

ARTICLE

IMPERIALISM AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF COVID-19 IN VENEZUELA

Resumo

O impacto da Covid-19 apenas aumentou uma crise de saúde pública interna à Venezuela. Como os demais setores da economia e da sociedade venezuelana, o colapso do sistema de saúde decorre do legado de conflitos de classes e das contradições da política de desenvolvimento bolivariana dependente do petróleo, que chegaram a um ponto de ruptura com o fim do super ciclo dos *commodities*. Não obstante as causas domésticas da crise, o atual desdobramento da pandemia de Covid-19 é naturalmente geopolítica. As dinâmicas eleitorais e políticas, vinculadas à cadeia imperialista centrada em Washington, são centrais para esse quadro. O conflito entre as forças chavistas e de oposição, a crise constitucional de 2017, a declaração unilateral de Juan Guaidó como presidente interino em 2019 e a intensificação do regime de sanções são todos condicionados pela estratégia imperial dos EUA. Esse artigo revelará as interconexões entre as dinâmicas domésticas e internacionais da crise socio-política da Venezuela, explorará as maneiras pelas quais a Covid-19 foi usada como arma pela administração Trump, e tentará prospectar uma renovação política radical sob condições de um crescente conflito geopolítico.

Palavras-Chave: Venezuela, saúde, cadeia imperialista.

Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 in Venezuela has merely compounded an already existing health crisis within the country. Like the rest of the Venezuelan economy and society, the breakdown of the healthcare system is largely due to the legacy of class conflict and the contradictions of Bolivarian oil-dependent development policy, which finally came to breaking point with the end of the commodity super-cycle. And yet, despite the domestic sources of the crisis, the current unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic in Venezuela is inherently geopolitical in nature. Central to this story is the manner in which Venezuela's domestic and electoral dynamics have become inextricably embedded within the 'imperialist chain' centred on Washington. The conflict between chavista and opposition forces, the constitutional crisis of 2017, the unilateral declaration of Juan Guaidó as 'interim president' in 2019, and an intensified sanctions regime are all differentially conditioned by US imperial strategy. This paper will unpack the interconnections between the domestic and international dynamics of Venezuela's socio-political crisis, explore the ways in which COVID-19 has been weaponised by the Trump administration, and attempt to understand the prospects for radical political renewal under conditions of increasing geopolitical conflict.

Keywords: *Venezuela, health, imperialist chain.*

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Introduction

The global outbreak of the most recent strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) has merely brought to the surface a number of tensions, contradictions and fault-lines that were previously simmering below the surface. From the looming global food crisis to the spectre of a new Great Depression (DAHIR, 2020; ROUBINI, 2020), the global pandemic has cast a searing light on the irrationalities of the capitalist world system (GILLS, 2020). While the impact of the virus has been severely enhanced by the region-wide trend of underfunded national health-care systems (WEBBER 2020; BURKI 2020), infection rates having been growing exponentially, with the US, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru being particularly hard hit (PHILLIPS *et al.*, 2020; AFP, 2020). Both Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro have actively downplayed the severity of the crisis, bordering on denialism (ASCHWANDEN, 2021; FRIEDMAN, 2020), and have instead “weaponised” the pandemic for the purpose of reinforcing their authoritarian-nationalist agendas (MASON and HOLLAND, 2020; HOFFMAN PFRIMER and BARBOSA JR., 2020). As a result, the US has recorded the highest number of cumulative cases (5,014) and 92 deaths per 100,000 (per capita), followed by Brazil with 3,319 case and 87 deaths per capita. (Peru, meanwhile, has the highest COVID per capita death rate in Latin America, at 360).¹

The case of Venezuela, on the other hand, is somewhat more surprising. Despite years of rapid deterioration in the country’s health care infrastructure, and its increasingly limited supply of medical imports, Venezuela has recorded strikingly low infection rates. This is largely attributable to the rapid response of the Venezuelan government. On March 13th, the country registered its first confirmed case of COVID-19, and first COVID-related deaths two weeks later (VAZ and LUCAS, 2020; VAZ, 2020a). On the day of the first confirmed cases, the government implemented protocols for social distancing, closing of non-essential services, obligatory use of face masks on public transport, and the launching of a government web portal allowing citizens to register potential COVID-19 cases. On top of this, the state has absorbed the enormous economic cost accompanying the lockdown, including a nation-wide rent-freeze and guaranteeing workers’ salaries (FLORES, 2020).

