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**Author(s)** Christophe Simpson

**Editor(s)** Christina Ivey



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## Introduction

I stayed in Venezuela from July 26 to August 26, which is an entire month or approximately 5 weeks, to conduct business on behalf of LANDS. The trip can be broken down into 3 parts:

- Attending the 25th Sao Paulo Forum
- Spending a week in Petare
- Participation in the Che Guevara Brigade

I spent enough time to see both good and bad things in Venezuela. It is necessary to discuss both, but this will be done carefully. Overall, the things that I had experienced and witnessed have strengthened my confidence in the Bolivarian Revolution.

The nature of the good things is very eye-opening. These are not the things that they talk about in the mainstream media, or things that even well-known activists or journalists who visit Venezuela spend much time to focus on. These are things that my organisation may have heard small references to in the past, but without in-depth detail.

The nature of the 'bad' things is much more sensitive. Most of these things are issues regarding specific individuals and organisations rather than the situation in Venezuela, and thus they do not need to be in a public report; these things will only be discussed within our organisation and with our Comrades from Cuba and Venezuela. These things are not major concerns for the government, but they can become weak points in the Bolivarian Revolution in the future if they go unchecked and get out of hand.

This report will focus mainly on the good things; the only 'bad' things that may be mentioned in this report are related to the blockade and other problems that the Venezuelan people, movements, and government are actively trying to overcome.

This report will be read by specific Comrades from organisations and movements in Venezuela before being publicly released, just as a check on the accuracy of some things said in it. Before public release, it will also be discussed with Comrades from Jamaica and Cuba, as well as allies from other countries who are engaged with LANDS.

During the trip, I had a Jamaican Comrade with me for only the first 4 days; after the first 4 days, I had not encountered another Jamaican until after I left Venezuela. With this said, the report will have more of the tone of a personal account than a typical formal report; much of it will be written in first-person and there will be many minor anecdotes.

## **25th Sao Paulo Forum**

My participation in the Sao Paulo Forum was limited, as I had arrived a day late, due to things beyond my control. Some details of this will be noted in a separate private report, as they are related to other issues that I faced or noticed during the trip. I was not the only person who experienced or noticed most of these issues. As established in the introduction, rather than focusing on these problems, this report is intended to note interesting things that I experienced or what was accomplished.

We (another Comrade and I, both representing LANDS) attended the 24th Sao Paulo Forum in Cuba the year before this one and the International People's Assembly in Venezuela early this year, so I had high expectations and I had hoped to see some persons whom I had met in Cuba. This time, I went with another Comrade who is also a registered observer in LANDS but who was representing another organisation.

There were, however, some difficulties with organising this forum in the same way as the one before. The Sao Paulo Forum in Cuba was much more seamless because the party and the state worked together to ensure its success. The International People's Assembly that was held in Venezuela in February 2019 was also a major success; it was organised by parties, other organisations, social movements, and with heavy involvement from the Foreign Ministry.

The separation between the party and the state in Venezuela is more than one would assume and became much clearer in this event when the Foreign Ministry was less involved. Officials working in the government were responsible for reaching out to invited guests, but they were not the ones organising the forum. There was a disconnect between the officials working in the government, the Comrades in the PSUV, and the Comrades in other parties and movements that are allied with the PSUV.

There are finer details and specific individuals who could bear more responsibility for some of the problems, and this will be mentioned in the separate private report, but the point of mentioning this disconnect is to get rid of the myth that Venezuela is some one-man or even one-party dictatorship.

There was also an apparent attempt to sabotage the Sao Paulo Forum; there was a cyberattack on Venezuela's electricity and telecommunications systems on the day that officials from the party and the Foreign Ministry were working together on important things to ensure the success of the forum. Venezuela has its internal inefficiencies like any other country does, but this exacerbated the problem.

The result was that a significant portion of delegates were not able to arrive in Venezuela in time for the start of the Sao Paulo Forum, and things were rescheduled to ensure that we could participate in some things that we would have otherwise missed; the downside of this was that certain things clashed with each other (i.e. things that were scheduled for different times were now being held concurrently, though in different locations to avoid interference with each other). With all of this said, some important experiences during the Sao Paulo Forum were mostly things that I did outside the formal confines of the forum.

