been validated by pointing to the country's repeated triumphs at the Miss Universe competition (Blackmore 2017, 57-59).

Western-style development went beyond the physical look of the people and toward the physical look of the landscape. To prove the legitimacy of the military regime, the administration embarked on nationwide mass housing operations to literally bulldoze the aesthetic problem of informal housing where approximately 40% of the population lived. Lisa Blackmore writes of

how the new housing projects served as “springboards to a modern way of life and national development” for Venezuela’s urban and rural poor. A combination of government propaganda and the “inward pull” of oil industry labor towards urban centers contributed heavily to the mass domestic migration (Blackmore 2017, 50-55). State resources were thus expanded towards these urban centers, the capital Caracas in particular, to reshape the landscape in the image of rapid development through modern buildings. Former barrio residents were forcibly relocated to “universally despised” superblock buildings in Caracas (Davis 2017, 54-55). At the same time, poverty began rising and with it the growth of slums in hills bordering large cities (Martinez et al. 2010, 14). European migrants with agricultural skills were incentivized to populate the rural interior in an effort to develop and modernize the farming and agricultural practices of the land while at the same time continuing to “clean” Venezuelan bloodlines (Blackmore 2017, 58).

The ten years of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship created through deliberate policy a Venezuela that was whiter, more European, and further disconnected from its rural and indigenous roots. The programme was accompanied by significant use of military force and state power to limit opposition. Half a century later, when opponents of the newly-elected Chávez accused him of rhetorically splitting the country between rich and poor, his supporters circulated a meme showcasing the Francisco Fajardo Highway of Caracas, the most important in the city, acting as “an asphalt ribbon dividing rich from poor” with the caption “It was Chávez who divided us?” (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, Kindle loc. 371). It was under Pérez Jiménez that these divisions came into a form recognizable today.

The post-dictatorship regime was known as Puntofijismo, after the 1958 Pact of Punto Fijo that set up a system of liberal electoral democracy. It was signed by elites of the three major

anti-Communist parties in the country: Acción Democrática (AD; Democratic Action), Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI; Social Christian Party), and the Unión Republicana Democrática (URD; Republican Democratic Union). The forty years between then and the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez would see those elites struggle to maintain the image of stability and Venezuela's marginalized communities struggle to make the new democratic regime work for them. In the thick of the Cold War and in the shadow of Cuba, it was all but predictable that these two struggles should come into conflict. Local Caracas leader Negro Miguel said of these times that "we had just come from a fierce ten-year dictatorship under Marcos Pérez Jiménez. And then came the incorrectly called 'democracy.' And in the beginning, we saw a change in things, and everything was very hopeful, but it's like a party and the day after you have all the trash" (Martinez et al. 2010, 15). The architects of Puntofijismo, former activists themselves against the dictatorships in the early 1930s and later against Pérez Jiménez, walked the line between right-wing demands for concentrated power as a means of jumpstarting the new democracy and left-wing demands for social and economic change through mass mobilizations. An example of this balance came between 1958 and the 1960 election of Rómulo Betancourt, when the barrios surrounding the big cities boomed as "the governing provisional junta suspended evictions in the barrios and offered public relief to the unemployed: as a result, 400,000 mostly poor people moved to Caracas in little more than a year" (Davis 2017, 59). Elites of AD and COPEI erred on the side of caution by opting for pragmatic development "based on foreign and local private capital, subsidies to the private sector, principles of compensation for any land reform," and stability by all means, which also meant excluding the left from most political processes (Diamond et al. 1989, 258-259).

The positive experience of Venezuelan elites under Puntofijismo was inevitably different from that of Venezuelans in marginalized communities. To help take down Pérez Jiménez, women used a “conjunctural coalition-building” model developed by them in which they worked with both legal and illegal political organizations across party lines; but when power was consolidated between only AD and COPEI (URD had left the establishment after Betancourt condemned revolutionary Cuba), that pluralistic unity across parties was seen as a threat by the Puntofijismo pact that wanted to exclude more radical and left-wing parties (Silva Michelena 1971, 68; Elfenbein 2019, 40). Women and indigenous organizers were effectively demobilized by democratic centralization, which concentrated power in the hands of the establishment, and were left outside the channels to political power by the two parties. Limited numbers (only around 2% of Venezuelans are indigenous) and financial resources meant that indigenous movements couldn't mobilize their own candidates inside or outside of the clientelist party establishment (Donna Lee 2010, 185). Additional barriers to political participation by indigenous peoples include the lack of support from nonindigenous voters, “fears of co-optation or exploitation [due to] a belief that non-Indians are incapable of understanding indigenous aspirations and cultures,” and the leftist nature indigenous movements in Venezuela, making the formal lack of leftist representation in federal politics a major roadblock (Donna Lee 2010, 183-84; Diamond et al. 1989, 259).

Despite the challenges faced by marginalized groups, advances were still made even if it meant circumventing the liberal democratic model. The 1970s, for example, saw the formation of “nonhierarchical, noncentralized alliances across the political and class affiliations to advance” the gender interests of women who were dissatisfied with the “rise of middle-class and

popular-sector women's organizations." In 1975, the recognition of the economic value of unpaid housework traditionally relegated to women became judicial precedent by judge Yolanda Poleo de Baez, who was also the leader of the Venezuelan Women Lawyer's Federation (FEVA). The ruling received little national attention but informed the future demands of popular women's organizing (Elfenbein 2019, 41). In the late 70s, networks of women's rights-based NGOs proliferated after organizing led to the creation of the Ministry for Women's Participation in Development and gains for gender and children's equality. Further labor-based social protection for homeworkers and domestic workers, however, was subsequently prevented from inclusion in labor laws by middle- and upper-class women involved in women's rights movements in the 80s and 90s (Elfenbein 2019, 43).

For indigenous movements, the question of sovereignty largely defined their struggle against the state. From before Pérez Jiménez, unofficial state policy was to incorporate indigenous tribes into national life in order to provide them with healthcare and education. The work, particularly in territories such as Amazonas which were essentially cut off from the rest of the country, was still relegated mainly to nonstate religious organizations. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and the fact that indigenous issues are a low priority meant that few results came of this (Angosto-Ferrández 2015, 44-46). Even some pro-indigenous movements on the progressive left sought to repress indigenous claims to territorial sovereignty in favor of bringing them into the mainstream national imagination (Angosto-Ferrández 2015, 42). Despite widespread conflicts over indigenous lands, 72% of indigenous communities in the early 90s had no land titles (Angosto-Ferrández 2015, 54). Furthermore, a lack of unity among indigenous groups, due to the fact that they were divided between rural and urban settings across states, meant that

organizing always remained local and never elevated to the federal level. One success came when the territory of Amazonas became a state in 1992 and organized indigenous resistance ensured that the state's constitution included language inclusive to indigenous territorial claims and identity.

One of the clearest examples of popular organization in Venezuela came in the form of communes in the 1980s, where poor barrio residents met in assemblies to discuss everything from local affairs to the realities of revolutionary praxis in the face of democratic exclusion. This was done entirely unofficially, as this form of organization was not recognized by the state. They expanded into barrio networks through larger and larger swaths of land, becoming one of the most direct forms of antisystemic resistance to the capitalist world-system albeit in a highly localized manner. More specifically, communes “aim to produce the things that people need locally through socialist enterprises” that are explicitly anti-capitalist. In a general sense, the theory is that the community best knows what the community needs, so it should provide for itself (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, 17-18). The limited resources and off-the-books status of the communes did limit their extent and overall success, but regardless the communes did prove that popular self-organization was possible and that its proliferation did not necessarily depend on state infrastructure.

Puntofijismo survived in Venezuela because of its ability to project an image of stability, perpetuated by oil wealth that kept the economy afloat and savvy governance that kept potentially radical elements at bay. Social organizations and labor unions, for example, were often subsidized by the government and their leaders knew that compliance with state power could grant them seats on official boards. According to some, the image of Venezuela's stability

covered up thousands of disappearances and assassinations by Venezuelan security forces during the 60s and 70s (Martinez et al. 2010, 16). This was the age of the “Magical State,” as Fernando Coronil dubbed it, in which “the myth of Venezuela as a wealthy democratic nation steadily advancing toward modernity” persisted despite numerous indicators that it was just that— a myth, a facade (Coronil 1997, 368). Seemingly unlimited oil wealth allowed for everything from social programs to funding for organizations aiding marginalized communities, such as the unsuccessful missions to indigenous lands. Political leaders were seen as magicians who could conjure progress out of a hat. None was more successful than Carlos Andrés Pérez (CAP), president from 1974 to 79. A historic rise in oil prices gave him new powers with which to modernize the nation, and the ruse worked. The prevailing view of Puntofijismo’s magic is represented in a historiography by Daniel H. Levine in which he argues that this socioeconomic development “solved” the problem of the peasantry as a social group— a solution which overlooks “the explosive expansion of informal barrios” in Caracas, to the point where the country went from “being 30 percent urban to 30 percent rural” in the 60s (Davis 2017, 59). The elitist tinge of the magic becomes clear when he claims (writing prior to 1989) that “there are no politically significant racial, ethnic, or linguistic splits in Venezuela” (Diamond et al. 1989, 276-277).

The onslaught of neoliberalism made a slow entrance into Venezuela, first through the successive presidents who piggybacked off CAP’s wizardry and then, ironically, through CAP himself in his second term from 1989-93. The magical veneer wore off after the inevitable oil bust, meaning that “if the growing poor didn't see the money that gushed into Venezuela's petrol-class through the booming 1960s and 1970s, they sure didn't see it after” that (Martinez et

al. 2010, 16). After campaigning by calling the IMF a “neutron bomb that killed people but left buildings standing,” he accepted \$4.5 billion in IMF loans mere weeks after taking office (Fastenberg 2011). Rapid neoliberalization from the mid-80s to the early 90s meant that what little oil wealth was used in support of social movements disappeared, particularly for women’s organizations. For indigenous communities, however, decentralization under neoliberalism opened up new opportunities as indigenous-focused agencies boomed with similar goals of incorporation through access to public services and citizenship. But as Luis F. Angosto-Ferrández writes, if this was the goal, it “was clearly a failure. By 1992, the national census established that 65% of indigenous communities were deprived of schools and nearly 87% lacked even a pharmacy” (Angosto-Ferrández 2015, 47). Levine’s comment is indicative of a larger trend in Venezuela during this time. Relegated to the hills surrounding big cities, to the distant Amazon, and to kitchens nationwide, Venezuelans of marginalized communities were made invisible to Puntofijismo and its benefactors. The racist and elitist legacy of Pérez Jiménez was alive and well in the Magical State. But for an invisible population beaten down even harder by neoliberalism, the logical remedy was to make themselves visible in the most forceful way possible.

The opportunity came on the last Monday of February in 1989. When Caracas’ workers woke up early in the morning to discover that CAP’s austerity measures had doubled gasoline costs literally overnight, riots and burning busses were already being reported as they refused to pay the higher costs. By 7:30 A.M., demonstrations were already underway and looting was taking place in the capital’s heavily Afro-Venezuelan east. The anger initially directed at the gas price hikes spread politically to cover both the entire neoliberal package and physically to cover

significant parts of the entire country within a few hours. Scholar George Ciccariello-Maher argues that it was not the students, nor the low-wage working class, nor the peasants who sparked the revolution; it was the urban poor who came from the hills they had been corralled into for decades and made themselves seen through a mixture of coordinated, on-the-ground organizing and spontaneous riots across the major cities nationwide. Evidence shows that the looting was primarily of basic necessities, from household items to food, though whiskey and champagne were certainly not left untouched (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, 93). Some reports claimed that rioters ended up firing back at the state forces at some point and that the motives for the riots had moved beyond the initial economic frustration and into indiscriminate destruction of private and public property.

The *Caracazo*, as these riots came to be known, walked the peculiar line between organization and spontaneity. To the middle classes and the elites, they must have felt like a highly coordinated assault undertaken by professional militants. Reports of Cuban involvement, including by former Venezuelan military general Carlos Peñaloza, persist to this day with little hard evidence (Peñaloza 2014, 185). What is known is that the “‘spontaneity’ had been practiced in the streets for several years before the revolt and in many ways resulted from conscious and organized efforts to overcome the failures of the guerrilla struggle” after decades of forceful repression against an emergent Left in Venezuela (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, 95). But the invisibility of the barrios under Puntofijismo allowed these efforts to run unsurveilled. Relegated to the hills surrounding the cities, struggles against the AD-COPEI “partyarchy” and encroaching neoliberalism continued because they could not be spoken out of existence. What made the Caracazo different, and the reason why it is still remembered with either fondness or horror

today, is that it was the first time that forty years of struggle spilled out from the hills and forced itself into the view of the Venezuelan elite.

With hindsight encompassing over thirty years of Global South neoliberalization today, the response by the state to the Caracazo was all but expected. But for the masses of the urban poor in 1989, it would be an understatement to say that they were underprepared. February 28 began with police firing indiscriminately at rioters in some areas, whereas in other areas the police either monitored the looting or partook themselves. At 6 P.M. that day, CAP got on national television and announced Decree #49, which suspended the individual rights to liberty and security, the inviolability of the home, and the rights of assembly and peaceful protest. The suspension of rights lasted until March 22, creating nearly a month in which the government was essentially able to act without constitutional restriction that state security forces took full advantage of (Carey & Shugart 1998, 157-58). Violators of an overnight curfew were treated with predictable brutality, particularly in the large barrios of Caracas. The Catia and 23 de Enero barrios were identified by the state as the “organizational brain of the rebellion” and saw

known organizers...dragged from their homes to be either executed or “disappeared,” and when security forces met resistance from rooftop snipers, they sprayed entire apartment blocks with automatic machine guns. Just as the bullet holes left in these apartment blocks in the 1960s remained as scars and political reminders well into the 1970s, so too are the bullet holes from the Caracazo visible to this very day. Turning attention toward Petare, which today is the largest and most violent of Caracas' slums, up to twenty were killed in a single incident when, on March 1, the army infamously opened fire on the Mesuca stairway. Much of the country was “pacified” after three days of such incidents, whereas Caracas saw rioting for more than five (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, 96-97).

Official figures place the death toll at around 300, but popular figures place the toll closer to 3,000. The combination of an effective government blackout amid the repressions (meaning that no documents during this time are available), government obstructions to investigations into the violence, and the sheer geographic spread of the riots have made it all but impossible to determine the reality (Carey & Shugart 1998, 157). Those potentially thousands of Venezuelans were not, however, the only casualties. So too had died the illusion of the Magical State, of Puntofijismo, and of the peripheral urban poor who remained in their hills. The government knew that its image had been shattered in the eyes of many of its most important subjects, namely the low-wage and informal workers who served as its real engine, and thus it responded “with a series of measures attempting to restore Puntofijismo’s legitimacy within a neoliberal framework” (Elfenbein 2019, 45). But after living conditions worsened still and people lost faith in the state’s ability to uphold the collective good, the state lost people’s compliance.

In the short term, the impact of the Caracazo was contradictory. On the one hand, newfound anti-establishment energy had literally rocked the streets and reinvigorated the long-gestating social movements that gave birth to it. But on the other hand, the neoliberal infection that mobilized the rioters persisted, resulting in less availability of funding and state resources to social organizations relative to the pre-neoliberal era of Puntofijismo. It ushered in an era of further anti-neoliberal organizing entirely from the grassroots perspective. The Puntofijista establishment itself provided an important boost to that aim through a series of decentralization reforms following the Caracazo, which made it so that mayors and governors could now be elected by a direct vote. This had the obvious effect of opening space for nontraditional candidates to take power, which in turn spread even further the antisystemic

energy (Corrales & Penfold 2015, 17). But for that energy to really challenge the behemoth of global capitalism, the social nature of the Bolivarian antisystemic movement would need to take on a national face and use state power to challenge state power.