And yet, despite these measures, Venezuela is struggling from this acute health crisis in ways unparalleled with other Latin American nations, in the context of a crumbling health care sector and a deadly sanctions regime orchestrated by the

¹ Author’s per capita calculations from, <https://who.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/c147788564c148b6950ac7ecf54689a0>

United States. While initially the US delivered targeted sanctions against assets and accounts held by top Venezuelan officials, as of 2020 the Trump administration has gone into high gear in the hope of toppling Maduro and placing their man in Caracas (Juan Guidó) into Miraflores. However, questions concerning national health systems and international sanctions regimes should not be viewed through merely an internal/external lens. Rather, the unfolding of COVID-19 in Venezuela must be seen through a distinctly geopolitical lens. Indeed, employing a broader analysis to the COVID-19 pandemic in Venezuela helps to go beyond narrow depictions of Maduro's "authoritarianism" and state incompetence as the root causes of the country's healthcare crisis (GREENE, 2020). Framed through the concept of "imperialist chain", I argue that the current socio-political conditions through which the current pandemic unfolds must be traced back to the geopolitical dynamics of the capitalist world system itself, and the international relations of class struggle that have shaped the "Bolivarian revolution" from the beginning.

The article will reveal the ways in which economic, political and ideological determinations become complexly imbricated within the shifting forms of imperialism during the modern era. The crystallisation of non-territorial domination during the 20th century signalled the historic triumph of the capitalist mode of production, insofar as the capillaries of geopolitical power became increasingly mediated by transnational flows of capital and investment across a fragmented system of formally independent sovereign states. The uneven geography of these flows, expressed in the international division of labour, constitutes the hierarchy of wealth and power of the imperialist chain as a whole. Yet the international systems is itself a system of *capitalist states*, each comprising a unique mix of class forces, struggles and institutional resolutions, the consequences of which reverberate across the entire chain in a chaotic pattern of rivalry, conflict, co-optation or cooperation. The history of Venezuela thus shares a common pattern among many states in the Global South during the post-war period, all of which simultaneously attempted to reconcile their own patterns of uneven development and differential insertion into the international division of labour, while simultaneously attempting (however unsuccessfully) to limit the imperial dominance of the Global North. The emergence of Venezuela's "Bolivarian turn" under Hugo Chávez at the turn of the century constituted perhaps the most fundamental challenge to this pattern of geopolitical relations. The subsequent pattern of class conflict and geopolitical rivalry marking this period of Venezuelan history forms the fundamental context of how and why the current pandemic is unfolding within a broader context of social, economic and geopolitical crisis.

Theorising the Imperialist Chain

In attempting to understand the geopolitics of COVID-19 in Venezuela, we must come to terms with the complex relations between a variety of analytical levels – from the operation of the capitalist world market, to geopolitical strategies and conflicts between different social formations, and the determinant dimension of class struggle that fundamentally shapes the evolution of domestic and international relations (*cf.* GORDON and WEBBER 2020). One way of broaching this task is through the concept of the “imperialist chain”. Initially formulated by Lenin, the imperialist chain articulates the inherently uneven character of capitalist development on a world scale, between dominant and subordinate states (MILIOS and SOTIROPOULOS, 2009, 19). Each (national) link in the chain represents the totality of global capital accumulation that is necessarily divided into a specific international division of labour.

In contrast to pre-modern forms of direct territorial colonisation and control, modern imperialism, as it crystallised in the late 19th/early 20th centuries, tended towards the export of capital and financial investments across colonial territories that soon acquired their own form of political independence in the guise of sovereign statehood (SAKELLAROPOULOS and SOTIRIS, 2015, pp. 95-96). This transformation signals the changing historical forms of geopolitical domination, from one based on direct political control to one that is mediated by financial and capital flows, insofar as the movement of capital from the imperial ‘core’ (from the Atlanticist West) towards the Global South is merely the pre-requisite for the extraction of surplus value that makes its way back towards the Global North (*cf.* LUBBOCK, 2018). Yet the notion of an imperialist chain does not presuppose a mechanical process operating in a smooth and predictable manner; as Lenin emphasised, links in the imperialist chain are not that of national economies, but *national states* (MILIOS and SOTIROPOULOS, 2009, p. 19). Precisely because the capitalist state represents the condensation of class contradictions and antagonisms within any social formation, it is principally through the process of class struggle (at the national scale) that the imperialist chain assumes its specific configuration. The aggregation of all such instances of struggle and political resolution across the imperialist chain thus congeals into the “international conjuncture” – as the broader geopolitical correlation of forces that differentially shapes the evolution of domestic class relations and struggles (MILIOS and SOTIROPOULOS, 2009, 196-197).