## **Formal Participation in the Forum**

These are the things that I participated in as a part of the formal schedule of the forum.

### Plenaries

The plenary sessions were amazing experiences, just as they were in Cuba. They had less speakers, and most were Venezuelan, but they were great, nonetheless. The Venezuelans who spoke, both the government officials and persons from social movements, accounted for many of the critiques that someone would try to make at face-value.

They spoke of many problems in concrete terms and explained the international situation with more depth than just limiting things to Trump; the blockade against Venezuela only intensified with Trump but some of the measures and sabotage started before that. Some of the things that were emphasised were the importance of production and national self-reliance, a self-critique of the old dependence on imports for food and commodities. The government of Venezuela is very aware of its problems, and we were reassured of its competence in addressing them.

### Afro-Descendants Caucus

I was not able to participate much in the Afro-Descendants' meeting, but I was pleased to see several Black Comrades from places that I've never seen Black representation from before. There were some technical issues (relating to the audio equipment and the translation equipment) which made it difficult to listen to most of what was happening.

### Youth Caucus

I was able to participate in the Youth meeting, but I arrived late because I spent more than half of the time in the Afro-Descendants' meeting that was taking place at the same time. Originally, they were scheduled to be at separate times.

I was given a chance to speak, and I used it to explain the current situation in Jamaica with the austerity policies, the workers' struggles, our government's collaboration with the US, and the difficulties with rallying support around the mainstream Left party. LANDS itself was founded partly because a group of Comrades on the Left were losing confidence in the PNP, our mainstream Left party. The JLP, the mainstream right-wing party, is in power right now.

We prefer the PNP's foreign policy over the JLP's foreign policy, but the PNP lost the support of many older Jamaicans after embracing austerity politics and it fails to win the support of the youth because it is seen as focusing more on history than on things that are currently relevant. The JLP has more appeal among younger people, and their current policies make them seem more concerned with welfare while people associate the PNP with austerity. They're also better at optics.



## Unscheduled Encounters

This section focuses on things that were not officially a part of the Sao Paulo Forum.

### Conversation with a Comrade from Peru

One of my first encounters on this trip was before I arrived at the Sao Paulo Forum; I met Victor, a Comrade from Peru, and we quickly got along. Our conversations started with asking about the problems in our countries and the organisations that we are involved in.

At some point, we began to discuss Maoism. I told him that Maoism is a major part of my ideology but that, since he is from Peru, I needed to clarify that I'm not the same type of 'Maoist' as the persons in Sendero Luminoso. I loved his response; he said that they were/are not Maoist, and he went into detail, and we both spoke about that for a while.

I had a similar encounter with a Peruvian Comrade who I met in Cuba at the Sao Paulo Forum last year; he said that many Peruvian people see Sendero Luminoso as terrorists, but he didn't say that they were "not Maoist." I was glad for this second encounter in Venezuela.

The conversation continued and we realised we were similar in thought, having strong admiration for much of Mao's work, disliking dogmatism, equating some self-labelled "Maoists" in Peru and the USA to Trotskyists, etc. – these were not new ideas that I introduced to him or that he introduced to me; we both had these opinions already, and there is established literature<sup>1</sup> on the similarities between Trotskyism and this new 'Maoism' that emerged in the 1980s.

These things are also not mere meaningless labels for persons to identify with and have random arguments online; this is about how we go about our political work, and some reckless errors of some organisations and individuals have caused harm to communities, movements, and even entire countries. We discussed particular strategies and the errors of Sendero Luminoso, particularly how they related or failed to relate to the actual material conditions and the different classes that existed in Peru.

It's refreshing to have these types of conversations with like-minded Comrades in person. Apart from this encounter with the Comrade from Peru, another Comrade from Jamaica and I have had similar encounters with Comrades from Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> Criticism of the 'Revolutionary Internationalist Movement' (Revolutionary Communist League of Britain 1988)

## Conversation with a Comrade from the Philippines

Victor and I befriended a Comrade named Sarah; she is from the Philippines. On our way to visit a university, I talked with her for a bit. She and I both find it easier to speak English than Spanish and everyone else spoke Spanish, so conversation between us was determined to happen.