On the fourth of February in 1992, that challenge came in the form of an attempted military coup d'état against CAP led by lieutenant-colonel Hugo Chávez. Chávez, whose anti-government sentiment was known by the government at the time of the Caracazo, capitalized on the widespread post-Caracazo popular dissatisfaction with Puntofijismo, to lead a rebellion on the house of government that ended with his arrest. After the attempt failed, however, a press interview gave Bolivarianism its most direct voice yet when Chávez articulated that “friends, unfortunately, for now, the objectives we strived for were not reached in the capital city” (Marco 2017). That “for now” sent shockwaves throughout Venezuela. It was famous then for the message it sent to the social movements who could again believe that there is hope for a better future. And it is infamous today for its remarkable prescience that continues to haunt the country to this very day.

As part of a plan to distance himself from the neoliberal disaster of 1989, President Rafael Caldera in 1994 released Hugo Chávez from prison with a pardon. Chávez mounted an ultimately successful campaign for President four years later as an anti-neoliberal candidate (Painter 2011). Even in a country as business-friendly as Venezuela, anti-business and anti-neoliberal sentiment combined with “outlier business elites” helped secure the victory of his platform built on ending corruption, poverty, and democratic exclusion (Gates 2010, 133). He generated widespread excitement among the populations that had been systematically excluded from democracy, giving his incoming government in 1999 a massive popular mandate in which

forty years of organizing placed their trust. Indeed, the rise of Chavismo represented the ascension of Bolivarianism as a series of antisystemic social movements into a single antisystemic national movement with the promise of representing their interests. The following sections will depart from a chronological study and address various elements associated with Chavismo and explore how the rhetoric of nonagentic anti-imperialism engages them.

4. Chavismo

When Ciccariello-Maher, himself a nonagentic anti-imperialist, attempts to sell the image of Chávez to his readers on the left, he does so by promoting the formation of what he calls “radical democracy,” which takes form through the practice of local power such as communes. This is the first point addressed in this section because to many, it cuts to the heart of the essence of Chavismo— building democracy from the bottom-up. Grassroots democracy meant to give a voice to those who were denied access to top-down democracy for so long, even with the help of the social movements described above. While the “council-socialist” tradition of communes wasn't official state policy until 2006, the language of “‘participatory and protagonistic democracy’ based on a broad conception of participation that...encompasses social, economic and cultural rights [with] collective rights for specific groups” was inscribed in Chávez’s popularly ratified 1999 constitution from the beginning (Azzellini 2018, 5). Dario Azzellini describes this as part of a “two-track” approach to dealing with 20th century questions of whether antisystemic social movements can remain effective after “seizing the state” and becoming national; Venezuela’s answer was to have social movements essentially guide the state from below. This was Chávez’s famous “third way” between capitalism and socialism (Azzellini 2018, 9). Local power and autonomy took many forms, each contributing to a restructuring of the linkages between citizens and the state. The aim of this section is not to determine if this restructuring was for better or for worse; rather, it is to understand its significance and ultimate effect on the democratic ideals of Chavismo as established in the 1999 constitution. The forms

that will be examined here are the 1999 housing reforms, the 2003 establishment of the *misiones*, and the 2006 turn towards local organization through communes.

In promising citizens the right of participation in the administration and execution of housing policy, the administration clearly repudiated the neoliberal housing establishment that had led to and maintained the physical segregation between rich and poor in urban areas. More importantly, the 1999 housing reforms built on a decade of bottom-up organizing, such as the 1991 Assembly of Barrios, through which citizens demanded greater control over land rights and tenancy (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 85-86). Chávez seized on these movements during his campaign and gave them the political legitimacy that they had lacked. A centerpiece of these reforms are Urban Land Committees (CTUs), established in 2002. Article 1 of Decree 1.666 declares the goal of “initiating the protagonistic participation of organized communities in order to achieve the regulation of urban land tenancy in popular neighborhoods through proper inter-institutional coordination,” effectively creating CTUs as the method through which citizens would take the lead in housing reform (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 88). CTUs are organized on a “basis of communal solidarity” and focus on the cultural elements that make up a community, such as local traditions and shared histories (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 91). Venezuelan scholar María Pilar García-Guadilla writes in her chapter of *Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy* that there is an inherent contradiction in having top-down approaches sanctioning bottom-up movements. The fact that the legitimacy of these movements hinges on presidential decrees and bureaucratic mechanisms creates self-evident limits on their autonomy and opens the door to “political co-optation to the extent that the CTUs’ objectives are conditioned upon political loyalty – especially given the relationship of the popular sectors with such a highly charismatic leader as

Chávez” (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 99) This unavoidable contradiction will be apparent in any similar piece of supposedly pro-autonomy legislation, including the ones examined below.

The second form of “radical democracy” is probably the most prolific. Chávez’s misiones, or social programs, were a cornerstone of his socioeconomic platform and stretched across significant shares of the population, going far beyond the reach of the Puntofijista establishment. The push for misiones began in 2003 following a very turbulent 2002 and preceding a recall referendum, making them a clear play to prove to the electorate that concrete gains had in fact been made. Between 2003 and 2006 alone there were nearly 20 misiones carried out, providing services and aid to the poor, to women, to indigenous communities, and other groups. It is impossible to address all of them here, so only Barrio Adentro (2003), Robinson (2003), and Vuelvan Caras (2004) will be highlighted because they represent a diverse assortment of issues addressed by the misiones.

Barrio Adentro was the first misión to be put into action. Its aim was to provide free medical care nationwide to those who needed it, using tens of thousands of Cuban doctors and thousands of Venezuelan medical students. The Cuban export of doctors throughout the developing world had reached Venezuela first in 1999 after a natural disaster, something that set the foundations for what eventually became Barrio Adentro. Though the program first began offering only primary aid, it quickly grew to include more elaborate treatment centers and within a year had the additional goal of consolidating “much of the traditional public health care system within *Barrio Adentro* while maintaining its emphasis on free health care and expanded local access” (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 197). The importance of the accessible provision of medical care to poor communities cannot be understated; for many of Venezuela’s poor, particularly in

the program's early years when it focused on primary care, it was a literal lifeline. The characteristically opaque nature of Venezuelan government affairs means that it is impossible to know how much the program actually cost, but the state oil firm PDVSA claims it invested US\$6.36 billion in the program from 2003-2010.

Along with healthcare, education is another pillar on which the Chavista regime hitched its legitimacy. Public education programs were a stated priority, and the Misión Robinson (Phase I) program, started in 2003, was arguably its shining light. It involved sending volunteers, either civilian or military, into areas previously untouched by public education efforts to teach citizens how to read and write. It began heavily orientated towards the grassroots, with municipal coordinators working with communities to create regulatory parameters based on local needs, but within a couple of years it became more bureaucratized and regulated from above. Gauging the success of Misión Robinson is particularly difficult because the only figures available come either directly from the government, with little sourcing beyond just their word, or from explicitly anti-Chavista researchers and journalists. The government claimed that in its first year, Robinson taught 1.5 million Venezuelans to read using around 130,000 facilitators, declaring Venezuela an illiteracy-free country by 2005 (“‘Aló, Presidente’ Número 227 Declara Hoy a Venezuela Territorio Libre De Analfabetismo” 2005). The retrospective blog of elite inner-circle Chavista Diosdado Cabello described the accomplishment as the result of “Supreme leader of the Bolivarian Revolution” Chávez’s “goal to give liberty to the people and break with imperialist oppression” (“¡Yo Sí Puedo! Misión Robinson” 2019). While the figures are disputed, it is worth noting that no effort like this had ever been undertaken in Venezuela and its ambition should be recognized.

Misión Vuelvan Caras of 2004 promoted “endogenous development centers” by training participants for work largely in worker cooperatives. More broadly, the goal was to create popular power by addressing low unemployment and high poverty rates through locally-organized work structures in areas where industry did not reach (McIlroy & Wynter 2016). The focus on cooperative forms of labor organizing represents one of the strongest concrete breaks from capitalist modes of labor organizing before 2006. Additionally, Vuelvan Caras represented one of the first opportunities for poor women to train for work and become working members of cooperatives. The program consisted of sending teams of facilitators out to communities around the country to provide citizens with “technical information, political knowledge and the opportunity to begin to work with the practical skills they have gained in the course” (McIlroy & Wynter 2016). There is much less information available about this misión compared to Barrio Adentro since it never reached the same scope, but from what is available from researchers and journalists in Venezuela, the program appears to have provided thousands of poor citizens outside of urban cities with new opportunities for self-organization.

And finally, the third form of “radical democracy” studied in this section is that of communes and colectivos, the most direct forms of local organizing that the regime supported. The two are not necessarily synonymous, though they do share enough qualities to merit inclusion in the same section not only by their supposed autonomy but also in the fact that both “came under the umbrella of the government’s ‘communal councils’” (“Venezuela: A Mafia State?” 2018). Azzellini posits that communes are the pathway to devolve the traditional state into a communal state. To address the contradiction brought up above, he argues that the state cannot be the driver of the transition towards socialism, but only provide the local organizers the

power with which to do so (Azzellini 2018, 1010). The history of local autonomy as an alternative form of organization has deep roots in Venezuela, from early Marxist thinkers to indigenous peoples and Afro communities descending from emancipated slaves. 2006 was the year in which Chávez formally moved his government towards a socialist vision, as opposed to the more vaguely anti-neoliberal one from before, with the Law of Communal Councils. Communes had existed in Venezuela for decades, but it was this law that finally recognized them as legitimate forms of organization able to receive government support (National Assembly 2006). A little over a year later, the Ministry of Participation and Social Development announced that around 19,500 communes were in existence (“Minpades Registra 19 Mil 500 Consejos Comunales” 2007). Local self-organization allowed the poor in both urban and rural areas to reach new levels of self-sufficiency and, true to the law’s aim, disengage from the centrality of the state in certain respects. Ciccariello-Maher writes of the El Maizal commune, created in 2009, and how it autonomously produces corn to be ground up and made into flour for arepas, a staple of Venezuelan food, on land expropriated from landowners by Chávez (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, Kindle loc. 981). Production is able to take place independently of industry and put power in the hand of the community.

The colectivos have a different history, loosely emerging in the 1980s as armed militias engaged in self-defense, contrary to the communes’ goal of autonomous self-sufficiency. They were formalized in 2001 when Chávez “asked his supporters to form civic action groups so that communities would have more clout in lobbying central government directly for funds,” though they were seen by many as paramilitary groups operating in support of the regime (Morsbach 2002). That view was validated during the 2002 coup attempt when members of the Bolivarian

Circles –early versions of these paramilitaries– opened fire against the pro-coup Opposition, something Ciccariello-Maher argues was “not to attack the constitutional order, but to protect and restore it” (“Venezuela: A Mafia State?” 2018; Ciccariello-Maher 2016, Kindle loc. 805) An example of a colectivo is that of La Piedrita, with roots dating back to the 1980s in 23 de Enero (23rd of January, a name commemorating the date of the coup that toppled Pérez Jiménez) barrio in Caracas. Born out of strong Marxist-Leninist principles, it was created to defend against the cycle of violence that rocked the barrio. Ciccariello-Maher also writes that its authority supersedes that of the state, a point emphasized by a

hand-painted sign that greets all visitors: “Here La Piedrita gives the orders and the government obeys.” This is no exaggeration: the Chávez government once sent a captain of the military reserves into the zone, who was immediately taken into custody by the collective. When the official protested, explaining that he was merely there to scope out a possible escape route for the president in the event of a repeat of the 2002 coup, the response from La Piedrita was unambiguous: the government does not tell us anything, it must ask (Ciccariello-Maher 2015).

Such descriptions of autonomy certainly lend credence to the notion that Venezuela's radical democracy, with roots in pre-Colombian indigenous organization but formalized by Chávez, has set the country on a path to the devolution of the state in favor of locally-organized popular power based on community traditions and shared histories. There is unsurprisingly a great variety in the form, management, and productive capabilities of different communes; dedicating a couple of sentences to only two of the tens of thousands of communes in Venezuela may seem like more of an insult than an overview. Those sentences aim only to introduce that variety and outline the structures that supposedly form the basis of revolutionary democracy.

Having briefly reviewed three forms of “radical democracy” that sought to reshape citizen-state relations and decentralize state power, it is time to revisit the aforementioned contradiction of top-down approaches to bottom-up autonomy, especially when it comes to Chavismo. It is a contradiction addressed by the scholars cited above. Ciccariello-Maher concedes that top-down reaches “from above toward the popular movements from below...is not without either its contradictions or dangers. The contradictions are as old as sovereignty itself: the state does not like to share power, and much less does the military” (Ciccariello-Maher 2013, 250). Azzellini similarly acknowledges the difficulty in a bourgeois state existing under the capitalist world-system with institutions which, “out of their own inherent logic, try to control the social processes and reproduce themselves” (Azzellini 2018, 56). The first barrier to the autonomy of these “radical democracy” initiatives is their legal adscription to the powerful executive. All were either created or formally recognized by federal law, meaning that the power ultimately rests there. In the case of the CTUs, García-Guadilla claims that this opens them up to co-optation by the regime when questions regarding competition for the top-down distribution of resources emerge. Similarly, a challenge for autonomy arises when significant governmental influence restricts the ability of the CTUs to forge their own identities, a necessary development when the entire goal of this method of housing policy is supposed to be as localized as possible (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 99-100). When the federal executive is the fountain for whose resources the network of autonomous CTUs must compete, an inevitable result of these is that the communities that side more with the government will receive more of the benefits. The same issue is apparent in Chávez’s misiones, an issue which was the focus of the chapter by Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson in *Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy*. They sought in 2005 to understand if

the misiones were programmatic or clientelistic; in other words, were the program resources impartially distributed where needed, or were they used in direct exchange for votes and political support? Their answer is somewhere in the middle— what they call “charismatic/populist” (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 201). They found that for the missions they analyzed (including Barrio Adentro and Robinson, but not Vuelvan Caras), the allocation of resources was in fact determined in large part by whether or not a certain community politically supported the regime. For Misión Mercal, for example, which established a nationwide chain of stores selling subsidized food, the correlation they found is that richer communities actually had a higher chance of receiving a Mercal store than poor ones, “conditional on the percent of the 2000 vote for Chávez” (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 201-205). Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson also found, however, that recipients of the services of the misiones were mostly unaware of that conditionality. They “conclude that screening sometimes occurred...but that the misiones were not using any kind of overt conditionality at the time we studied them” (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 208). This means that the programs were far from impartial, but the people they did benefit did not feel that their reception of the services depended on support for the government. The primary reason the authors cite for this is Chávez’s charisma and sheer popularity in many poor communities during this time, which made it to where residents were receptive to anything since it was provided by Chávez (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, 206-207). This has a number of implications, many of which hinge on developments following the timeframe in which this study was conducted.

One of those developments was reported by the New York Times in a March 2019 article. It agrees with Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson in that Chávez’s popularity and charisma were a

large component of what allowed the programs to promote the regime with conditionality but without coercion. As soon as Chávez died and was replaced by Maduro, however, coercion had to step in where his charisma failed. The article speaks of sixteen Cuban doctors who made up the medical workforce of Barrio Adentro, most of whom spoke under the condition of anonymity out of fear. They spoke of their actions preceding the fraudulent 2018 election, where they were instructed to employ a number of coercive tactics to secure a greater number of votes for the ruling PSUV party. Those maneuvers, part of Barrio Adentro, ranged from benign “reminders to vote for the government to denying treatment for opposition supporters with life-threatening ailments.” One doctor admitted that it “became a form of blackmail.” Some of the Cubans reported being given false identification cards that allowed them to vote in the election while “others were told to give precise voting instructions to elderly patients, whose infirmities made them particularly easy to manipulate” (Casey 2019a). The article delves into many more forms of coercion, but no more need to be mentioned here to underline the point: the top-down social programs created by the Chavista executive meant to create popular power through local organization, healthcare, and education very much retain the power with the executive, not communities. The Barrio Adentro coercion is only one of the most obvious means through which that power has been used.