As the energy substratum of the capitalist world economy transformed from coal to oil at the turn of the 20th century, those states in possession of large petroleum reserves became key nodes within the geopolitical strategy of imperialist states. With the discovery of oil in Venezuela in the early 20th century, US oil firms quickly established a dominant position within the country's emerging energy sector. Successive governments in Venezuela struggled to wrest their share of oil rent from US multinationals in order to enhance state capacity and the normalisation of class antagonisms within the country's most important industry; indeed, by 1929 (at which point Venezuela became the world's principal oil exporter), some 27,000 workers were employed in the oil industry, reflecting enormous leverage among organised workers within the most strategically central economic sector (HEIN, 1980, p. 231).

The social transformations wrought by the expansion of oil production led to a specific amalgamation of social forces that increasingly aimed to challenge the prerogatives of imperial states. One of the key founders of the *Acción Democrática* –AD party, Rómulo Betancourt, denounced the *imperialismo petrolero* of the US in his effort to mobilise sections of the middle class, industrial workers and peasants into an anti-imperialist and anti-oligarchic alliance (HELLINGER, 2017, p. 57; DI JOHN, 2009, p. 196). The first AD government in 1945 thus opened a key chapter in a long history of struggle between US imperialism and the Venezuelan state over the capture of oil wealth. The onset of high commodity prices in the 1970s presented a unique opportunity for the Venezuelan state to assert a more independent path within the imperialist chain. Carlos Andrés Pérez's creation of the national oil company, PDVSA, in 1976 brought a windfall of oil rents into state budgets that were quickly funnelled into grand development projects (HELLINGER, 2017, p. 59; cf. CORONIL, 1997).

The collapse in oil prices and the onset of sever socio-economic crisis during the 1980s and 90s set the scene for a radical transformation of Venezuelan politics under the presidency of Hugo Chávez Frías. The election of Chávez in 1998 would bring the question of imperialism back to centre stage, primarily through the re-valorization of the historical figure Simón Bolívar as the symbol of national independence against imperialist domination. The birth of the “Bolivarian republic” thus laid the ground for a series of political struggles over the direction of national development and political sovereignty, the consequences of which continue to shape the current terrain of Venezuelan politics.

Oil, Class Struggle and the Re-Organisation of the Venezuelan State

The systemic contradictions of the Venezuelan economy (particularly in the form of shortages and hyperinflation), which form a key part of the country's current health crisis, are not merely the outcome of “socialist policy making”, but rather a result of the unforeseen consequences of class struggle that shaped the first years of the Bolivarian Republic. Right-wing political forces swiftly mobilised against Chávez's political program, particularly over the 2001 petroleum law that significantly enhanced state capture of Venezuela's oil wealth (HELLINGER, 2017, p. 66). Beginning with a demonstration from the offices of PDVSA that marched towards the presidential palace, a short-lived US-backed military coup in 2002 soon thereafter, and finally the ‘bosses strike’ in 2002-2003, signalled an intense struggle between the old power bloc and the newly enshrined Bolivarian state. From that point on, Chávez understood the degree to which the old power bloc would continue to challenge the progressive transformation of Venezuelan society. As a consequence, the state introduced much stricter currency controls, ostensibly to curb the prevalence of capital flight, and to discipline Venezuelan capital by limiting hard currency to businesses willing to cooperate with the government (ELLNER, 2017).

Yet the re-organisation of the state, principally through the strengthening of executive power, was also conceived as a way of connecting the Bolivarian state to the popular sectors. In the face of hostile fractions of the state apparatus, particularly within the National Assembly and officials within mayoral or gubernatorial positions, Chávez established a series of social development funds, such as the *Fondo de Desarrollo Nacional* –FONDEN and the *Banco de Desarrollo Económico y Social de Venezuela* –BANDES, directly controlled by the executive that would target much needed assistance to the state's social base (LUBBOCK, 2019a). This pattern of state-society relations was also crucial for the initial stages of Venezuela's new health policy, and arguably the principal factor in its marked success. In contrast to previous administrations, which focused more on the expansion of curative rather than preventative medicine, the Bolivarian state adopted a new philosophy to health care provision, conceived as a human right that recognised the inherently social, political and economic contexts through which access to health is shaped (BUXTON, 2017, p.355 and p. 361; see also ARMADA *et al.*, 2009; ALVORADO *et al.*, 2008). A key plank in the transformation of health care came with the *Misión Barrio Adentro*, facilitated by the participation of Cuban medical personnel working

within Venezuela's poorest neighbourhoods. Renewed focus on the health sector led to a significant improvement in the ratio of medical personnel to population, from 1:14.373 (1998) to 1:1.380 (2007) (MUNTANER *et al.*, 2013; MUHR, 2011, p. 145). The success of this social mission was also aided by the network of *consejos comunales* (communal councils), through which health care workers established training programmes and monitoring practices with community residents (MAHMOOD and MUNTANER, 2013). And this re-valorisation of social policy was expanded through the regional institution of the ALBA-TCP, bringing the *Barrio Adentro* programme to other ALBA states and peoples (ARTARAZ, 2018).