I asked her if she is a Maoist, and she said that both her and her organisation are, then she asked the same of me; I told her that I'm influenced by a lot of Mao's works but that we may have differences on the question of the status of China. Surprisingly enough, however, our perspectives on China are very similar and she has a more nuanced position than the ones I see online from self-labelled Maoists.

Like Victor and I, she dislikes Puritanism, and she is critical of dogmatic or orthodox stances on countries like Cuba, Venezuela, or China. She understands that different countries have different material conditions, and she extends this to having a nuanced understanding of State Capitalism.

She isn't, however, uncritical of China. Her issues with China are not so much their internal politics, but we did discuss the imperfections with China's internal politics. Like me, however, she sees China as a victim of the capital of the West; capital is coercive, and the global economic system that we exist in is one where we make decisions out of desperation for capital. China accepts low wages, subprime working conditions, and other things so that it can attract foreign investment. All Global South countries do the same. We can't make critiques of China's internal economics<sup>2</sup> without accounting for the pressures of the global economic system.

She says that the issues with China and the Philippines are national, and that a lot of the anti-China sentiments in the Philippines are driven by the Nationalistic petit-bourgeoisie. She says that they have to accommodate them in the Left because they are trying to build a broad front with all sectors, and she is critical of China but also of the overdone anti-China sentiments. She doesn't make the error of seeing China as worse than the US or condone her government's friendliness with the US, but she is caught in the middle between genuine critiques of China and simply rabid anti-China sentiments.

We briefly discussed Duterte; I said that I had hope in him when I heard him aiming for peace with the Communists, but then felt betrayed when he took a 180 turn on that, and she excitedly explained that she felt the exact same, i.e. both in having hope and in feeling let down. She invited me to the Philippines and told me of an upcoming event, and also that she would try to arrange with her Comrades to provide accommodation at the university she works at.

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<sup>2</sup> We can argue the same of Cuba, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and other countries.

Bolivarian University of Venezuela

A Venezuelan Comrade organised a tour for a small group of youth to visit the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV). We visited different departments to learn about the courses that are offered. The most notable departments that we visited were linguistics, indigenous studies, and computing. As is typical in Venezuela, the university is free to attend. The bathrooms are clean and well-kept, and the common areas have comfortable furniture.

We had a meeting with the Dean of the school, in which a Comrade who worked at a university wanted to establish a working relationship between her institution and the UBV. The Dean was young (he seemed to be in his early 30s), very friendly, and welcoming. He gave us many books including one of Chavez' most important works, the Blue Book. After our meeting, I noticed that he had some 'Russian doll' type figurines<sup>3</sup> of Soviet leaders, and I casually made remarks on the leaders based on how much I liked them, i.e. I gave thumbs up to Stalin and Lenin, a so-so gesture at the leaders from Khrushchev onwards, and a confused gesture at Gorbachev. He and others repeated my thumbs up with Lenin and Stalin, the so-so gestures with the others, but he gave a thumbs down at Gorbachev.

We had heard Maduro refer to Marxism-Leninism more than once, but to see that admiration for the earlier Soviet leaders existed among other Venezuelans was important. This wasn't the last time I encountered Venezuelans who had favourable opinions of Stalin and Mao, and the others were normal persons, not officials like the Dean of this school.

We went to the nearest subway station after leaving the university; as we walked, I noticed a newspaper stand, and a large stack of newspapers of a particular type that were insulting Maduro; I remarked that it's ridiculous that persons call Venezuela a 'dictatorship' where there is 'no freedom of speech' while that can happen. "Is this what they call a dictatorship?" I asked. My Comrades were still around me, as we were walking together, and they had similar remarks.

I added, to the conversation, that the People's Revolutionary Government did not tolerate such things in Grenada, and referred to an incident where they arrested a group of persons and seized all of their printing equipment to shut down a newspaper they were creating; nevertheless, I consider the People's Revolutionary Government in Grenada to have been one of the most democratic projects in the world. If others who know about it in detail would agree with me that it was a democratic project, and if that could happen there then but isn't happening in Venezuela, it makes no sense to say that Venezuela has no Democracy because of a supposed lack of free speech; if Venezuela had no free speech, I would not have seen those newspapers.