Misión Robinson has also come under scrutiny not for dangling necessities in front of Venezuelans in exchange for support the way Barrio Adentro did, but for the government greatly exaggerating its successes and using it as a vehicle to spread propaganda rather than education. Economists Daniel Ortega and Francisco Rodriguez, the latter a former Chavista and economist for the regime, conducted a study in 2008 to see if the government’s claims of wiping out

illiteracy were legitimate. Their study, predicated on self-reported Household Surveys later compared to official government figures, found “evidence for, at most, small positive literacy gains as a result of the program, though in many specifications the Misión Robinson program’s impacts are statistically indistinguishable from zero” (Ortega & Ramirez 2008). The authors also claim that Venezuela had fewer than 1.5 million illiterate citizens before the program started, making the government’s claim an impossibility, something backed up by the fact that the government has never cited a source other than itself for the 1.5 million figure (Ortega & Ramirez 2008). Even if this doesn't lead one to recognize the reality of the misiones described here, as was the case with Chávez’s brother and Education Minister Adán Chávez when he claimed the figures were manipulated by the regime’s enemies, it should at least put a major asterisk next to the regime’s claims (“Propaganda, Not Policy” 2008). By holding these initiatives up to the light and understanding not only their aims but also their actual impact on people, it becomes clear that they were often conditional upon recipient’s support of the regime, something that became more obvious only as Chavismo had to start relying more on coercion instead of charisma. They began in part as tools to boost Chávez’s chances through the recall referendum and continued more as a spectacle to hold up and prove Chavismo’s legitimacy as opposed to actual grassroots attempts at a real revolution.

Even the communes and colectivos, hailed as the most radical form of local democracy, have been subject to co-optation, albeit in a fundamentally different way. The close association with Chávez by way not only of unwavering partisanship but also of special access to government funds “considerably reduced the diversity of participating sectors, distancing the Circles from their original objectives and facilitating their political co-optation” (Smilde &

Hellinger 2011, 87). The inclusion of the Circles in the Law of Communes made it so they could receive more “state funding and resources, including weapons. They were granted legitimacy and real power in their areas of influence” (“Venezuela: A Mafia State?” 2018). La Piedrita, the colectivo Ciccariello-Maher speaks highly of as being dedicated to the defense of the revolution, is perfectly representative of the ways this co-optation has manifested and is in action today. Based out of the 23 de Enero barrio, it operates in many ways like a commune, running a small community-owned farm and selling produce to local buyers. It is also a hyperviolent colectivo known for doing the regime’s dirty work, especially after Chávez disbanded the Metropolitan police in 2011 (“Venezuela Suprimirá La Policía Metropolitana Por Bolivariana” 2017). That dirty work includes everything from attacking anti-government demonstrators in the streets to tear-gassing television stations to even conducting executions inside the barrios that the regime would rather keep its hands clean of (“Venezuela: A Mafia State?” 2018). There is much more to be said about the ways in which many of these autonomous communes and colectivos have been co-opted by the Chavista regime to carry out its most violent wishes, but it should be clear by now that autonomy in Venezuela is only to be had in service to the government; anything outside of that must be reined in.

It would be easy to dismiss these programs of “radical democracy,” their promises, and their outcomes as domestic policy matters separate from the question of nonagentic anti-imperialism. The quote from Cabello, however, provides a key insight into why the domestic programs of Chávez, from the CTUs to the misiones to the colectivos is still relevant to the question of anti-imperialism. Though it appears to be juvenile rambling at first, the connection of high literacy with “imperialist oppression” actually zeroes in on the role of the

capitalist world-system in the underdevelopment of the periphery. Azzellini's framing of the contradiction –that it stems from the “inherent logic” of the capitalist world-system– intellectualizes Cabello's sycophantism and effectively places the blame of Venezuela's inability to fully devolve into a communal state on the imperialist powers of the core that have forced bourgeois state organization on the periphery. The lesson from Azzellini's point of view is that the failures of these programs, the corruption that surrounds them, and the basic reality that these locally organized forms of popular power are autonomous only to the extent that the state approves of them is not the result of conscious decisions by the Chavista regime, but rather of the imperial powers whose specter haunts its every action. Supporting the regime in its actions, which, according to this argument, are inherently positive, is therefore an anti-imperialist position. Their failures, if they are even acknowledged, are thus not to be looked at as the fault of the well-intentioned regime, but as that of the imperialists. All one can do in this case is continue to support the regime in the face of opposition so it can continue to chip away from the core hegemony that has swallowed the key to its shackles. That this falls under the category of nonagentic anti-imperialism is only logical. It is also logical, of course, to recognize that the kind of radical change Chavismo claimed to pursue would face significant obstacles under the capitalist world-system. But based on the evidence laid out above, the greatest obstacle came not from the imperialist powers of the West but from the regime itself; from its ineptitude and its own intention to maintain power over supposedly-autonomous segments of Venezuela. The regime employed its agency to undermine its own public efforts of creating an autonomy that was never intended to materialize. Removing the role that the regime itself played in the failure of this socialistic vision in favor of blaming the “imperial oppression” identified by Cabello

represents a key means through which nonagentic anti-imperialists continue to uphold the regime on false grounds.

If the case is made that Chavismo is primarily at fault for its failure to construct a communal state through grassroots autonomous organization rather than the omnipresent capitalist world-system, then there must be an explanation of how the regime could have used its agency to make the experiment work despite the “imperialist oppression.” This explanation begins and ends with finding a way out of the contradiction from above. By sanctioning the grassroots movements with presidential decrees, Chávez retained ultimate control over the projects, be they CTUs, misiones, or communes. He poured billions of petrodollars into these initiatives, attempting to buy the revolution rather than build it. Securing more popular support by way of charisma or coercion was always the goal, since a truly autonomous sector would have challenged his own power. To build that autonomy, the petrodollars should have gone to the development of infrastructure capable of handling the enormous demands of programs like Barrio Adentro and Robinson and building an environment in which an autonomous sector can thrive without competing against itself for government resources. As Venezuelan journalist Francisco Toro wrote in 2012, “if the government had invested a fraction of the effort it devoted to publicizing Misión Robinson’s supposed achievements to optimizing the program’s efficiency, Venezuela would have eradicated illiteracy long ago” (Toro 2012).

4.1 The Centralization of Power

The previous section outlines how Chávez was successful in institutionalizing democracy at the grassroots level, something that social movements had struggled to do for decades. This

section will outline how, once in power, Chavismo took a battering ram to the democracy it had supposedly aimed to build up. In *Antisystemic Movements*, Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein observe that once a regime has taken power in opposition to a country's elite, as Chávez did, "the class struggle within the country was de-legitimized as an obstacle to the former struggle, which was itself defined as class struggle at a higher level" (Arrighi et al. 2012, 66). The Chávez playbook mirrored their analysis. Through a variety of means, the vehicles through which the Bolivarian class struggle was waged throughout Puntofijismo were eliminated, precisely as obstacles to the continuation of the revolution that was cemented in 1998.

Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold ask near the beginning of their 2011 book *The Dragon in the Tropics* how "a grassroots movement that began in 1998 as an effort to bring more democracy to Venezuela transformed itself into a movement intent on empowering the executive branch above any other actor" (Corrales & Penfold 2015, 14). How this expansion of centralized power squares with the parallel expansion of local and antisystemic will be an important question to investigate as it defines one of the key contradictions of Chavista Venezuela. The clear motivator for concentrating power in the first months of his administration was the rooting out of the partyarchy that voters had overwhelmingly rejected, and part of that was eliminating the power that the old guard held in the judicial and legislative branches. Through a series of legal maneuvers and procedural tricks, boosted by historic approval ratings, Chávez did just that in the constitution, which included little input from oppositional parties. The presidency now became the most powerful instrument in Venezuelan politics, with heavy influence at best and indirect control at worst over most of the country's institutions, such as the courts and the electoral monitoring body CNE (Corrales & Penfold 2015, 18-20).

4.2 Media Controls

National antisystemic movements with state power are constantly under pressure from the Core and its allies to conform to the capitalist world-system. One need only look at the propaganda campaign that preceded the 1954 CIA-backed coup in Guatemala, where, among various other forms of psychological operations (psyops), Miami-based radio announcers broadcasting in Guatemala denounced the democratically-elected communist Arbenz regime as “based on absurdities” and ignoring “the existence of moral values” (The Sherwood Tapes 1954). This has been a tough reality for many antisystemic leaders, and is increasingly becoming an issue even for Core states by way of destabilizing disinformation campaigns by rival states (Glenza 2020). That leaders aim to ensure that propaganda is not weaponized by rivals is not antidemocratic; indeed, it is the opposite. But when it comes to the fine line between protecting truthful information and censorship, nonagentic anti-imperialist leaders take a stand firmly at the latter.

The Chavista regime is no different, with the foundations for censorship being laid in the 1999 constitution with Article 58, which states that “everyone has the right to timely, *truthful* and impartial information, without censorship” (Venezuelan Constitution 1999; emphasis added). Though the state had the power to determine what does and does not count as truthful, the media remained moderately free of state interference until 2007– though it was not uncommon for pro- and anti-Chavista journalists to be attacked or harassed. It began with the government's refusal to renew the broadcasting license of Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), the country's oldest private television network, because of its unfavorable coverage (Lauria & Rodriguez 2007). The

crackdown has continued since then, with news organizations forced to either subject themselves to state censorship or censor themselves. Journalists critical of the government have been imprisoned and leaders of antigovernment outlets have been subject to persecution by the regime (“Venezuelan Columnist Sentenced to Prison for Defamation” 2010; “Venezuela Media Bills Would Harm Freedom of Expression” 2010). With TeleSUR filling the media void and becoming a mouthpiece for Chavismo, the Venezuelan state was able to control far more of the media than any antisystemic state should even with the reality described above.

The simplistic, black-and-white view of international relations that colored TeleSUR’s coverage of Syria’s Arab Spring –US allies are bad, US enemies are good– is unsurprisingly replicated in Venezuela. Its ideological outlook views the West as the only real source of violence and oppression, which leads to rightfully critical coverage of Trump’s treatment of Central America refugees at the US-Mexico border and the patent invisibilization of Venezuela’s own refugee and humanitarian crisis (Ceja 2016). For nonagentic anti-imperialists outside of government, Hensman notes, the confirmation bias provided by such ideological coverage “is especially dangerous in cases where the despots have well-funded and fairly sophisticated state media through which they disseminate a mixture of genuine news and propaganda (like the Russian RT and the Iranian Press TV), as well as paid and unpaid ideologues who do the same” (Hensman 2018, 14). TeleSUR has succeeded not only in acting as a mouthpiece for Chavismo, but more importantly in either hiding or embellishing the regime’s social and political impact on certain groups as it saw fit.

The rise of TeleSUR was made possible as well by the practice of media censorship, began by Chávez and enthusiastically continued by Maduro. Maduro’s campaign against El

Nacional, one of Venezuela's "last independent newspapers," demonstrates the extent (Krygier & Faiola 2018). Months after his 2013 election, Maduro accused El Nacional of being "manipulators," and then calling it "El Nazi-onal" (Marino 2013). Coordinated pressure continued as recently as 2018, notably as El Nacional reported on the ever-worsening humanitarian crisis, when the regime blocked the paper's website (Krygier & Faiola 2018).

Chávez's crusade against renewing broadcasting licenses had a recognizable rhetorical flair. A Committee to Protect Journalists report writes that in 2006

Chávez threatened to block the license renewals of unnamed television and radio stations that were waging "psychological war to divide, weaken, and destroy the nation" as part of an "imperialist plan" to overthrow the government...After having won re-election, Chávez singled out RCTV in a December 28 address to Venezuelan troops. "There won't be any new concession for that coup-mongering channel that was known as Radio Caracas Televisión," Chávez said. "Venezuela must be respected." That applies to international observers, too, he made plain (Lauria & Rodriguez 2007).

The story of Venezuela's media censorship and repression of journalists goes much further than simply refusing to renew licenses, but this does present one of the most glaring examples of state-led censorship. The strategy is clear: if unfavorable media coverage is characterized as an "imperialist plan" for destabilization, then blatant media censorship can be characterized as anti-imperialist by definition. By invoking the memory of the CIA's psyops, Chavismo frames the debate as one not of press freedom, but of an invasive force that the state has no choice but to rule with an iron fist in order to stop. That this is an argument in bad faith should be self-evident; undemocratic influence over the media has allowed Chavismo to hide in plain sight the refugee crisis it created, to force its own narrative about itself into the mainstream, and to have undue control over supposedly democratic elections.

4.3 2017 Protests

The reality of Chavismo's failed economic policies trickled down to the general public after the massive drop in oil revenues meant that social programs could no longer be sustained and resources could no longer be redistributed. The ensuing shortages, combined with the more obvious antidemocratic moves by Maduro, led to a major series of Opposition-led protests in 2014 and 2017. This section will focus on the latter because it developed within the context of the humanitarian crisis becoming significantly more widespread than in 2014.

In the last days of March in 2017, Maduro flexed his dictatorial muscle by having his Supreme Tribunal of Justice (TSJ) effectively dissolve the combative National Assembly (AN) by unilaterally taking over its legislative duties (Oré 2017). Outraged citizens took to the streets, leading to the TSJ reversing its decision days later after protester demands ("Tribunal Supremo De Venezuela Suprime Partes De Las Polémicas Sentencias y Ya No Se Atribuye Poderes De La Asamblea Nacional" 2017). But the cat was out of the bag. Venezuela's constitutional crisis, the product of one of the clearest acts of authoritarianism during Maduro's tenure, gave birth to the largest series of protests of the Chavista generation. The protests transcended economic class, drawing ire not only from the middle- and upper-class elites, but also from poor Black and mestizo residents throughout the country. Even in Chávez's hometown of Barinas, residents began demonstrating the day of the takeover announcement. These demonstrations escalated to all-out riots in Barinas in late May, during which Chávez's childhood home was set ablaze along with five statues of the late president in a symbolic act of resistance (Sanchez & Dreier 2019). Former Chavistas joined in, denouncing Maduro as a "tyrant" in acts of civil disobedience ("Ex

Chavistas Se Declararon En Desobediencia Civil En Barinas” 2017). According to estimates from Venezuelan polling firm Meganálisis, one out of every five Venezuelans –six million total nationwide– was on the streets protesting on April 19 in what was known as the “Mother of All Marches.” More demonstrations took place nearly every day during this period, with hundreds of thousands joining in around the country. The goal of the protesters, beyond merely expressing legitimate rage against the constitutional crisis, became to stop a proposed drafting of a new constitution, announced by Maduro on May 1. Under that proposal, Maduro would handpick a group of loyalists under a Constituent Assembly, who would then go on to write the new constitution. After the protesters failed to stop both the June Constituent Assembly and the illegal July vote that ratified it, the energy died (Semple 2017).

The real tragedy of these months-long protests, however, does not come from the failure to stop authoritarian advances. It comes from the resurrection of the ghosts of 1989; of the brutal violence of the state in efforts to repress popular will. Before proceeding, it should be made clear that even conservative estimates of the Caracazo death toll greatly outweigh those of the 2017 protests, a fact made more significant by considering the duration of both. It goes without saying, however, that this does not lessen the power of the 2017 protester demands. Venezuelan NGO Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Civil (Venezuelan Observatory of Civil Conflict) claims that from April 1 to July 31, there were 6,729 individual protests that left 163 dead– a number composed primarily of protesters, but also of National Guardsmen to a lesser degree. “Violent actions” on behalf of the *colectivos* mentioned earlier occurred in at least 523 protests, further highlighting their role as unofficial paramilitary allies of the regime engaging in violent

repression of dissent (“Venezuela: 6.729 Protestas y 163 Fallecidos Desde El 1 De Abril De 2017” 2017).

To the regime, the protests were not demonstrations against their actions; the protests were part of a “fascist” coup plot. Maduro framed his regime as “the new Jews of the twenty-first century” who “don't carry the yellow Star of David...we carry a red heart, the will to fight for human dignity, and we will defeat these Nazis of the twenty-first century, these fascists” (“Nicolás Maduro Compara a Los Chavistas Con Las Víctimas Del Holocausto Nazi”. 2017). Not much additional commentary is needed to demonstrate the sheer absurdity of this framing, painting the violent repression as somehow necessary to combat demands for democratic accountability. But such is the logic of the nonagentic anti-imperialists.