By and large, Venezuela's radical health policies were merely part of a much larger vision of social transformation and renewal. Integral to the health of the nation was the rejuvenation of political life through mass participation, and the construction of a "social economy" that would instil the values of Bolivarian socialism based on cooperative production and the elevation of human need over private gain. And yet, it was precisely from the unforeseen consequences of class conflict and disorganised policy-making that the gains of Venezuela's healthcare miracle would eventually become undone.

From Social Policy to the Social Economy

The Venezuelan right-wing opposition, still clinging to its dream of a return to the elite politics of the *Punto Fijo* era,² would not let this progressive turn go unchallenged. Having gone through a failed coup and ineffective strike, opposition forces attempted to straddle the boundary between institutional and extra-institutional confrontation. Combining electoral strategies among Venezuela's main opposition parties (combined under the *Mesa de Unidad Democrática*, MUD, after 2006), as well as street mobilisations and violent clashes (*guarimbas*) among Venezuelan students, the terrain of Venezuelan politics became increasingly polarised. These anti-government strategies were deeply embedded within broader transnational US elite networks, with tight links between a series of US-based "non-governmental" organisations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy – NED and the US Agency for International Development – USAID, providing funds, training and organisational

2 The consolidation of Venezuelan democracy in 1958 was based on the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* (Fixed Point pact), established between the three main political parties – *Acción Democrática* (AD), *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI), and *Unión Republicana Democrática* (UPD) – who vowed to work together to guard against the return of dictatorship, and to exclude more radical currents like the Venezuelan Communist Party.

support for opposition parties and civil society groups (GOLINGER, 2007). Yet this support to the Venezuelan right did not translate into a substantive political programme; anti-chavista forces were increasingly fixated on overthrowing the government rather than developing a popular message, curiously reflected in the opposition's core support base in the student movement, which itself carried little political content or substantive visions of politics beyond the empty rhetoric of defending "individual rights" (IVANCHEVA, 2017, p. 185).

To overcome these challenges, the Bolivarian state shifted its focus from social policy to the "social economy" (*economía social*). Underlying this socialist philosophy was the formation of a new system of production and consumption mediated through the democratisation of the means of production and worker co-/self-management (*cogestión/ autogestión*), principles that were later integrated into two of Venezuela's 6 year plans (RBV, 2007; RBV, 2013). While these experiments in workplace democracy and broader social participation within economic management have seen some notable successes, they have also been mired in continued struggle among workers and communities with more bureaucratic elements of the state apparatus, as well as organisational obstacles emerging from wider contradictions in the national economy (see LARRABURE, 2013; AZZELLINI, 2016). From an institutional standpoint, the transformation of the Bolivarian state has engendered a systematic tendency for the expansion and duplication of state entities, a problem that afflicts virtually every sector of Venezuelan society – from the economy to health and education (BUXTON, 2017, p. 367; IVANCHEVA, 2017). Particularly problematic was the multiplication of institutions in the food sector, leading to huge deficits in planning and coordination, as well as the expansion of graft and corruption (LUBBOCK, 2019b, p. 303).

The underlying contradictions of economic policy and strategies of reproduction among a variety of social actors would eventually transform into a full-blown economic crisis. The turn to capital controls and the state-managed distribution of dollars to the private sector led to the rapid expansion of black market exchange in dollars and other goods. This later characteristic was further aggravated by the implementation of price controls and a cap on profits (30%) aimed at cultivating a *precio justo* (just prices) for the popular classes. In response, national capital continually circumvent these measures, either by switching product lines (and thus evading price controlled goods categories), halting production, or switching to imports, in order to hoard consumption goods for the sake of price speculation (CURCIO, 2017).

In its attempt to manage these problems through deeper involvement in the economy (particularly through nationalisations) economic policy increasingly turned towards bureaucratic work place structures, public firms managed by military personnel with little experience, and an increasingly high turnover rate of government personnel in state ministries (*cf.* LUBBOCK, 2019a).