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<sup>3</sup> These are also called Matryoshka dolls.

### Visit to the Students' Residency in Plaza Venezuela

A Comrade opted to meet up with me when he found out that I was in Venezuela; he took me on a tour of the “Students' Residency” where he lived. Over 200 students live there. There are several floors, and each room has 2-3 persons cohabiting as roommates. The kitchens and restrooms are communal, and there are free Wi-Fi zones; the size of each room is decent, and the conditions of the building seem very much like a regular university dorm in the Caribbean. The roof has a small garden with pumpkins and other things, as well as some equipment for working out.

The students took control of the building by seizing it around the time that its restoration was almost finished. On each floor, schedules are displayed with responsibilities and chores (like cleaning the common areas) assigned to different persons; these are collectively decided in meetings, which are held regularly on each floor. Delegates from each floor together form a committee which co-governs the entire building along with the institutional presence of the mayor's office<sup>4</sup>; the entire building is self-governed in that the administration, decisions, and even the security is done by the students themselves.

The students don't pay rent in the typical sense, but they pay a small maintenance fee which goes towards expenses like utilities (which are cheap) and cleaning supplies. They oversee this money themselves; they know what it is spent on. This is to say that they are not students renting spaces from a landlord; they are students who pool funds to maintain the building that they live in. They also don't jointly own the building as specific individuals; the building is collectively controlled by students in that only students are allowed to live there; someone is not allowed to continue to live there after they finish school. The students attend multiple different universities.

I asked what happens if a student gets pregnant, and I was told of 2 specific cases; one student opted to leave the building, and I assume this may have been because she wanted to discontinue studies, but another student stayed and the residents on her floor collectively discussed how the baby would be taken care of. I was also told that they offer education on contraception to lessen the chance of student pregnancies. I also asked what happens if persons want to swap roommates to be with their friends, and I was told that that is facilitated but that there is a process which involves meeting with all the affected persons.

The students don't have formal/official ownership of the building, but they are in talks with the government about that. It would be owned by the collective as an institution, not by the individual students. There are business interests in the building, so the government has asked them to consider doing small-scale commercial activity on the ground floor.

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<sup>4</sup> The Students-Municipal Institute of Youth, Caracas

Commercial activity could take multiple forms, and I had offered my suggestions which were welcomed by my Comrade; they also had their own existing ideas as well. The ground floor has the entrance, a stairwell, the elevator, and a lot of empty space. Commercial activities could fall into 2 main categories; commercial operations done by the students themselves, or commercial operations done by outsiders who pay rent to the collective of students since the collective of students would be responsible for maintaining the building. The more creative ideas would involve commercial operations done by the students themselves, but even outsiders could mean small vendors instead of larger establishments.

Ideally, the students could do something that they themselves would use. They could set up a gym, a printery, a laundromat, a café, a cookshop, or similar things. Depending on the type of service, the students could not get them for free; still, it would be better for the students to buy from there than to go to a separate for-profit establishment. These small businesses would need revenue, but the benefit is that they would employ the students themselves, and the profit would go to development of the building (and if a high profit is achieved, prices could be cut which would both increase the appeal of the businesses to outsiders and the benefits that students get from using those services instead of going elsewhere).

In general, this was simply a fascinating project to learn about. Hopefully it can inspire similar movements in Jamaica, as our people – especially young adults – struggle with access to land and housing. The monthly rent for a student living on campus at UWI is around the same as or more than our monthly minimum wage in Jamaica. Many people have built their houses on land that they don't own, being labelled as 'squatters' and forming entire communities of informal settlements. We need tenants' unions and more social movements like these in Jamaica.

#### Assembly of Caribbean Peoples

Some members of the Regional Executive Committee of the Assembly of Caribbean Peoples had a meeting during lunch time on one of the days of the Sao Paulo Forum, to plan for the upcoming 8th Assembly. I informed them that I could not attend the 8th Assembly because I would still be in Venezuela, but that another Comrade would represent LANDS.