4.4 Civil Society Organizations Under Chavismo

Chavismo rose on the back of decades of social movements and a vibrant civil society that proliferated behind the watchful eyes of pre-1998 governments. Recall that these organizations and movements took the form of everything from communal decision-making in the barrios in the 80s to legal resistance against the disregard for women’s unpaid labor in the 70s. The strongest indicator that Chávez recognized the importance of such organization doesn't come from his speeches and flowery rhetoric. It comes from his administration’s efforts to render subsequent popular organizing against his administration illegal and illegitimate. The logic is simple. If Chávez’s aim is to remain in power, then shutting down the very paths to power he took is an obvious step. This entails severely limiting the ability of organizations that are not in alignment with the regime to operate effectively and independently.

The strategy of the regime since 2007 regarding civil society organizations (CSOs) has consisted of either modifying existing laws or enacting new ones to greatly restrict the ability of critical politically- and legally-oriented CSOs to organize, fundraise, and disseminate information without criminal prosecution or intimidation— all under the all-powerful rhetorical veneer of democracy and human rights. That year, the executive attempted to pass new legislation known as “Laws of People's Power” that attempted to “monopolize all forms of social organizations and combine them into a new branch of the State called ‘Organizations of People's Power’” (“Venezuela” 2018). Though the proposal was shot down by a slim margin in the AN, it eventually passed in 2010 (National Assembly 2010a). Independent CSOs could now be arbitrarily denied access to government resources and be criminalized for, or restricted from, exercising freedoms of expression and assembly. The Law for the Defense of Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination was passed that same year. It prohibits “organizations with political aims or organizations that defend political rights” from receiving financial assistance provided by foreign entities. Additionally, foreign individuals invited by a CSO who participate in domestic activities (events, speeches, etc.) are subject to deportation from the country (National Assembly 2010b). In other words, CSOs critical of the government cannot accept out-of-state donations or host critical guests. The multi-decade effort aimed at weakening CSOs, which has attracted condemnation from regional governments, the OAS, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and the UN, has resulted in an estimated 60% drop in active domestic CSOs between 2011 and 2013 (“Venezuela” 2018). There is much more that can be said about the political repression against independent civil society, but

this window offers a brief look at the politically repressive environment facing the NGOs that have survived the autocratic assault.

The case of Venezuelan NGO El Foro Penal Venezolano (FPV) demonstrates how such repression affects on-the-ground organizations. FPV is a 5000-person strong human rights organization, comprised of lawyers and volunteers, that has provided pro bono legal assistance to victims, or families of victims, of arbitrary detention, torture, assault, or murder, particularly during protests since 2002. Given the Chavista regime's loose regard for human rights and civil liberties described in the previous section, one would be correct in assuming that its relationship with FPV is contentious, to say the least. An analysis of FPV's publications between 2002 and mid-2019 showcases the direct ways in which the work of NGOs has been affected if their work questions the regime's actions. Arguably the most important indicator within these reports for determining how FPV navigates the political environment is by its mentioning of the perpetrators of human rights violations. It is one thing to call out the violations and name the victims, but by bringing the regime itself into it, FPV is putting itself directly in its crosshairs. Starting with references to government agencies, the reports rarely attempt to hide the perpetrators. The Guardia Nacional Bolivariana (GNB), or Bolivarian National Guard, is mentioned 263 times in FPV's 2014 report, the first one available on their website. The report sticks to depoliticized mentions for the most part, limiting references to instances of violence. While the vast majority of mentions remain objective, FPV does not avoid giving opinions in its analysis. The report says in reference to the use of security as a pretext for increasingly punitive measures that:

Added to the repressive actions of security agencies are paramilitary groups and armed civilians, clearly in coordination with military and police forces, that attack protesters throughout the country. During recent

protests, they have increased their repressive actions. While human rights organizations have documented the participation of these groups in the quelling of protest, their increased capacities and coordination with security organs and the military constitutes a grave risk to human rights (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2014, 30).

The report outwardly criticizes the GNB, as well as its *colectivo* allies, but still ties the criticism back to the issue of human rights. It is a microcosm of FPV's greater strategy of implicit criticism of the regime through a broader discussion on human rights, one that has continued in the years since. This first 2014 report also features a section titled *Personas Fallecidas en el Contexto de las Manifestaciones* (People Killed in the Context of Protests), and features many members of the GNB itself who were killed.² As the years progressed and more reports were published, the mentions of the GNB and other security agencies became even less political, limited almost exclusively to datasets, tables, and impartial summaries of events. They stay neutral when it comes to calling out the perpetrators of abuses, only doing so in the context of human rights discussions.

The next important element to analyze is how FPV deals with the main players in the regime itself. Namely, Cabello, Tareck El-Aissami, and Maduro. These three represent the most powerful elements of the regime and arguably hold the most leverage over FPV. The former two frequently rotate in and out of positions like the Vice Presidency and various Ministries, so to attempt to label their current title is something of a futile act. For an autocratic regime bent on protecting its own image and hiding its responsibility for the abuses, naming names can be a combative and political act.

² There is no information regarding who killed these particular individuals, so it isn't known which deaths were a result of friendly fire and which were due to the Opposition. Given the ubiquitous lack of arms possessed by the Opposition, however, it is safe to say that they are likely not responsible.

The vast majority of Maduro's mentions are restricted to descriptions of his position in the government or of accepted history as it relates to the crisis. Surprisingly, other than this one mention from 2014, there are no explicit references to the nationwide shortages or even to interim president Juan Guaidó in the later releases. A cynical observer, however, might argue that even in that limited capacity, sections with phrasing like "with the arrival of the government of Nicolás Maduro, the repression has increased" indicate a political position by the organization (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2016).

One of these cynics is Diosdado Cabello, widely recognized as the "criminal mastermind" behind the Maduro regime. That view is what led him to publicly criticize FPV in 2014, an incident that will be expanded upon below. His mentions are remarkably limited given the immense power he holds within the regime, with only three of the 27 available reports mentioning him by name. The first 2014 report does so more than the rest, almost exclusively in reference to statements Cabello made on his show "Con el Mazo Dando," such as one statement where, true nonagentic anti-imperialist fashion, he baselessly accused a detained 20-year-old protester of terrorist activity with intentions to "create destabilization" (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2014, 75). The third official is Tareck El-Aissami, who has been exposed as the primary link between the regime and drug-trafficking cells of Hezbollah (Casey 2019b). El-Aissami is known as a close confidant to Maduro and another strong component of the regime's iron fist, which makes it all the more remarkable that he isn't mentioned by name in a single report. This is perhaps the strongest evidence of FPV making a conscious attempt at separating the legal from the political. Were El-Aissami to be mentioned with even the limited

frequency of Cabello, the organization would risk veering into political territory and opening itself up to further attacks from the regime.

Despite FPV's precautions, it has still been targeted by the regime. According to that 2014 report, then-Minister of the Popular Power for Interior, Justice, and Peace Miguel Rodriguez Torres publicly accused FPV and other NGOs of being part of a destabilization conspiracy— another piece in a clear pattern. The report cites this as the “fortification and corroboration” of a new phase of persecution against lawyers and human rights activists (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2014, 63). This incident is expanded upon in a December 2015 report, where it mentions that Torres had accused Vice President-Director Gonzalo Himiob in particular of participating in terrorism (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2015, 23). This was followed up by Diosdado Cabello, then-president of the AN, accusing FPV President-Director Alfredo Romero of being part of a conspiracy to destabilize the country. Cabello also claimed to have evidence of FPV and other NGOs taking foreign donations to finance this conspiracy, the clear implication being that outside groups were using these organizations as vehicles for violations of Venezuela's sovereignty (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2014, 63). While information of FPV's funding is not available online, Cabello never provided his evidence. About a month later, Maduro himself stated that he would “expose” the human rights-based NGOs that participated in a celebration of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). He publicly said of the participating NGOs that they are “bandits” who will “speak poorly of the country and earn thousands of dollars” (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2016, 32).

The 2015 report also claims that incidents of intimidation against Romero in particular have increased since he attended a session on the UN Convention Against Torture (CAT) in November of 2014.³ According to the report:

Romero hasn't only been singled out systematically by top-level government officials through various state-run television stations and discredited or intimidated through a variety of means, but he was even intercepted by a vehicle in the streets and had a firearm aimed at him, all approximately thirty minutes after being named on television (El Foro Penal Venezolano 2015, 22).

Here it is easy to see the costs of navigating a political environment like this one. Despite the steps FPV has taken to prevent retaliation from the regime, the very nature of their work is a direct challenge to it. The legal has become the political, and it has put the lives of the FPV leadership in jeopardy. Even through all of this danger, however, an obvious fact must be stated: FPV is still operating to this day. By refraining from directly antagonizing the regime unless absolutely necessary, FPV has been able to remain independent from the government and continue its human rights-based advocacy. This is far from an exhaustive exploration of Chavismo's restrictions of a politically active civil society, but the case of FPV demonstrates the barriers that are put in the way of organizations attempting to hold the regime accountable for its abuses. These restrictions are particularly insightful because they reinforce the notion throughout this paper that Maduro is an extension of Chávez, both existing under the banner of Chavismo.

³ Also of note is the irony of the regime's strident opposition to the ICESCR and CAT, two major contributions to human rights law made by the Global South and the Non-Aligned Movement as a way of holding the North accountable and preserving its own paths to self-determination (Moyn 2018, 110; Jensen 2016, 255).

4.5 A Nonagentic Anti-Imperialist Foreign Policy

Anti-imperialist solidarity between “Third World” countries has for decades been undermined by the invisible burden of dependency on global powers. Oil markets gave Chavismo the opportunity to actually support the international working class and governments aiming to break from the capitalist world-system. After two decades, however, the Chavista foreign policy has been defined by uncritical support for Chávez’s authoritarian allies, as its backing of Assad demonstrated; a steady fall from dependency on the West to dependency on the non-Western world through debt and oil contracts; and a proud anti-Americanism rounded out by episodes like Chávez claiming to smell sulfur at the podium of the UN General Assembly after “the devil” George Bush had spoken there the day before. That anti-Americanism is the basis on which Chavista foreign policy is based, a philosophy rooted in the nonagentic anti-imperialist notion that the only international actors capable of oppression come from the West.

The example of Iran clearly demonstrates this logic in action. Since the 1979 Revolution, actions undertaken by the theocratic regime have included the murders of Communist dissidents as well as the theocratic oppression of women and ethnoreligious minorities (Hensman 2018, Kindle loc. 2819). As Hensman puts it, “The rationale is simple: Iran is opposed to the US, therefore supporting the theocratic regime constitutes ‘anti-imperialism’” (Hensman 2018, 119). Such was the logic behind Chávez’s relationship with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from 2005-2013, crudely described in an article in *The Atlantic* as “the Thelma and Louise of international dictators” (Abad-Santos 2013). One example of the operationalizing of this relationship came in 2009, when an estimated 500,000 Iranians took to the streets in protest of irregularities leading to Ahmadinejad’s “landslide” reelection victory for nearly a week and faced

violent repression, Chávez called the election an “extraordinary democratic development” and demanded “the immediate end to manoeuvres to intimidate and destabilise the Islamic Revolution” (Tait et al. 2009; “Chávez Sides with the Clerical Dictatorship against Iran's Youth, Workers and Women” 2009). The tactic is obvious: portray a power-grab as a healthy response to outside “destabilization” efforts and condemn the protesters by painting them as unwitting agents of foreign agitators. Anti-imperialism is not the foundation of the foreign policy relationships under Chavismo. It should come as no surprise then that even in those cases when Western powers use their institutions to actually uphold human rights law, nonagentic anti-imperialists interfere. Such was the case in 2009 when numerous United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) members like the EU states and Canada attempted to open an independent investigation into the high civilian body count of the Sri Lankan civil war and to provide humanitarian aid to internally displaced people detained in military camps by the self-declared “anti-imperialist” Rajapaksa regime. Instead, a cadre of nonagentic anti-imperialist regimes, including Daniel Ortega’s Nicaragua, Castro’s Cuba, Morales’ Bolivia, Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China, with predictable support from Chávez’s Venezuela, actually succeeded in passing a resolution “commending the government for addressing the needs of the IDPs and welcoming ‘the continued commitment of Sri Lanka to the promotion and protection of all human rights’” (Hensman 2018, 14).

Iran and Sri Lanka exemplify nonagentic anti-imperialist solidarity on a more ideological level. The reality changes when Russia and China enter the picture because these states in particular do not operate on a basis of solidarity or cooperation; they operate on the basis of dependency. On the issue of debt, Venezuela has been the largest recipient of Chinese finance,

receiving over \$62 billion in loans from the Chinese Development Bank from 2007 to 2016—more than twice the second-largest recipient in the continent (“China-Latin America Finance Database” 2018). Since 2006, Venezuela has also received at least \$17 billion in loans from the Russian government and its state-owned oil giant Rosneft (Korsunskaya 2018). It is no surprise that these debt-based relationships began under Chávez, when oil prices were high and Venezuela could offer its prize resource as repayment. The loans were for much more than to fund the aforementioned social programs, however. With the perpetual imminence of an invasion from the North as his excuse, Chávez amassed “one of the largest military stockpiles in the Western Hemisphere” thanks to weapons purchases primarily from Russia, with China a distant second (Berg & Martínez-Fernández 2019). As resistance to Maduro’s reign grows both inside and outside the country, he has continued the buildup despite already defaulting on debt payments even with efforts to restructure (Gillespie 2017). For nonagentic anti-imperialists, the relationship of Venezuela to these two far stronger global powers is an example of third-world solidarity simply because they oppose US hegemony— it doesn't matter that both aim to become hegemons themselves rather than create a more equitable world-system. In an article for *Latin American Perspectives* titled “China and Venezuela: South-South Cooperation or Rearticulated Dependency?,” Emma Miriam Yin-Hang To and Rodrigo Acuña argue that while China’s influence in Venezuela is not at the same level as that of the United States before Chávez, particularly because there are marginal efforts at cooperation nonetheless overshadowed by rentier politics, “the relationship between PDVSA and Chinese oil companies and the manner in which Chinese companies carry out Venezuelan government contracts reflect the wider shift of Chinese participation in the global economy in which Chinese companies are now key players

and their behavior in relation to Venezuela does not differ markedly from the previous behavior of U.S. or European capital” (To & Acuña 2018). The same can be said for Russia to a lesser degree. The ardent defense of these two regimes is based on protecting capital interests, not anti-imperialism; this is why Guaidó and his team have been attempting to see it that a post-Maduro Venezuela will be more suitable for debt repayments (“Venezuela’s Guaido Wants China to See Maduro Is Bad for Business” 2019).

If legitimate anti-imperialism is rooted in self-determination for the people of a nation, then the rhetoric of anti-imperialism cannot be used to justify dictatorships and despots. Chavista foreign policy has to a large degree replicated the patterns of dependency that have trapped Latin America in with hegemonic Western capital interests for decades, simply substituting the latter with non-Western capital interests. It has also used its alliances to cover up and defend human rights abuses beyond its borders, something anti-imperialists rightly criticize when, for example, the United States defends human rights abuses by Saudi Arabia or by any of its twentieth century puppets like Pinochet.

Venezuela’s relationship with Cuba exists on an entirely different plane. It dates back decades, from Betancourt being Fidel Castro’s first foreign state visit after the Revolution to Cuba attempting a guerrilla invasion of Venezuela in 1962 (Bermúdez 2019). The history that brought these two nations together is a long one but can be summarized briefly as follows. The Soviet Union stepped in as a “buyer-of-last-resort” for Cuba by becoming the primary market for Cuban exports after it severed ties with the United States and global trade links in the 1960s (Corrales & Penfold 2015, 117). Additional Soviet support for Cuba totaled billions of dollars in economic and military aid during the 70s and 80s (Anderson 1983). Soviet money kept Cuba’s

ineffective economy afloat in exchange for a strategic footing in the Western hemisphere. Predictably, the collapse of the Soviet Union sent Cuba's economy spiraling out of control for the time in the 1990s known as the Special Period (Voss 2018). With the legitimacy of his revolution hanging by a thread, Castro saw a glimmer of hope in a young lieutenant-colonel in Venezuela—one who was just imprisoned for a failed coup attempt.