With the death of Chávez in 2013, and the precipitous drop in oil prices a year later, the underlying tensions that had been building up over the previous decade were now heading to breaking point. Despite efforts to diversify the economy, establish new forms of participatory democracy, and create a more just economic system based on expanding popular consumption, relative failure on the first of these dimensions severely impacted the viability of the other two. As a consequence, Venezuela's attempt to break the imperialist chain inadvertently deepened its subordinate position within the international division of labour. Indeed, while geopolitical conflict with the US has re-directed Venezuelan oil exports to more sympathetic partners in the Pacific (OPEC 2016: 49), sporadic changes in export partnerships have not affected the continued dependence on oil revenues. Thus, while the imperialist chain has undergone a relative shift across the East-West axis, Venezuela has merely enhanced its dependency within the shifting configuration of geopolitical power (BELLO, 2019; ROSALES, 2016).³ As we will see below, the reproduction of (relative) economic dependence on oil rents, and on the US market in particular, would provide Washington with enormous leverage over the Bolivarian state.

Economic Collapse and the Making of a National Health Crisis

With reduced revenues from oil rents, national imports collapsed. Coupled with a decline in national production, supply squeezes soon fed into an inflationary spiral, registering a rate of inflation of 2,600% in 2017. Consequently, the renewed focus on economic development led to a relative neglect of social policy; shifting national investment from health to production starved the former of much needed funds, while the organisational dysfunctions in the latter severely hampered the ability of the state to continue supporting its social missions (see Figure 1). Key to the story of Venezuela's current vulnerability to the coronavirus pandemic is the relative collapse

³ It should be noted, however, that China-Venezuela relations embody a mix between exploitative economic relations and cooperative diplomatic and political relations, particularly in light of China's recent medical assistance to the Maduro government (TELESUR, 2019a).

of the national food system (DOOCY *et al.*, 2019). As seen in Figure 2, less and less families are able to purchase basic goods due to both declining production and imports.

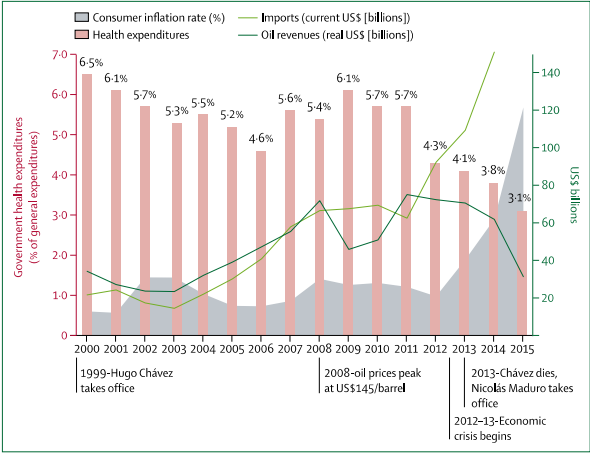


Figure 1: Timeline of government health expenditures, annual consumer price inflation, imports, and oil export revenue, 2000-2017. Source: Page et al. 2019, p. 1255.

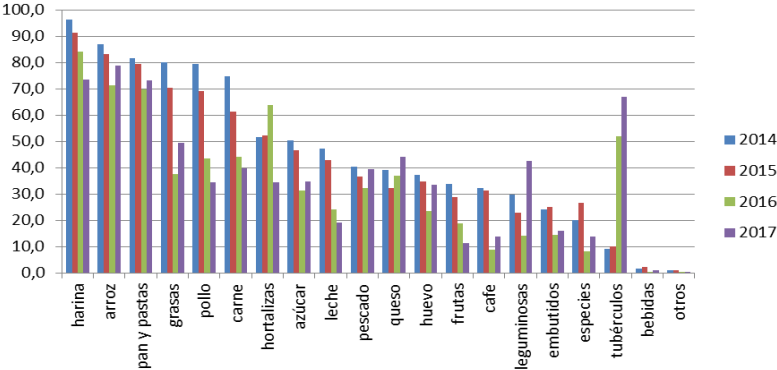


Figure 2: Weekly food purchases, 2014-2017 (% of families). Source: ENCOVI, 2017.

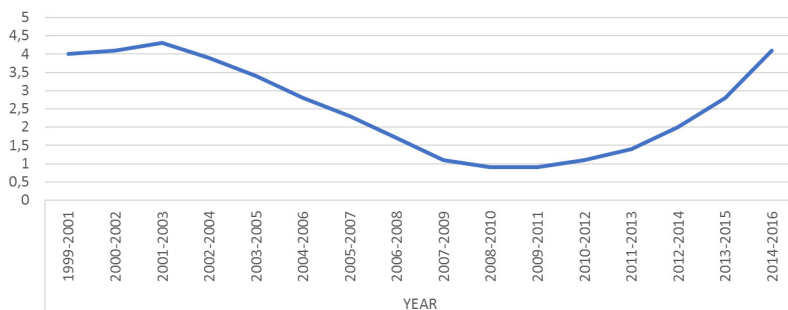


Figure 3: Number of People Undernourished in, millions (3 year average). *Source:* Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2017.