After his release by Caldera, Chávez was invited to Havana by Castro for a meeting (Carrasco 2019). Chávez's Presidential victory five years later marked a tight relationship the likes of which are not too common between two states. How this relationship manifested depends largely on whether one asks commentators supportive of Chavismo or those opposed to it. For some it is the epitome of anti-imperialist solidarity, while for others, Cuba is akin to an invading force that brainwashes the poor into supporting Chavismo. Neither extreme is true. Cuba has certainly helped Venezuela by sending doctors in exchange for oil; however, the role of those doctors in the destabilization of Venezuelan democracy, including through the means explored above relating to Barrio Adentro, raises questions about the true goals behind the relationship (Casey 2019a). The heavily influence of Cuban military and security personnel—in what might be called an infiltration were it not for the blessing of Chávez—has served the double purpose of ensuring that the Venezuelan political system and oil-pumping machine remains loyal to Cuban interests and of providing additional intelligence help in the repression of domestic challenges to the regime. According to Reuters, the Cuban military presence in Venezuela was stepped up after Chávez lost his first election in 2007, a move meant to not only increase control of dissenters on the streets but also spy “on its own armed forces, instilling fear and paranoia and quashing dissent” (Berwick 2019). The true extent of this influence is unknown. There is debate

among scholars about whether the Venezuelans or Cubans actually call the shots in Venezuela. If the latter is true and the Venezuelan state apparatus is more loyal to Cuban interests than those of its own people, it would be possible to call Cuba an imperialist power in Venezuela, according to Hensman's definition— though there is not enough hard evidence to definitively make this understandably controversial claim.

Regardless of who calls the shots, however, the effect of the influence is undeniable and certainly goes beyond simple cooperation in healthcare. The Cuban government has been instrumental in Venezuela's transformation into a mafia state, the details of which will be discussed below (Dickey 2018). The partnership also appears asymmetrically lucrative for Cuba (Piccone & Trinkunas 2014). For the past decade or so, Venezuela has shipped approximately 100,000 barrels of heavily subsidized crude to Cuba, which the island then refines and sells internationally for a profit. While that number has decreased in recent years, it was upped to 173,000 barrels a day in February of 2020 despite Venezuela's crippling energy crisis.

The depth of this secretive relationship may never be known, but its asymmetries are clear and its goals can be deduced. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to argue that the relationship is imperialist in nature, but it should be made clear that it is also not anti-imperialist. The substantial Cuban presence in Venezuela has glaringly contributed to the devolution of its democracy and the establishment of its mafia state elements. In response to then-President Obama's 2017 designation of Venezuela as an "unusual and extraordinary" threat given the drug charges, Cabello responded that "'Yes, we're a threat because we want peace...because we're socialists...because we're revolutionaries...because we're chavista'" ("Cabello Responde a Obama: 'Sí, Somos Una Amenaza'" 2017). Regardless of one's feelings towards Obama's

declaration, it is impossible to defend the actions of Venezuela's mafia state, and Cuba's role in building it, by citing "anti-imperialism." Venezuela, like Cuba, has had a choice in how it goes about resisting Western hegemony. It decided –on its own volition– to do it by bringing another state's intelligence services to spy on its own military after losing an election. Legitimate anti-imperialists must not fall into the trap of supporting autocratic actions, even when it is done in the name of an anti-imperialist foreign policy.

4.6 Food Shortages

According to the nonagentic anti-imperialists leading the Chavista regime in Venezuela, the food shortages that have led the country's descent into crisis are the result of US sanctions. A February 2020 article in TeleSUR blames them for the restriction of "the import of food, seeds, fertilizers, machinery, and other basic necessities," resulting in food production registering "a 60 percent decrease at the national level." The article goes on to describe the efforts of "several cooperatives and communes to revitalize food production at the national level, to meet the country's food needs" (Monjane 2020). The framing serves two purposes. First, it absolves the regime of any blame whatsoever for the shortages, not bothering to ask why Venezuela has to import 70% of its food supply in the first place when it could once produce two-thirds of it (Graham-Harrison 2017). Second, it posits ideological Chavismo as the solution to these imperialist aggressions. The reality is that the logic of nonagentic anti-imperialism here is used to excuse the failure of the regime's economic policies.

The food shortages for which Venezuela has lamentably become globally recognized for originated with and were perpetuated by Chavismo itself, though it took until the fall of oil prices

for the deadly flaws to reveal themselves. Like much of the regime's policies, its food policy began with noble aims of increasing food independence and making productive use of the lands. A 2001 agrarian reform law gave the government largely free reign to expropriate unproductive private lands, and after the law was strengthened in 2005, Chávez made full use of this power ("Venezuela's Nationalizations under Chávez" 2011). The goal was to use these unproductive lands, or those without proper land titles, to create an alternative food system using those local cooperatives and communes. Patrick Clark writes in an article for the *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* that "Venezuela's unique position to self-finance these reforms and its endogenous development model...have allowed it to transcend the conditions placed on aid or credit offered by international financial institutions and northern governments" (Clark 2010). These policies are what gave birth to the El Maizal commune mentioned earlier. The ideological underpinnings of the strategy make sense. Unfortunately, this is only step one. Step two involves actually making the land productive for sustainable agricultural production. Rampant mismanagement of these lands and "chaotic administration of state-backed agricultural cooperatives" destroyed local food production so profoundly that the government had to rush to import so much food amid a 2008 shortage that "thousands of tons rotted at the ports" (Carroll 2013). This, to answer the question that TeleSUR never asked, is how Venezuela went from producing two-thirds of its food supply to having to import 70% of it.

High oil prices were able to sustain this dramatic shift until they suddenly couldn't. Combined with the massive international debt and unstoppable inflation, the country was thrown into the crippling humanitarian crisis of today. Rather than reverse the trend his predecessor set, Maduro has instead turned to other forms of constructive solutions. In 2017, a plan baptized as

“Plan Rabbit” mandated that rabbits be distributed to popular sectors for consumption, arguing that “they have taught us that rabbits are pretty pets, but they are two and a half kilos of high-protein meat without cholesterol” (Scharfenberg 2017). Rather than admit to and fix his and his predecessor's mistakes, Maduro turned to the rhetoric of nonagentic anti-imperialism by hoping that “ the small mammal [would] counter the impact of what he calls a huge ‘economic war’ waged against him by ‘imperialists’” (Reeves 2017). US sanctions were not behind the brutal mismanagement of seized arable land and US aggression was not behind the conscious decision to push forth with the absolute failure that was the agrarian reform project; yet if one only listens to nonagentic anti-imperialists, the Maduro regime had no choice but to address his peoples’ starvation with “Let Them Eat Rabbit” (Reeves 2017).

5. Venezuela Under Chavismo

It is necessary to include analysis of marginalized communities when discussing nonagentic anti-imperialism precisely because these communities have been traditionally excluded from the masculinist national imaginations of the nation-state system. The rhetoric of anti-imperialism has historically sought to include these marginalized communities in revolutionary conceptions of the nation. As Benedict Anderson notes in his *Imagined Communities*, these anti-imperialist movements have always wrapped themselves in an inclusive nationalist rhetoric even at the social antisystemic phase (Anderson 2016, Kindle loc. 147). As the previous sections have made clear, Chávez's Venezuela was no different. Chavistas have claimed, for example, that "the revolution has a woman's face" as a means of separating it from masculinist nationalist projects (Elfenbein 2019, 3). Feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis argues that all modern conceptions of the nation rely heavily on gender roles, and in effect construct "notions of femininity and masculinity, naturalize power relations [that] reproduce...national collectivities" (Yuval-Davis 2003). At least in rhetoric, anti-imperialist movements have sought to overcome such gendered divisions (Arrighi et al. 2012, 104). Similar rhetoric has surrounded the inclusion of indigenous peoples into the national imagination of Chávez's Venezuela, evident by the efforts behind the *misiones* described above. The politics of indigenous exclusion from traditional nation-states is intimately connected to the politics of empire because of the history of Spanish and Portuguese settler-colonialism, which makes indigenous inclusion a matter of anti-imperialism.

As important as rhetoric and language can be in bringing these marginalized communities into that national imagination, the concern of this paper is with whether or not that rhetoric has translated into better lived ends for them. It was, after all, largely the activism of these groups that got Chávez elected in the first place. This section will focus on the lived ends of popular women and indigenous communities under Chavismo in order to determine whether the anti-imperialist language of national inclusion went beyond mere performativity or was nothing but empty rhetoric.

Article 88 of Chávez's 1999 constitution laid the groundwork for the legislation of popular women's demands. It reads that "The State guarantees the equality and equitable treatment of men and women in the exercise of the right to work. The state recognizes work at home as an economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and wealth. Housewives are entitled to Social Security in accordance with law" ("Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" 2010). Importantly, Article 88 only outlines the principle of recognizing women's unpaid labor. Not even when the Chavistas had overwhelming legislative control from 2006-2011, however, did the regime translate that principle into law. Rachel Elfenbein writes that "the dialectical relationship between forces from above and below intersected with tensions and popular women's gendered positioning in the revolution, undercutting popular women's organizing" efforts, particularly when it came to actually legislating into effect the promises made to women regarding new labor laws (Elfenbein 2019, 174). Numerous popular women's groups offered proposals for feminist labor laws, and finally in 2012 they succeeded in getting Chávez's word that he would organize a commission to draft the law.

What followed fits the mold of Yuval-Davis' description of masculine conceptions of the nation. Despite the anti-imperialist notion of a revolution with women at the forefront, the commission only featured one woman and zero members involved in feminist organizing. Input from popular women's organizations, limited as it was during such an opaque process, only took into account demands from those organizations that openly supported the regime. The resultant law "did specifically recognize workers outside of employment relationships both as workers and as subjects of social security rights and responsibilities," but it did not guarantee the social security benefits promised under the 1999 constitution (Elfenbein 2019, 193). Some demands included in the law, however, include extended maternity leave and the outlawing of workplace sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. As Elfenbein notes, the significant and deliberate lack of transparency means that no one truly knows how decisions were made. It only made clear that "decision-making about the law remained outside the public sphere," a process ensuring that control over the law always lay with the masculine-dominated levers of power from above (Elfenbein 2019, 196).

The example of the 2012 labor law is used here to represent Chavismo's relationship to popular women's demands because this is when an explicit effort was made to follow through with a promise made thirteen years prior. That effort to legally include women into the Venezuelan national imagination was laden with processes intended to separate popular demand from state power. The symbol of the woman as bearer of the nation's collective identity, in this case an identity intimately linked with the masculine Chavista identity, can perhaps best be summarized by the label "Chávez's women," a term used by the regime to imagine women's political participation as mobilized yet contained (Elfenbein 2019, 196).

Indigenous Venezuelans have faced a similar struggle in the sense that their demands have been rhetorically co-opted by the regime with little of substance to show for it. Incorporating indigenous peoples into the Venezuelan national imagination is something that administrations had attempted since Puntofijismo, but many tribes only aimed to maintain their sovereignty as they feared that their own politics would be co-opted by the governments. Just as with the feminist organizers, indigenous demands were recognized in the 1999 constitution, which included indigenous representation in the National Assembly without the need for political party affiliation. Combined with the rhetoric surrounding the *misiones* described above, hopes were high that indigenous peoples could have state-level representation that respected their sovereignty and addressed their needs.

The indigenous response to these efforts towards representation has been predictably mixed. Many acknowledge the importance of inclusive rhetoric and understand that the Chavista regime has been more generous towards indigenous sovereignty than previous administrations. One of the most concrete steps taken towards the goals of the constitution was the creation of the Indigenous University of Venezuela, which “gives indigenous peoples the right to develop their own education [in] a space where their youth can be educated as the defenders of their original ways; able to resist the onslaught of the Western world upon their peoples” (Martinez et al. 2010, 196). Others, however, believe that attempts at increased representation are merely ways of co-opting indigenous demands only in the capacity that it serves the regime’s anti-imperialist narrative. One member of the Ye’kuana tribe said in an interview that they “have an indigenous representative in the government, Nicia Maldonado, whom we have invited various times to the university to speak with us. But we have received no response. Being our sister and having

political power, she should be trying to support us.” Similar claims are repeated by members of other tribes when it comes to actually receiving material aid from the government (Martinez et al. 2010, 282). The question of legitimate indigenous representation and sovereignty does not have a consensus across the community, but what is clear is that at least rhetorically, and legally to a lesser degree, indigenous peoples have been incorporated into the nationalist imagination of Venezuela.

As has been evident throughout this paper, however, including in the case of feminist organizers, the regime’s nationalist imagination is welcoming primarily to those groups that the regime itself can benefit from. Two cases will be looked at here in which the regime’s thesis came into conflict with an indigenous antithesis as part of the state-society dialectic. The first is the ecocidal proliferation of state-led mining operation, the Arco Minero, on indigenous land and with indigenous labor. The second is the massacre that took place in 2019 during a confrontation between members of the Pemón tribe and state armed forces.

Oil is far from the only natural resource resting beneath Venezuelan soil. Its riches of gold, diamond, nickel, and uranium have long been sought by state and nonstate actors both legally and illegally (“Venezuela: Violent Abuses in Illegal Gold Mines” 2020). After the Venezuelan economy collapsed, they also became a coveted source of revenues for the Chavista regime under Maduro. In 2016, the Arco Minero del Orinoco mega-project was created to attract foreign investments to extract gold from mines primarily in Bolívar state but also Amazonas and Delta Amacuro— all of which feature some of the highest indigenous populations in the country. In typical extractivist fashion, as Amnesty International (AI) notes, “prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples was not sought and...there were no publicly accessible environmental

impact assessments, meaning the potential damage to their territories could not be gauged” (“The Deadly Cost of Defending the Environment” 2018). Protecting indigenous territorial sovereignty was said to be a cornerstone of resisting “the onslaught of the Western world” and colonialism itself, but these promises did not appear to matter when violating this sovereignty became a matter of state policy. AI tells the story of Lisa Henrito, a Pemón activist who in 2018 declared in response to the mining efforts that “it was the state’s duty to respect and recognise the rights of Indigenous Peoples over their territories and resources; this had a serious impact on the advancing militarisation and financial exploitation of the Venezuelan Amazon” (“Venezuela: Violent Abuses in Illegal Gold Mines” 2020). The military, in response, accused her of treason and of attempting to lead an indigenous national secession from Venezuela (“Venezuela: Indigenous Activist Slandered and Stigmatised” 2018).

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the land demarcated under the Arco Minero project quickly saw nonstate actors and local gangs competing for control of the mines. The Maduro regime and its security forces directly and indirectly benefit from these illegal mining operations by taking a cut from these groups at every step of the process, from the mining itself to the illegal smuggling out of Venezuela (Rendon & Sandin 2020). The International Crisis Group (ICG) writes in its report “Gold and Grief in Venezuela’s Violent South” that these state security forces have murdered numerous indigenous activists who stand in the way of these operations. These mining operations in the Amazon rainforest have had a predictable impact on the environment as well. CSIS reports that the Arco Minero has destroyed over one thousand square miles of forest, half of that land marked as “protected territories” (Rendon & Sandin 2020). The operations have also been linked to a

dramatic rise in cases of malaria, going from 136,402 confirmed cases nationwide in 2016 to 404,924 in 2018. This is because working conditions have greatly increased the risk of the mostly indigenous laborers to mosquitoes that carry it and because the deforested mining pits “provide an excellent breeding environment” for the mosquitoes (“Venezuela: Violent Abuses in Illegal Gold Mines” 2020).

The second case is much more localized, taking place on February 22nd of 2019. That was the day in which a US-led humanitarian effort was scheduled to bring desperately-needed food aid into Venezuela through its border with Brazil. This was taking place about a month after Juan Guaidó ascended to the presidency of Venezuela, though Maduro continued to hold domestic power within Venezuela. As the two dueled for legitimacy in the eyes of the people, it became clear that the one who was able to provide food to the starving country would curry significant favor. It thus became Maduro’s mission to prevent the food from entering the country in Guaidó’s name despite the brutal conditions. That mission manifested itself in the use of the military to forcefully block the food aid from entering. Understanding the importance of the aid and disregarding the state politics, indigenous tribespeople from the Pemón tribe fought to keep the border open to allow the food aid through (Ramirez 2019). They were met with violent resistance from the GNB, who opened fire on the Pemónes and killed at least five. At least twenty-five others were wounded. The message was clear: indigenous lives matter only when they do not interfere with the national identity of Venezuela, which in this case was partly built on resisting “humanitarian imperialism” from the United States. According to the advocacy organization Survival International, a Pemón leader sent out a recording as she fled the violence, saying ““This is a war taking place here. They have orders to shoot anyone. Persecution of the

capitanes generales [council of Pemon leaders] has started. They came through my community shooting with rifles” (“Venezuelan Army Opens Fire on Pemon Tribe” 2019). A Reuters investigation elaborated more on the aftermath of the massacre and the Pemón response, writing that

[t]he repercussions included the arrest of 23 Pemon tribesmen, some of whom say they were beaten in custody. Pemon villagers also held more than 40 members of the military hostage, some of whom suffered severe bites after being left half-naked atop ant nests in retribution for the killings, according to interviews with Pemon tribe members (Ramirez 2019).

These examples of state-indigenous relations were selected because they represent two cases, one systemic and one specific, in which indigenous demands and state interests entered into dialectical conflict. It is easy for the regime and its defenders to claim unconditional support for indigenous peoples when their interests dovetail, but the true nature of that relationship can only be surmised when those interests come into dialectical conflict. Even a cursory analysis of that dialectic shows that state interests will always supersede indigenous ones even when it is a literal matter of life and death for indigenous activists.

This section has covered only two marginalized groups in Venezuela; the demands of Afro-Venezuelans, labor movements, LGBT Venezuelans, and any other number of communities traditionally excluded from national imaginations (and, perhaps ironically, also from this paper) also merit an analysis of their own lived ends, but space constraints require that it be done elsewhere. What this analysis has shown is a pattern traceable from previous sections covering everything from foreign policy to the misiones. The regime’s national imagination is open only to those groups from which it can personally benefit. Because the exclusion of these groups,

particularly indigenous people but also popular women, are the result of settler-colonial politics of empire, their inclusion has been framed as an anti-imperialist act. In practice, however, the promises exist only in rhetoric.

5.1 The Economic War

At this point in the argument it is worth revisiting John Pilger's claim that there is a "war" facing Chavista Venezuela. This belief is articulated against the very real background of decades upon decades of Northern imperialism against Latin America and the long history of US-led or -backed coups against democratically elected leaders in order to install fascist or neoliberal puppets in their place. As has already been established, to apply the logic of that imperialist history to Venezuela under Chavismo is to ignore the changing patterns within the past century of global capitalism. This means that the actions of the Global North must be analyzed within these new contexts and stripped of the old logics that no longer apply. The nonagentic anti-imperialist argument of a "war" against Chavismo often takes two forms. The first is an economic war, defined by sanctions and finance capital. The second is military might, the threat of which should never be fully discounted.

Economic sanctions by the United States against the Chavista regime are ultimately aimed at regime change. They are designed in theory to financially strangle the regime to the point of surrender. This strategy has one glaring problem: it has never worked in any context it has ever been attempted. Sanctions are useful only when seeking particular concessions from a government, not in seeking its demise. As with Iran and Cuba, US sanctions aimed at regime change fail to achieve their goals and are continued despite their unintended consequences. The

allies Chavismo has surrounded itself with are more than capable of circumnavigating any obstacle placed in the regime's way. One popular nonagentic anti-imperialist claim is that the US sanctions ultimately hurt the people of Venezuela because there is ultimately less revenue available through which to fund important welfare programs. This narrative is pushed by voices as varied as UN Special Rapporteur Alfred de Zayas and Venezuelan NGO Fundalatin, arguing that US engagement in "economic warfare" against Venezuela...is hurting the economy and killing Venezuelans" (Selby-Green 2019). More right-wing elements of the debate will argue that the sanctions do not hurt the people because oil revenues already were not trickling down to the people even before the sanctions; they claim that they are effective in choking out the regime. The truth, of course, can be found in the synthesis of these two claims. The left is correct in claiming that the sanctions hurt Venezuelan citizens. Nicholas Kristof, the center-left liberal anti-Chavista journalist, argues as much in an opinion piece for the New York Times titled "Venezuela's Kids Are Dying. Are We Responsible?" (2019). Kristof claims that while the US is not the cause of the humanitarian crisis, its sanctions against fuel imports, for example, do harm the most vulnerable Venezuelans (Krauss 2019). The right-wing elements arguing that government money wouldn't be reaching the people even without sanctions also have a significant amount of evidence backing up their argument, beginning with the kleptocracy that will be examined in a later section. The reality, however, is that even the little that did trickle down could mean life or death for many of the country's poorest.

But to truly understand the role of the sanctions in the crisis and the validity of the pervasive language of "war" on the part of nonagentic anti-imperialists, it is necessary to actually look at the specific sanctions that the US has enacted rather than make assumptions about their

effects based on the term and its historical implications. The fact of the matter is that the vast majority of Venezuela-related sanctions imposed before 2018 targeted specific individuals involved with the Chavista regime, not the Venezuelan economy or oil industry. An example is a round of 2017 sanctions that targeted then-Venezuelan Vice President –and credibly accused drug kingpin– Tareck el Aissami and his “primary frontman” Samark Lopez Bello. Businessman Lopez Bello, who describes himself as a philanthropist and innovator on his website, purchased a luxurious Miami apartment for \$3.4 million in cash laundered from a state-sanctioned drug trafficking scheme allegedly led by el Aissami (“Samark Lopez Is Working to Transform Venezuela's Future” (n.d.); Ramirez 2017). The sanctions levied against these two men blocks their access to the Miami purchases, which also include another two multimillion dollar apartments and a private jet. Even most of the post-2018 sanctions continue in this tradition of freezing individual assets, but the effect of newer sanctions targeting the economy at large and the oil industry cannot be ignored.

The other obvious arm of the language of war is the threat of a military invasion. This belief has roots not only in Latin America’s regional history but also in conspiracy theories regarding the CIA’s perceived role in the failed 2002 coup against Chávez. As the nonagentic anti-imperialist narrative goes, the CIA funded and materially aided the ill-conceived, ill-carried out, and ill-fated coup in a play resembling the Bay of Pigs invasion and the toppling of Allende (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, Kindle loc. 923-935). CIA documents, of course, show that the organization did not plan or aid in the execution of the coup. The CIA did know about it ahead of time and did support an ouster of Chávez, but it did not materially aid it. Laying the blame of the coup at the feet of the CIA, rather than at the elite elements of Venezuelan society and military

that actually conducted the operation, is another manifestation of the revocation of Venezuelans' agency to rebel against a Chávez at the height of his popularity and, yes, put that rebellion into action in a way that even its primary actors have recognized as a brutal mistake. The “military option” has rarely been off the table when it comes to Venezuela, especially as the three US presidents of the twenty-first century have used it sparingly in other contexts. In numerous exploitative attempts to gain support from Cuban and Venezuelan voters, Donald Trump has floated the military option in public comments but there is no evidence to suggest that this rhetoric has translated into legitimate movement militarily. Regardless, the threat continues to color nonagentic anti-imperialist and even genuine anti-imperialist attitudes towards the pressures faced by the Chavista regime.

There is a legitimate argument to be made that recent US pressures on Venezuela, both economic and military, are harming the Venezuelan people. But when support for this argument is used to justify the authoritarianism causing significantly more harm to the people, nonagentic anti-imperialists are firmly putting their loose ideology far ahead of the needs of Venezuelans.

5.2 The Kleptocrats On Top

In 2016, two longtime ideological Chavistas came out with an allegation against the regime that serves as a perfect entry into the tangled chasm that is twenty-first century corruption in Venezuela. The two were Jorge Giordani, a former finance minister and close economic advisor to Chávez for nearly his entire rule described as “a man who delivered with absolute honesty in all of the tasks entrusted to him by the Revolution” by Maduro, and Hector Navarro, another loyal Chavista who had run five ministries during Chávez's rule. Reuters reported that

the men calculated that the regime had stolen nearly \$300 billion “of the \$1 trillion that entered its coffers” from approximately 2003-2013 as a result of exchange controls manipulation dubbed a “corruption machine” by anti-Chavista activists (China & Pons 2016). This chasm of corruption leads to the following assertion: under Chavismo, Venezuela was run less as a government and more as a mafia state with a criminal syndicate at its head. In an article for Foreign Affairs, Venezuelan intellectual Moisés Naím and Francisco Toro put this new dynamic in historical perspective, positing that

Maduro continues to peddle the rhetoric of socialism, but his authoritarian government has constructed not a worker’s paradise but a den of thieves. The classic twentieth-century Latin American dictatorship—what political scientists called a “bureaucratic authoritarian regime”—was a highly institutionalized affair. An oppressive but efficient state machine, propped up by a large, permanent bureaucracy, worked hard to maintain power and squeeze out dissent. Contemporary Venezuela is nothing like that.

Rather than a professionalized bureaucracy, the Maduro regime amounts to a loose confederation of foreign and domestic criminal enterprises with the president in the role of mafia boss. The glue that holds the government together is neither ideology nor the quest for rigid order: it’s the scramble for the spoils that flow from a dizzying array of illegal sources (Naím & Toro 2020).

While Naím only mentions the Maduro regime, the allegations of Giordani and Navarro are a worthy reminder that the mafia extended back through to Chávez as well. A 2018 report by the non-profit investigative organization InSight Crime outlines seven reasons as to why it is accurate to put this label on the government.⁴ The first is “top level criminal penetration into

⁴ The non-profit foundation InSight Crime studies and compiles information from around Latin America and the Caribbean as it relates to national and citizen security issues. Key funders, according to its website, include the “Open Society Foundations, the British Embassy in Colombia, the International Development Research Centre of Canada, and the Swedish government.”

state institutions,” best exemplified by the Cartel de los Soles (Cartel of the Suns), a drug cartel actively being run out of the military. Second is the allegations of kleptocracy such as the one described above, though that is far from exhaustive. Third is “the devolution of state powers to irregular and illegal actors,” something that has already been addressed as an element of Chavismo that nonagentic anti-imperialists might actually support without recognizing its ramifications and lived reality. This feeds directly into the “exponential growth of Venezuelan organized crime,” something easily visible from basic statistics. This in turn creates a space for “high levels of violence by state and non-state actors,” which is known only through the work of civil society organizations since the state does not keep official figures related to this. Such violence and criminality naturally cannot be prevented from spilling beyond borders, so it is no surprise that the “the exportation of criminality” made the list. And lastly, going off of number two, is the “widespread international accusations of criminal behavior” that have followed the regime for years (“Venezuela: A Mafia State?” 2018).

Only the clearest highlights of the kleptocracy will be addressed here given its unimaginable depth, beginning with the network of government officials and criminals known as the Cartel de los Soles. That Venezuela plays a significant role in the international drug trade is hardly a surprise; its geopolitical location makes it a prime location for cocaine exports to the North from the rest of South America. The reality of Venezuela’s drug trafficking scene involves the Chavista regime (here is a major component of the mafia state that Cuban influence helped craft), the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), and individual traffickers with high-level connections (Dickey 2018). One of those individuals is Samark Lopez Bello, whose story fits seamlessly into this context. Another is Syrian-Venezuelan Walid Makled, often known

as “El Arabe,” a longtime trafficker who came to sell “his services to the highest bidder, from corrupt elements in Venezuela’s military [the Cartel de los Soles] and the [FARC]. In exchange, Makled promised safe passage of cocaine shipments, which left Venezuela by the ton. He also counted with the support of certain governors from the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – PSUV) and officials from the administration of former president Hugo Chávez” (“Walid Makled” 2019). In public comments after his arrest in Cúcuta, Colombia, Makled admitted to paying off around 40 military generals as part of his work, claiming that “all my business associates are generals” (“Venezuela: A Mafia State?” 2018). In addition, he conceded that in exchange for “concessions” from Chávez at Puerto Cabello, the port from which approximately 70% of the narcotics pass through in Venezuela from Colombia, Makled bankrolled one of Chávez’s presidential campaigns (“Condenan a 14 Años De Cárcel a Walid Makled” 2015). Diosdado Cabello, who at times has been Vice President or President of the National Assembly, among other positions, is widely believed to be the mastermind behind the Cartel. So claimed Leamsy Salazar, a former confidante and bodyguard to Chávez who defected and went under the Witness Protection Program in the US (Nagel 2015). Equally damning is a 2015 audio recording of two nephews of First Lady Cilia Flores –wife of Maduro– following their arrest in Haiti for transporting large amounts of cocaine (Romera & Cifuentes 2017). The audio recording has “one of the nephews refers to Cabello as ‘the most powerful man in Venezuela’ and ‘a guarantee for the business’” (Dickey 2018). It is worth mentioning that Venezuela is a country where drug trafficking is, of course, illegal and severe punishments are meted out to those who use and possess drugs (“En Venezuela La Legalización Del Consumo De Marihuana...” 2018). The policy unsurprisingly hurts the urban poor in the barrios more than

any other, just as it does in the United States (“Detenidas Tres Mujeres Por Distribución De Droga En El...” 2019). Chávez’s crusade against drug trafficking was renewed in 2010 with the Organic Law on Drugs, which passed a mere year before Makled was arrested for collaborating with the regime on acts specifically banned in Article 149 (National Assembly 2010c). The embeddedness of drug trafficking in the government, severe to the point where the cartel is an effective arm of the government, merits calling Venezuela not only a mafia state but a narcostate.

Not all evidence of Venezuelan kleptocracy is as plainly visible as the Cartel de los Soles. InSight Crime acknowledges as much in its report, admitting that “without hard data, all we can do is recognize the scale of the corruption and look at some of its principal motors.” Many of those motors have played pivotal roles in previous sections— the blatant lack of transparency, the lack of reliable official figures for a variety of economic indicators, and the elite gang of Chavista loyalists who revolve around important posts, which allows them to keep their methods, as they say, within the family (“Corruption Perceptions Index 2016” 2017). One more example in which these indicators amount to a smoking gun is the currency exchange control scheme cited by Navarro and Giordani as the \$300 billion fountain for the regime and its private-sector allies. The system, which began under Chávez in 2003 and continues today at a smaller scale, consisted essentially of inflating “the value of goods brought into the country to grab American dollars at rock-bottom exchange rates. Sometimes, they fake the shipments altogether and import nothing at all.” The money is pocketed by the Venezuelan importers, many of whom can attribute their multimillionaire status to this practice, and traded for a profit in the black market for US dollars (Neuman & Torres 2015). Leftist economist and former Chávez ministerial leader Victor Álvarez compares the practice to “the robbery that our people were subject to in the time of the conquest

and the colonies, when the gold and silver were carted off by the ton” (Neuman & Torres 2015). The practice went undeterred when oil prices were high during Chávez’s reign because the treasury could afford to have holes in its pockets.

Today, one of the kleptocratic schemes most directly impacting and adding to the suffering of everyday Venezuelans is the fraud surrounding the controversial Local Committees for Supply and Production (CLAP) program, created in 2016, which offers heavily subsidized boxes of food with monthly provisions to poor communities. The opaque pattern of operation characteristic of Chavismo once again makes it difficult to determine as a matter of fact all of the workings behind the scheme, but enough evidence is available to create at least a partial image of yet another practice contributing to the starvation of the people. In this case, however, the Maduro regime is quite literally profiting off of the historic starvation of Venezuelans. According to investigations by the Associated Press, the Hong Kong-based firm called Group Grand that actually receives government contracts to provide the food is widely alleged to be a shell company for the regime, which later embezzles the funds. The government purchases these boxes at a cheap cost, partly because they contain “beetle-infested rice and other spoiled food,” and then sell them to the poor at up to twice the cost (Goodman 2018). The monthly boxes contain enough food to last approximately one week. Even at these inflated prices, and even at such an unimaginably low quality, these “subsidized” boxes are often the only option for people who have found their grocery store shelves empty for years. And for the Venezuelans who view this as sufficient reason to support anti-Chavista parties and perhaps join a demonstration or two, they are threatened with having their access to the CLAP program cut off.