Flour, meats, vegetables, milk, and fruit have all dramatically fallen over the past few years, with greater substitution for legumes and starchy tubers leading to a mono-dietary squeeze. The renewed prevalence of undernourishment has effectively wiped out most of the gains made over the past decade (Figure 3).⁴ These health dynamics thus adversely impact the most vulnerable sectors of the population within the current context, given the close relationship between nutrition and health.

The economic crisis has radically reduced health care capacity at precisely the time when Venezuelans are most vulnerable. According to one survey covering 137 hospitals in 22 federated states, lack of services such as laboratories and pharmacies, and the irregular functioning of key infrastructures/supplies such as water, medicine and surgical stocks, afflicts almost every part of the national health system (PAGE *et al.*, 2019, p. 1255). Additionally, Venezuela has seen a dramatic “medical brain drain”, with key personnel seeking refuge from the economic crisis. Those who remain have sought to pressure the state to address the shortages of medical staff and deteriorating wages. Somewhat surprisingly, these grievances have not been easily co-opted by the Venezuelan opposition. When the right-wing political figure, María Corina Machado, approached a strike among workers and medical personnel of the Miguel Pérez Carreño hospital in July 2018, protesters quickly rebuked her presence, and rejected the instrumental politicisation of their struggle by Machado’s party, *Vente Venezuela*. Likewise, during a protest by personnel from the Hospital

4 Though it should be noted that Figure 3 represents absolute measures of undernourishment. Relative to population, and taking into account population growth since 2000, the proportion of undernourished people in Venezuela between 2014-2016 (13%) is notably lower than it was in 1998-2000 (20% of total population) (see Felicien *et al.* 2018: 7, fn. 4).

Clínico Universitario, workers deserted the highways in which they were camped once they noticed the presence of officials from *Vente Venezuela* (APORREA, 2018). Yet this rejection of opposition support reveals a potential weakness of these sporadic rebellions. Characteristic of these health sector strikes is their radically *depoliticised* content, distancing themselves from *any* political party or social force. While the current terrain of Venezuelan politics may help to explain this position – particularly in light of the increasingly bureaucratic and decrepit United Socialist Party of Venezuela (see HETLAND, 2017a) – these protests – untethered to any organised political force – may fall prey to fragmentation and an inability to scale up their demands into the heart of the state apparatus.

Elite Conflict Across the Imperialist Chain

While the general crisis of Venezuela's health system and its declining health indicators can be broadly traced to the underperformance of the national economy, the current unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic in Venezuela is deeply embedded within recent cycles of elite conflict, and the manner in which this standoff has been crucially shaped by US imperial strategy. Years of logistical and economic support from the US to opposition groups has rendered political conflict in Venezuela a near permanent feature of the Bolivarian period. Of course, domestic opposition forces are not simply puppets of US imperialism; as with all links in the imperialist chain, the dynamics of domestic class conflict remains the decisive determination in the evolution of the international conjuncture, which is itself formed by a transnational correlation of class forces. As such, the relationship between the Venezuelan right and US planners – as with many instances of imperial “democracy promotion” efforts (AYERS, 2009) – remains “multifarious and checked with contradictions and conflicts” (ROBINSON, 1996, p. 11).

Since the election of Nicolás Maduro to the presidency in 2013, the opposition has continued its long-held strategy of defeating *chavismo* through both electoral and extra-parliamentary tactics. Rather than formulate a coherent political agenda and platform that might connect with the popular sectors, the MUD turned towards lobbying external forces in order to validate its struggle with the state, including the US, OAS and the EU. Internally, the MUD faced severe divisions over strategic direction, with moderate elements opting to remain within the electoral realm, while more radical elements such as *Vente Venezuela* and *Alianza Bravo Pueblo* pushing for violent street mobilisations (BUXTON, 2018, p. 417). The resultant stalemate has

led to the further consolidation of state power within the executive. One example of this trend can be seen in the somewhat dubious convening of the National Constituent Assembly (*Asemblea Nacional Constituyente* – ANC), conceived by the government as a substitute for the previously suspended (and opposition controlled) National Assembly.⁵ To be sure, there has been a vigorous debate over whether the events leading up to the convening of the ANC can be considered a slide towards authoritarianism or not (cf. HETLAND, 2017b; KOERNER, 2017). Regardless of the difference of interpretation, there is no disagreement on the deep crisis fracturing the state apparatus as a whole. And it is from this position of crisis that the US has recently begun to ramp up efforts to overthrow the Maduro government.

On the 23rd January 2019, a young and relatively unknown political figure, Juan Guaidó, declared himself the “legitimate” president of Venezuela, in light of Maduro’s alleged “abandonment” of his duties. Guaidó had emerged from relative obscurity, signified by the fact that, at that time, most Venezuelans had never heard of him (VTV, 2019; SÁNCHEZ and SMITH, 2019; cf. BOLTON, 2020, p. 238). Forged in the crucible of Venezuela’s student protests in 2007, Guaidó helped to form the right-wing *Voluntad Popular* party with his political mentor, Leopoldo López. He soon received diplomatic recognition of his (unconstitutional) claim to the presidency from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay and the United States. In its early stages, US planners were optimistic about the Guaidó gambit; as then National Security Advisor John Bolton recalled, “The more I thought about it, the more I realized the decision on political recognition [of Guaidó’s claim to the presidency] was more important now than the oil sanctions” (BOLTON, 2020, p. 235). Yet despite the full backing from Washington, Guaidó has failed to make any headway in unseating the ruling party from power. The ineffectual approach of the opposition, and Guaidó in particular, has thus led to a souring of support from the US (KOERNER, 2020). As a result, US imperial strategy increasingly turned to economic warfare as a substitute for strategic cooperation with the Venezuelan right.

5 The principle area of contention revolves around the lack of a prior referendum vote on whether the ANC should go ahead – a constitutionally guaranteed mechanism in which only the people may convoke a new constituent assembly (Article 347), even if the President may initiate the convocation (Article 348). The lack of popular consultation may not be surprising, in light of the fact that around 85% of Venezuelans did not think it necessary to convene a new constituent assembly in the first place (APORREA, 2017b).

Cruel (but not unusual) Punishment: The Pathology of US Sanctions

While Washington has routinely turned to unilateral sanctions against Venezuela since 2005 (CRS, 2020), the current sanctions regime orchestrated by the Trump administration has entered into a pathologically violent phase. With the express aim of strangling Venezuela's oil industry (principally by cutting off its largest market, the US), as well as blocking the import of medical supplies, it is estimated that around 300,000 Venezuelans are now at risk due to the lack of imported medicines, leading to roughly 40,000 excess death in just one year (2017-2018) (ZAKRISON and MUNTANER, 2019). In January 2019, UN rapporteur, Alfred de Zayas, spoke out against the US sanctions regime as "crimes against humanity" under international law (SELBY-GREEN, 2019). Indeed, as Mark Weisbrot and Jeffery Sachs observe, the Trump sanctions regime violates the OAS charter, the Hague and Geneva conventions, as well as US domestic law, pertaining (respectively) to the illegitimacy of foreign intervention, collective punishment of civilian populations, and the false invocation of Venezuela as a "national emergency" that threatens US security (2019, pp. 313-315).

Beyond this unilateral sanctions strategy, the US has also coordinated efforts with key geopolitical allies, such as the UK, with the Bank of England freezing \$1.2bn of Venezuela's gold reserves (BOLTON, 2020, p. 238). Instances of geopolitical leverage over other states (such as India), as well as a host of oil trading houses and refineries pressured to suspend business with PDVSA, point towards the enormous power resources mobilised by Washington in its quest to overthrow the Maduro government (WEISBROT and SACHS, 2020, p. 300). Finally, the US has used its weight within global governance institutions to deny the Venezuelan government necessary medical aid required to cope with the current pandemic (VAZ, 2020b; MACLEOD, 2020).

Confronting COVID: Socialist Internationalism and Popular Power

In light of Washington's pathological assault against Venezuela during the world's most acute health crisis in generations, the UN and European Union have urged the Trump administration to ease their sanctions regime on Venezuela and other states in the Global South (KOERNER and VAZ, 2020). While such calls for compassion will likely fall on deaf ears, Venezuela has moved forward with its own strategies to combat the spread of COVID-19, with infection rates rapidly increasing

in early December (APORREA, 2020).⁶ In response, Cuba has maintained its long-standing health diplomacy with Venezuela. Indeed, while oil exports to Petrocaribe have largely ceased – due in part to the most recent US sanctions regime, as well as years of mismanagement within PDVSA (DOBSON, 2019; cf. OLIVARES, 2018) – Venezuela has steadfastly maintained its oil exports to Cuba as a means of maintaining the flow of doctors into the country, which stood at around 20,000 by 2019 (Yaffe 2020: 174). In August 2020, the Venezuelan government welcomed an additional 230 doctors from Cuba sent to assist with the COVID-19 outbreak within the country’s poorest neighbourhoods, with an additional 1,000 medical personal projected to arrive the following month (ARIZA, 2020).