Both the article by Naím and Toro and the InSight Crime report outline numerous other examples of the Chavista kleptocracy that has corrupted, starved, and cheated the country from money laundering to sex trafficking (Naím & Toro 2020). A further exploration of the network and its actors would serve only to emphasize a point that has already been made: Chavismo rules over a mafia state, a criminal syndicate whose authoritarianism exists to protect its own member's financial interests. This outright kleptocracy is invisible to nonagentic anti-imperialists who continue to believe that the regime's actions are taken in the interests of the people. Even when they choose to accept the realities laid out above, they might argue that alternative revenue streams are necessary in the face of sanctions and "economic warfare." They might argue that the corruption does not compare to that of the West and thus does not merit abandoning the Bolivarian project. Such logic attempts only to divert attention away from the fact that the very existence and active promotion of the kleptocracy by the highest levels of the Venezuelan government is enough to collapse the thin notion that the Chavista regime exists to benefit everyday Venezuelans. The role of nonagentic anti-imperialism here is to cover up for the crimes committed and justify the legal and financial assaults against the Venezuelan people.

6. Revisiting the Rhetoric of Nonagentic Anti-Imperialism

Nonagentic anti-imperialism is a widespread perversion of anti-imperialist sentiment that is twisted and distorted to fit the narrative of oppressive regimes. The example of prominent nonagentic anti-imperialist John Pilger was brought up earlier to illustrate how this perversion can lead anti-imperialists to support actual imperialism. Having now understood the ways in which nonagentic anti-imperialism is operationalized by the Chavista regime and its supporters, this section will look at how Pilger has fallen into that trap as it relates to Venezuela as well. It will also look at George Ciccariello-Maher, who has been cited throughout this paper, and his own propagation of nonagentic anti-imperialist thought.

It should come as no surprise that, apart from being a stooge for Russian imperialism even during the invasion of Crimea, Pilger is an ardent supporter of Chavismo in Venezuela because of its stated opposition to US imperialism. Similar to his arguments in praise of Putin's Russia, he makes use of omissions, misrepresentations, and outright lies to justify his positions. In *Rulers*, he mocks the “millions of readers and viewers [in Europe and the United States who] know next to nothing about the life-giving changes implemented in Latin America, many of them inspired by Chavez.” The sheer irony of Pilger accusing others of being misinformed is comical to say the least; one need go no further than a February 2019 article entitled “The War on Venezuela is Built on Lies” to appreciate his naked hypocrisy. The article is short but wide-ranging, covering everything from Chávez's contributions to the poor and indigenous of Venezuela to the recent presidential crisis that has rocked the Latin America. He repeatedly

makes the case that Venezuela is victim to constant imperialist aggression from the United States. He describes “Washington’s ‘sanctions’” against the regime as the reason for the “loss of at least \$6 billion in Venezuela's revenue since 2017, including \$2 billion worth of imported medicines, as illegal, or the Bank of England's refusal to return Venezuela's gold reserves as an act of piracy,” ignoring the true reach of the sanctions, the legitimacy of the Bank of England’s decision, and the regime’s own role in manufacturing the crisis he describes. And lastly, he characterizes Guaidó as a US stooge with, once again, no agency outside what his imagined handlers in Washington demand (Pilger 2019). The portrayal of the Chavista regime as the passive, well-intentioned victim of a war with the United States allows Pilger to either justify or disregard its oppressive actions in the name of anti-imperialism. For the Venezuelans on whom the burden of those oppressive actions fall, making them invisible is not an option.

The writings of Ciccariello-Maher have been used throughout this paper as a source on pre-1998 Venezuela because his historiographical framework places those at the margins in the center of his analysis. In his analysis of Chavismo, however, he has fallen into the trap of defending governmental abuses in the name of anti-imperialism. Unlike Pilger, Ciccariello-Maher actually addresses corrupt elements within Chavismo and recognizes that they stain the integrity of the more ideological elements. The primary argument made by Ciccariello-Maher has already been addressed– it is that the regime has fostered and legitimized a form of “radical democracy” in which state power is devolved into grassroots political organizing and local communes. His two books on Venezuela, *We Created Chávez* and *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela*, focus on the people who organize through these communes and their collective relationship with the state. It is this focus that still made his work

useful for this analysis. While Ciccariello-Maher doesn't portray Chávez as a saint the way other writers might, he still views the direction of Bolivarian power moving from popular demands to the palace of government, rather than originating from and being executed by it. When we put his approach in the terms of Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein, however, gaps in its logic within the Venezuelan context begin to emerge.

As many social movements do, Bolivarianism began to show national face in 1992 with a Chávez-led coup attempt and became a distinctly national antisystemic movement in 1999 with his democratic taking of the presidency (Arrighi, et al. 66). This means that the force behind the antisystemic movement came from the taking of state power, not from grassroots organization at the community level as Ciccariello-Maher asserts. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, which was laid out above, he sustains this point in two ways. The first is by framing Chavismo as a social antisystemic movement that has maintained its class-struggle nature, allowing him to romanticize the ideals of Chavismo while downplaying the overbearing authoritarianism of the state he claims is productively devolving. The second is nonagentic anti-imperialism at its finest. Whatever authoritarian moves Chávez made, such as censorship of the press and speech, is legitimate because the revolution must be protected from the counterrevolutionary empire at all costs. In *Building the Commune*, Ciccariello-Maher outlines numerous instances where Chávez censored popular voices on radio and television, even on the left, if they criticized his policies or his regime's corruption. Rather than recognize these actions as blatantly antidemocratic and authoritarian, he argues that

at stake in this debate is more than just criticism versus discipline, hushing radical voices in favor of a smoothly unified front. It is also a debate between militants about what constitutes a truly revolutionary outlook... Against some of the most vocal critics of Maduro's policies, other revolutionaries with even deeper roots in concrete organizing have

responded by insisting that critique without action is merely empty posturing. Revolutions are difficult and messy affairs, they argue, and it is unrealistic to expect that they will remain pure in the face of a protracted and complicated struggle against unwavering enemies (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, 79-80).

In Ciccariello-Maher's version of "radical democracy," dissenting voices must be shut out. It is contradictions such as these that define nonagentic anti-imperialism and force its proponents to tolerate and even celebrate the very aversions of democracy they criticize. He does raise an important point, however, which is that expecting antisystemic movements, which by definition move against hegemonic ideology, to remain pure against enemies in the world-system is in itself idealistic. To call out corruption in the way that these censored voices did, however, is far from a counterrevolutionary act. The truth is that Chavista corruption is counterrevolutionary and so is the blocking of attempts to root it out. For nonagentic anti-imperialist Chavistas like Ciccariello-Maher, though, to go against the regime in any meaningful way is counterrevolutionary. The popular self-organization his writings celebrate is legitimate only in the capacity that the regime approves of it.

7. Existing Between Invisibility and Spectacle

Relative to other antisystemic movements and competitive authoritarian regimes, the study of Chavismo has the unusual distinction of having its legacy defined by a single phenomenon. That phenomenon is the manufacture of the single largest refugee crisis in the modern history of the Western hemisphere. Such a claim certainly demands significant corroboration. Simply piecing together the previous sections offers a picture of how it came to be. The mixture of unsustainable economic policies with a kleptocratic ruling body that exists more as a criminal syndicate than a functioning state inevitably leads to a desperate situation for members of all socioeconomic classes, and especially so for those at the bottom and at its margins. This is something that began with Chávez and was intensified under Maduro. On paper, the resulting situation is as follows: As of 2019, more than 4.6 million Venezuelans have already fled the country since 2015, a total of around 13% of the 2014 population (Armario 2019). In terms of scale, it is expected to surpass the Syrian refugee crisis at some point in late 2020. Every single day, out of an estimated 30,000 people who cross the border into Colombia or Brazil, 5,000 of them don't return home. Colombia has been the most popular destination, due to its proximity and welcoming immigration policy, taking in at least 1.5 million refugees from its neighbor (“5000 People Flee Venezuela Every Day” 2019). One in five asylum seekers globally are Venezuelan (Armario 2019). The United Nations has called the “exodus of Venezuelan nationals...the largest in the recent history of Latin America and the Caribbean” (“UNHCR Update on the Venezuela Situation” 2019).

The Venezuelans who face the brunt of the horrors of such an exodus are, as should be expected, the poorest and most vulnerable of the society. Those who must walk for weeks through illegal crossings, freezing temperatures, and mountains from western Venezuela into Colombia do so because they cannot afford a \$2 bus pass. Those who must cross from southern Venezuela into Boa Vista, Brazil –primarily indigenous Venezuelans– do so knowing the attitudes that Brazil’s Bolsonaro holds towards both indigenous peoples and refugees (“Venezuelan Refugees Put Strain on Brazilian Border Town...” 2019). Such extraordinary circumstances so clearly dismantling the lives of the most marginalized members of society should, in theory, be seen by the international left as a situation in need of advocacy, a careful approach, and attention towards its victims; such has been the case with Central American refugees detained at the US southern border. Instead, the poison that is nonagentic anti-imperialism has created an environment in which the left has chosen to make invisible the refugee crisis and in some cases even condemn humanitarian efforts to combat it.

Within the framework of nonagentic anti-imperialism, there is ample room to invisibilize the refugees. Some outright dismiss the issue as a whole, and with it the plight of the refugees, by making the economic crisis seem nearly irrelevant. Ciccariello-Maher is once again the standard-bearer here when he claims in *Building the Commune*, evidently without a clue as to the irony, that “it would be foolish to...deny the economic crisis of the present, the spiraling currency and spiking inflation, and the creeping corruption and military power it has wrought” (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, Kindle loc. 1543). Nowhere else in Ciccariello-Maher’s book, published two years after the drop in oil prices triggered the massive humanitarian crisis and one year after the refugee crisis became global news, is the crisis mentioned, despite being focused

entirely on the legacy of Chávez and Chavismo on the poor in Venezuela. An extreme version of this can be seen on teleSUR, where a search on its website for “refugees” shows zero results for Venezuelan refugees over the past year (as of early December 2019), other than a single story about the Russian foreign minister accusing the United States and Britain of training “alleged refugees” in Guyana for a vague Bay of Pigs-style attack on Venezuela (“Russia Denounces Plan Based in Guyana to Destabilize Venezuela” 2019). This story, published in the shadow of figures showing that Venezuelan refugees had reached the 4.5 million mark, has no sourcing outside of the Russian minister’s words. A search for “Venezuela” in the same timeframe displays no results for Venezuelan refugees. This is significant because teleSUR, as an effective mouthpiece for the Chavista regime, should be able to at least articulate a response to the crisis. Instead, it has chosen to wholly ignore it. This goes beyond state-funded media as well. Means TV, a leftist media cooperative which brands itself a post-capitalist Netflix “that reflects and empowers the 99%,” only has one piece of content dealing with Venezuela: a satirical documentary spoof quite literally mocking Venezuelan refugees by portraying them as elitist opportunists (Means TV (n.d.); “Venezuela in Chaos” 2020). In outlet after outlet, Venezuelan refugees and their struggle are made invisible— even by content creators who claim to empower those without representation.

It goes without saying that the left is not alone in its prioritization of ideology over refugees; the right-wing of the spectrum is far from absolved here. While the position of many on the left is to disregard the crisis in order to protect those responsible, the right has seized on the refugees as visible victims of Chavismo to be viewed on screens and at a distance. The very best example of this is none other than Donald Trump, who rarely misses an opportunity to decry

the evil of the socialist government of Venezuela yet refuses to grant temporary protected status (TPS) to the millions escaping it, instead choosing to deport them back to the tyranny they escaped (Davis 2019). The refugees are a spectacle to point to in order to win support from Latino/a/x voters, not human beings in need of material assistance. In other words, the legitimacy of the refugees is questioned by both sides of the political binary. Venezuelan refugees find themselves between invisibility and spectacle, unable to escape the blind politicization that keeps them there.

A case can even be made that this paper is politicizing the refugees by describing their exodus as the culmination of Chavismo given the fact that the regime has certainly not received a free pass for its descent into authoritarianism over the course of these pages. The contextualization of the crisis within the greater scope of Chavismo was done this way in part to provide a framework through which to think about the crisis— not as the result of sanctions or chance, but as the manufactured apotheosis of a criminal mafia state. Still, contextualization is not enough to avoid the trap of blind politicization. Avoiding that trap means looking past ideologues of the nonagentic anti-imperialist left and of the xenophobic right and actively choosing instead to listen to the voices of the refugees themselves.

These voices are found in interview footage captured for the 360° virtual reality documentary short *Walking for Freedom: A Venezuelan Story* produced by the Lima, Peru-based production firm Mycrom Films with support from the Washington, D.C.-based NGO Plan País, the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers for Venezuela community. The small team of filmmakers went to Cúcuta in May of 2019 and traveled across Colombia with various groups of *caminantes* over the course of a week. The goal of the film and its virtual reality format was to

allow viewers to “step into the shoes” of the refugees and follow them on their journey (“Walking For Freedom” 2019). As viewers experience the diverse spaces the caminantes walk through, they listen to various refugees telling their stories. The interview footage, used or unused in the final cut of the film, is uniquely useful in demonstrating how the past twenty or so years in Venezuela have affected the lived ends of many of its most vulnerable citizens. The interview process does not capture a cross-section of all Venezuelan refugees, but it did get the largest slice possible within one geographic area since Colombia has been the largest emigration point (“Venezuelan Refugees Put Strain on Brazilian Border Town...” 2019). The remainder of this section will feature transcriptions from three interviews that give a voice to the realities on the ground. The transcriptions are presented without edits except for clarity. All were translated into English from Spanish. The italicized information in brackets summarizes the questions the refugees were asked to prompt responses.

7.1 Rocío, from Valencia, Venezuela

[Asked what she did back in Valencia]

I dedicated myself to homemaking. My husband worked. I had a daughter in school. Because of what’s happening in Venezuela, because of the situation in which we’re living, my daughter stopped studying. My husband stopped working. My sisters went to Chile. From my family, many went to Chile. And they are the ones who have been helping us with food. Because we can't with the costs in Venezuela.

[Asked what finally made her want to leave]

That was a decision I told my husband about. Because on the first of May they were going to [raise the minimum wage again]. How was that going to help? It would do nothing. A package of bread would cost 15. A minimum wage is 18. That doesn't allow for anything. I have hypertension, but I can't take my pills because they can't be found. And if they're found...they're too expensive.

[Asked if the coming inflation was the breaking point]

Yes. I said to my grandparents, “now that we have some money, we’re going.” On Sunday I decided and on Monday I took off. From Valencia to San Antonio. When I got to San Antonio, when I got to the border and crossed *la trocha* [an illegal border crossing connecting Venezuela and Colombia], I was scared. Because this is the first time I leave Venezuela. I was born and raised there. It’s very different, the Venezuela I grew up in from the one my daughters are living in. It’s two daughters, because my first daughter came two months ago to Bogotá with my grandson and her husband. I decided to come with my daughter, the youngest one of fifteen years. Because sometimes we could eat, and sometimes we couldn't eat.

[Asked if she has lost weight]

Yes. I weighed almost 70 kilos (154 lbs), now I weigh almost 43 (94 lbs)...I got sick there from hepatitis. My daughter too. I almost died. I didn't turn yellow, I turned phosphorescent. It took all the pain in the world to leave my husband alone, because we were three in the house and he was used to being there with us when he worked. But he stayed. Well. “If you go, it’s for the future of our daughter and for your future.”

[Asked if she came with her daughter of 15 and her son]

And with my son. Well, with my son, whom I haven't seen in four days. In four days. I left him in a camp and after that, I knew nothing. People are coming down, and when I see that I get excited to see my son, but I haven't seen him.

[Asked why they were separated]

Because we were walking, and when we finally almost got to one of the camps, the owner of the camp picked me up with my daughter because I was fainting and my son asked him to give us a ride. He said he would give us a ride here, to Bucaramanga, and from there I would wait for my son...They said that the last time they saw him, he was crossing the Páramo [de Berlín]. And from there no one has seen him, because there's so much fog, no one can see him.

[Asked what was going through her head as she nearly fainted]

With all the sincerity in the world, [I was thinking about] how Maduro's government ruined the Venezuelan family. The separation of families. So many homes, so many families. And above all, the children, I've seen so many children being carried, walking, it makes me so sad. And still, the sadness is with me. I'm depressed because of it.

[Asked if she has a job in Bogotá, her final destination]

No. I will take what is given. If I have to sell candies, whatever, I'll do it. Because I want a real future, not what I had in Venezuela.

[Asked what she wants to see happen in Venezuela]

Well, I would like, honestly, for Maduro to leave the government. Our family would return to the land where we were born and raised. Venezuela was so beautiful. It had so many riches. And above all, the love of all Venezuelans. All the Venezuelans, we were so beautiful. I would like that very much. Because my sisters went to Chile, I also decided to come. Oh well. That's what happened. Because of the government. That's really what I would like, for my family to return to Venezuela so we could be together like we were before. Christmas for us was really nice. With family. Now it's gone. We can't really. I wish the Maduro government were gone. I really do.

My daughter, my daughter was saddened to leave her dad. She was with him all the time. She says "I want to work to bring dad with us." Because she doesn't want to leave her dad alone so long. What's more, my family didn't know that I was going to emigrate as well. They were surprised, and every time I can communicate with them, they say, "Rocío, be careful, remember your hypertension, you can get hurt." And I give them strength too. "Don't worry, I'm fine. I'm fine." The only thing I want is everyone's well-being. It's true, we will be together again, but in our land. Where we grew up. Where I grew up, it was so beautiful. I said, and still say, that my youngest daughter was born into a situation that, well, was unlike the one my first daughter was born into. We got the most critical situation of all.

[Asked how she has been treated in Colombia]

Since I left Cúcuta, everyone has given me so much support. I would hear, “no, they discriminate a lot against Venezuelans,” and I’d say, “to me, that’s a lie” because they have always been there. Here, where I am in the plaza, even the military from here has been too kind with me. They have treated me well. The only thing I would not want is to return to Venezuela in the situation it’s in right now. Only after a change in government.

[Asked if she has a message for people thinking of emigrating]

For me, one of the things you need to arm yourself with is bravery. To emigrate from Venezuela. You must be strong and brave to do it. Because while Mr. Nicolás Maduro is there, things will not change. Everything will go from bad to worse. And whoever wants to emigrate, well, it’s an odyssey, but you have to keep going. Here, here in Colombia, from Cúcuta to Bucaramanga, they have always provided us so much help and support. They have treated us well.

[Asked if she has a message for the rest of the world]

I can say to the Venezuelan who has not emigrated, who wants to fight for our Venezuela, to do it. Because there are so many of us who are cowards and we didn't do it. Because the truth is that it has to be done. We will be united like we were before, us Venezuelans. But there are so many things they do. What they do is kill, imprison people, and we have to deal with that. With a government that does what it wants. I have nothing more to say because the truth is that what one needs is strength, and when you’re emigrating, you will see the situation that we have been through. Even where I am now, the Colombians have helped us so much.

[Asked if it's nice to cry about all of this]

Oh yes. It was the best thing I could do. Because I can't do it in front of my daughter, because she's been crying these past few days, saying "mami, please, lets go back." No. We're not going back, I will not return to Venezuela until justice is not done.

[Asked if the young girl next to her is her daughter]

Yes. She says "mama, I don't feel well, let's go." No, we'll be strong. You're younger and I'm your mother. I'm 43 years old, you need to support me and tell me that we'll keep going. And she has done it. She has done it. She's been very strong with me.

7.2 Karina Torres, from Valencia, Venezuela

Good afternoon, my name is Karina. Karina Torres. I come from Valencia, Venezuela. I left my country because my country only gives sadness. I came quickly because I lost a baby of one year and six months. My son died from a lack of oxygen and medicine. When I went to take him to the doctor, they didn't have cotton, there was nothing. In my country there is nothing.

My son got sick suddenly, and there was nothing in the hospitals. They couldn't see him, and because I don't have money, I didn't have anything to give to them.

[Asked if that was the last straw]

I have a child who suffers from diabetes and I'm here to fight for his medicine, but I haven't found any. There's no food.

I left my baby with my mother because I couldn't bring her. I only have the nine-year-old left. It's hard to leave my children and my family. Emigrating isn't easy. It's not easy.

[Asked what the most difficult part of emigrating is]

Leaving my family. And, well, I can't find work. I don't have a job yet.

[Asked how long she's been walking]

I'm heading into my eighth day of walking...from Cúcuta to Pamplona, and from Pamplona to La Dolorita and here I am.

[Asked what her plan is]

My plan is, well, my plan is to find work and bring my children and my family. Because we cannot be in Venezuela.

[Asked if she will stay in Colombia]

[laughs] It's a hard question. Whatever happens, I will always love my country. And I wish things would change. However it has to happen.

My final destination is Perú...because I have my sisters there, and, well...there's work there. I'll stay a while in Bogotá waiting for my daughter. Because right now, my daughter cannot be in Venezuela. Because I'd end up with no children. In Venezuela I would end up with no children.

So, well. Seeing my son die from a lack of medication was painful. Because of cotton. My son died because of a lack of oxygen in Venezuela.

[Asked about the nine-year-old]

He suffers from diabetes. Nutrition for him is very important. I can't take him to a doctor or clinic because I don't have a job, because what would I do by taking him to the doctor and not being able to buy any medication for him?

[Asked about the availability of work in Venezuela]

No. There's no work. In Venezuela there is nothing. The government of Venezuela ended all of that.

[On if she has a message for people thinking of emigrating]

My message, well, kiss your families, be strong, and whatever happens, keep going forward. Because at the end of the day, emigrating is hard, but there will be a future for your family.

[Asked if she has been helped in Colombia]

Yes, a lot, thank God for the care houses, the Red Cross. I thank God for all the countries looking out for Venezuela and giving food to the immigrants. Because if not for them, we would all die along the route from the hunger.

[Asked if she has anything else to say]

The saddest part is watching our country destroyed, destroyed like it is, without food, without medicine, without care for the people. Venezuela needs so much help. I wish the Venezuelan government would look us in the eye. They're hurting so many innocent people. Children. Those who suffer the most from this immigration are the children. Nutrition is so important for Venezuela because there are so many children. And the government needs to realize that the children pay the price. They make me so sad. One tolerates a lot for the children. And, well, I keep going thanks to the people who help. The people from other countries...they give us our strength. The support. I thank God because they have treated us well in Colombia. Whatever happens, we must keep moving.

7.3 José & De La Cruz

[Asked how they got to Bucaramanga]

José: Well, now, like you say, we are in Bucaramanga, and we're looking for a place to stay. We're here by the grace of God. And, well, it's tough.

De La Cruz: Since we left our hostel, we arrived at the Red Cross of Pamplona, who I'm so thankful for and for everything they've given us, for the flashlight. They told us it was the European donors. For the food, for the medical care. Since we got to the Red Cross and accepted the aid, we've been waiting for someone to take us to Bucaramanga. There were so many children, so many women. So many people for whom the cars were not stopping, there were so many groups left. And then we got our opportunity, when a car with two women gave us a ride. All the way to Bucaramanga...we didn't know them, really.

José: They're the unknown heroines.

De La Cruz: So we continued along the path. Past el páramo. They even took us to a coffee place and offered to buy us some. There were still so many people walking. Women, men. Men sleeping on the grass from being so tired of walking. We saw everything that we would have had to walk ourselves. We got here, and thank god for those women.

José: When we got out of the car for the coffee, the cold was extreme. It was a fridge. The cold was incredible. And the real cold hadn't even arrived. Imagine at night. And still, right now, there's people walking there. It's incredible. It's so high up that you can see above the clouds. It's an extreme place. And it's incredible that people are suffering there. Something has to be done. You understand?

[Asked what they would tell the people about to cross]

De La Cruz: I would choose to tell them not to cross on foot, really, to always have patience. A lot of patience. Patience because there will always be the opportunity to cross in a car. It's too dangerous by foot. No matter what you're wearing, you can't stand the cold.

José: We have on five shirts. This sweater and this sweater. And still, we're cold. It's tough. My opinion is to give support to those people. From there, from Pamplona. There's a transportation service that could take them. Because, really, the crisis in my country is very tough. People are

lacking so much that they don't mind doing the walk. Getting to those levels of cold. Risking themselves in that way. You see?

De La Cruz: This is our journey to find a better future.

[Asked what their plan is now]

José: Well, to improvise. Improvise where we're going to spend the night. He has a talent and I have a talent, so maybe those will help us.

[Asked what those talents are]

De La Cruz: He draws. And I sing. Musician.

José: We hope to continue safely. That there are no surprises.

[Asked what kind of singing he does]

Rap. Conscious rap.

[After some convincing to show off his skills...]

En estos días

Vemos como el amor se enfría

Como abunda la maldad

Disminuye la alegría

Violencia, muerte, droga,
Lo que vemos en la vía
De nuestro día día
De tanta monotonía
Tanto sufrimiento a causa de la rebeldía
Tantas veces que fallamos y no sabemos perdonar
Tantas veces que actuamos sin importar qué hacemos mal
Más no te apuesto pensar
Que todo esto puede cambiar
En vez de armas usemos lápices y cuadernos
Si cambiamos el ocio por arte y deporte
Hay que aceptar que esto no es solo culpa del gobierno
Y lo pueden lograr si realmente pones de tu aporte
Cambiándolo rato de parranda
Tomando licor con el buen sabor del amor en familia
Juntos se educaron nuestros hijos a golpe es un error
Cuando sembrar valores es la clave del asunto
Porque la educación siempre empieza con el hogar
Es preciso cambiar
Nuestras casas por hogares
Y si esta canción te hizo reflexionar
Con tu ejemplo es mejor futuro

Ponte a brindarles.

[cheers]

[Asked about the backpacks they have with them]

José: These backpacks? Yeah. The bag the government gave us [laughs]. Who would have thought? The government gave them to us. A symbol of immigration. They gave them to us during a time of fabric shortages, gave them to students in university and high school. Well, this bag represents Venezuela. Most use them so that we get recognized. “Look, we’re Venezuelan.” It’s our flag. This is all we carry with us.

8. Conclusion: The Magical Bolivarian State

Venezuela is a place where modernization was a facade, where democracy was a ploy, and where revolution was a lie. None understand this better than the refugees who have left their home in search of a future. Still, the role of the Chavista regime that manufactured the crisis continues to be obscured by its defenders. A counterargument to the points laid out throughout this paper is articulated well in Julia Buxton's foreword to David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger's book *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy*. In it, she writes that

Certainly it is the case that if Chávez's Venezuela is to be judged by the procedural benchmarks of liberal democracy, there is a deficit of checks and balances on government, the rule of law is weak, the military is not apolitical, and executive power is pronounced. But this leads to a number of related considerations. It has never been the case that liberal democracy was consolidated in Venezuela. During the Punto Fijo period, the country had a model of illiberal democracy that delimited participation, restricted access to power, privileged a minority, and politicized all state institutions. The rule of law was historically weak, and corruption and human rights abuses were pronounced. To present the Bolivarian process as some form of democratic regression or authoritarian aberration in this historical context is misleading. It denies the structural legacies of Puntofijismo and negates the progress that has been made in extending social and political inclusion in historical context characterized by infection with political parties, politicians, and institutions (Smilde & Hellinger 2011, xv).

Buxton is correct about the failures of the Puntofijista model. Puntofijismo outlined the standards it wanted to abide by –stability, democracy, accountability– and it failed to meet those standards. One would imagine that within the next few paragraphs, then, Buxton might include a sentence along the lines of “the benchmark to which Chávez's Venezuela should be held, however, is...”

followed by an alternative framework through which to analyze the antisystemic success of Twenty-First Century Socialism and hold it accountable to its principles. No such statement is found. Despite the clear abuses of the most basic tenets of democracy (participatory, representative, whatever it may be) such as free speech, free press, and independent organizing, Buxton continues under the pretense that in some way, under an environment in which people have severely limited access to information that the government does not approve of, a vibrant post-liberal democracy exists. To most observers such an argument is dead on arrival. But to the mind of nonagentic anti-imperialists on the left, such realities do not matter; this quote can attest. It accurately points to the failings of liberal democracy under Puntofijismo and identifies the expanded inclusion of marginalized communities into national legitimacy on paper. But in doing so, it confuses acknowledgment for betterment. It excuses action in defense of rhetoric. It ignores manufactured catastrophe in the name of imagined revolution. Corrales and Penfold, also writing in 2011, offer as succinct a response to Buxton as can be given: “Chávez is certainly correct that Venezuela is moving away from liberal democracy, but is not moving towards greater accountability and participation. Instead, Chávez has shown how a democratically elected leader can manipulate domestic institutions to crowd out social and political groups and, by extension, to crowd out democracy” (Corrales & Penfold 2015, 15).

One cannot help but ask if Fernando Coronil’s thesis of the illusion of Venezuelan modernity under Puntofijismo also applies to Venezuela under Chavismo. Coronil himself did so in 2000, wondering if Chávez is “yet another magician offering only the ephemeral illusion of progress, or is he a leader using his remarkable personal magic to revitalize Venezuela’s moribund democracy?” (Coronil 2000). Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez asked the

same after spending time with Chávez in 2000, where he described being “overwhelmed by the feeling that I had just been travelling and chatting pleasantly with two opposing men. One to whom the caprices of fate had given an opportunity to save his country. The other, an illusionist, who could pass into the history books as just another despot” (Márquez 2000).

The twenty years since these questions were asked provide a resounding answer. History points to more than a magician who conjured up the worst fears of both writers. Unlike his predecessors from the Punto Fijo era, Chávez had a far greater arsenal of tricks up his sleeve. For the Chavista regime, the illusion of “post-liberalism,” as Buxton would put it, has outpaced the high price of oil that kept Puntofijismo alive. The series of tricks that has allowed the kleptocrats of Venezuela to stay in power all fall under the umbrella of nonagentic anti-imperialism, which has proven itself to be an even stronger force for the regime than high oil revenues. Beneath the umbrella hides the ever-present specter of Western imperialism and finance capital, resistance to which “forces” the regime to undertake a number of actions to ensure its own survival— actions which include press censorship, the violent repression of protests, ecocide in indigenous lands, and the co-optation of radical democratic organizing towards autonomy.

This paper has conducted an analysis of the policy of Chavismo and its effects on the people of Venezuela. It has attempted to include the successes of Chavismo, such as the real attempts to include marginalized communities into the classist national imagination of Venezuela, along with its failures. What it has not attempted to do, however, is present its successes and failures as equals. The logic of nonagentic anti-imperialism has allowed the regime to do just that for two decades and the only thing Venezuela has to show for it is the desperate exodus of five million refugees. Hiding behind the rhetoric of anti-imperialism, the

logic lays bare its power through the regime's perpetual self-victimhood amid the crisis it manufactured. This paper's conclusion cannot be arrived at by just looking at the facts, figures, and statistics surrounding the situation— these are only context. The tragedy of Venezuela is not a plummeting GDP or a skyrocketing inflation. The conclusion is arrived at by actively listening to the voices of those affected by the crisis, of the members of those marginalized communities Chavismo promised to lift up. It is the families separated by circumstance and the incalculable displacement of people. It is the indigenous peoples thrown into a crisis where they would rather become refugees in Bolsonaro's protofascist Brazil than remain on their ancestral lands and the women like Rocío who leave their families behind in search not just of a better future but of a future at all. Their voices and their realities are the ones this paper has aimed to highlight in an effort to bring them out of the space between invisibility and spectacle. It is the hope that from there they can see justice and have dignity returned to their lives.

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