Nevertheless, in the face of an increasingly strained national health system, grassroots organisations have become the *de facto* frontline responders in combating the virus. Communal health organisations, like those in Altos de Lidice in the city of Caracas, emerged directly from the experience of working with Cuban doctors a decade prior. As one community nurse put it, “When the transition to the Venezuelan doctors happened, and later when the system became autonomous and self-managed by the commune, there was a bit of resistance. Little by little, however, the pockets of resistance dissolved. Now the neighbors are not only welcoming, but there is also a sense of pride” (cited in MARQUINA, 2020). More broadly, popular movements have helped to support local communities through the previously formed Popular Solidarity Aid Network (*Red Popular de Ayuda Solidaria* – REPAS) – a nationwide network of volunteers and revolutionary cadres that bring food, education, medical supplies and other forms of support to those most in need (RESUMEN LATINOAMERICANO, 2019). The REPAS is more than simply a local initiative to combat social problems; the revolutionary peasant movement, *Corriente Revolucionaria Bolívar y Zamora* – CRBZ, founded the network as a direct response to the “systematic, continuous and simultaneous attacks of North American imperialism” (CRBZ, 2019). In battling the current pandemic, popular organisations like the CRBZ have begun to use their organisational networks to identify new cases of infection, testing, and monitoring, while continuing their participation in the Local Committees for Supply and Production networks (CLAPs) that bring food to vulnerable families (FUENTES, 2020).

6 See also country data from the World Health Organisation, <https://covid19.who.int/table>

Conclusion

Since the inception of the Bolivarian “revolution”, mainstream discourse has framed every crisis, conflict and setback as the result of disastrous government policy and a misguided attempted to build more just society (MACLEOD, 2018). True to form, the depiction of Venezuela’s health crisis and the state’s response to the coronavirus outbreak is no different. Yet to understand the current conjuncture, both within and beyond Venezuela, we need broader appreciation of the domestic and international dynamics that critically shape the civilizational crisis facing humanity as a whole.

This article has offered a more critical analysis of the geopolitics of COVID-19, and the ways in which the economic, political and ideological determinations of class struggle, at a variety of different scales, shapes the wider structure of international hierarchy and social domination. Seen through the optic of the imperialist chain, the dynamics of global capital accumulation become refracted through a network of uneven development across the imperialist chain, in which capitalist states and the class antagonisms and struggles constituent of them forge the ever-changing character of geopolitical rivalries. Seen from this perspective, the global pandemic is merely the epiphenomenal effect of the historical legacy of a global food system based on the endless accumulation of capital (rather than human need), while its diffusion across different social formations results from the contingent class strategies situated at different times and places across the imperialist chain.

As the forgoing analysis has shown, the history of Venezuelan state formation, and the class and geopolitical struggles over its vast subterranean riches, constitutes the sedimented historical force that continues to shape Venezuelan politics today. The rise of *chavismo*, as an expression of popular antagonism against the domination of domestic elites and imperialist states, signalled an historically unprecedented challenge to US imperialism, and to the “common sense” of capitalist civilization. In attempting to break out of its position within the imperialist chain, the Bolivarian state encountered a fierce reaction from the US ruling class and its historic allies within the old Venezuelan power bloc. Invariably, this counter-strategy became couched in the ideology of “democracy” and “human rights”, even if (during the 2002 coup and after) the US opted to destroy Venezuelan democracy in order to save it. Needless to say, the assault on Venezuela was never about democracy, but merely the reassertion of US primacy in the region, and the reaffirmation of its claims over the material wealth of subordinate states (TELESUR, 2019b; LIMITONE, 2019).

The cycles of class struggle and state transformation during the Bolivarian era led to a series of unintended consequences – from a unique currency regime, to a raft of populist policies that ultimately failed to break the power of domestic capital. Even in light of the shifting geopolitical coordinates from West to East, the continued dependency on oil extraction ultimately created the conditions for a severe socio-economic crisis, made all the more fatal with the arrival of the Trump administration seeking to reclaim the Monroe doctrine as the basis of US power in the hemisphere; as Trump allegedly uttered, Venezuela is ‘really part of the United States’ (cited in BOLTON, 2020, p. 230). As with all instances of imperial assault on the Bolivarian Republic – from the coup d’état to the economic strangulation of the country – popular forces have played a crucial role in defending the Bolivarian process, even as they do so in partnership with a state that has increasingly vacillated in its response to long-standing socio-economic crisis. In a bitter twist of fate, Venezuela is now battling the deadliest pandemic in recent memory under the worst possible conditions. It is imperative that we resist the temptation of viewing Venezuela’s struggle with COVID-19 as merely the result of an incompetent and authoritarian state, and instead situate the specificity of the contemporary Venezuelan state (and its internal crisis) as a concentrated expression of the contradictions of the imperialist chain in the 21st century.

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