We discussed a few things, including what to do about translation equipment and some proposals that I had for the methodology of the Assembly after experiencing some issues the last time. We have been stressing the need to build a communication network among ourselves so that integration is something we feel when we are in our respective countries, not only when we have money to spend on flights to meet up in the same place.

### Environmentalist Caucusing

In Cuba in 2018, we had encountered a coalition from Mexico called Nueva Esperanza, and one of the movements in the coalition was the Movimiento Animalista. In February 2019, we encountered MEVEN, the Ecologist Movement in Venezuela; the persons I mainly interacted with are persons who really love animals. Unfortunately, our Mexican Comrades from the Movimiento Animalista could not make it to either the International Peoples Assembly or the Sao Paulo Forum this year, due to personal reasons unrelated to the forum or Venezuela.

Our Comrades from Movimiento Animalista informed us that someone from Nueva Esperanza was attending the Sao Paulo Forum, and we had tried to set up an informal meeting between them and MEVEN. Both parties were interested, but we ran tight with time, so it did not end up happening. The interest seems to be there nevertheless, so we hope that these organisations will build a formal relationship soon.

### Agro-Urban Movement

I was walking around the Teresa Carreño Theatre and I was fascinated by a particular video that I watched as well as a separate display set up by the Agro-Urban movement. After expressing this to a Comrade, he told me that the Venezuelan government has a Ministry of Urban Agriculture.

LANDS has been wanting to do urban agriculture projects for a while, but we haven't found a space inside any community, except 2 Comrades' homes; these Comrades don't own these homes as they still live with their parents, so we don't have that much liberty with the space. We got permission to use some space in the yard of the Venezuelan Institute for Cultural Cooperation, but that institute suspended operations because the sanctions have left them unable to pay utilities or staff since 2018. We hope that we can get some help with starting urban agriculture projects, whenever the sanctions are lifted or circumvented. We are looking for expertise or technical assistance in terms of training, not funding or materials. Still, even education and non-political cooperation have fallen victim to the sanctions.

### Housing Missions

The government has built roughly 3 million homes and given them to the people for free; there was a stall displaying the different models of these homes. A model of a 3-bedroom house with an indoor laundry area caught my eye. The Comrades who were responsible for the display engaged me, and I told them about a similar common model in Jamaica, a 2-bedroom and 1-bathroom house that doesn't have an indoor laundry area, and that costs millions of dollars<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Millions of JMD, but around 60,000-100,000 USD; minimum wage in Jamaica is less than 3000 USD per year.

### Conversation with a Businesswoman's Son

There is free public Wi-Fi at the Teresa Carreño Theatre, so I was pacing around a particular area for a while to try to connect to it. I was familiar with the area because I had hung out with a friend there in February. A random teenager in the same area saw me and knew what I was doing; he told me that it would be difficult to connect to the internet because of how crowded the place was at the time. He offered to turn on his hotspot to share data with me.

The teenager speaks English and he seemed open to conversation, so I engaged him a little. He's white and his mother is a businesswoman<sup>6</sup>, and a Comrade had told me that this is a popular hangout spot for petit-bourgeois youth in Caracas at another point in time, so I considered the possibility that this boy may support the opposition and/or have negative feelings about the forum. He knew about the forum, I told him why I was there and the ideology and the type of movement that I'm involved in, and he didn't give me any strange reaction or even disturbed facial expression; this is important to note because many right-wingers in Venezuela were not happy about the Sao Paulo Forum or the invitation of Leftists from other countries to Venezuela. Our conversation continued as normal.

As he knew why I was there, I was able to say/ask things more frankly/directly; I didn't rush into asking it awkwardly, I had asked him permission to ask something political first. He told me that he is neutral in politics, and then I told him that I've never met any opposition supporters because everyone I meet either supports the government or is neutral. He told me that his father supports the Venezuelan opposition but that he lives in the US, while his mother lives in Venezuela and is neutral like he is. Socialism obviously doesn't appeal to his class interests, but he still doesn't support the opposition; I suppose that he doesn't have enough discontent to decide to support the opposition, or the opposition simply doesn't appeal to him with all its theatrics and careless tactics.

Even though this was a minor encounter, it was important. If the situation in Venezuela was as bad as the Western media describes, one would imagine that this random teenager who doesn't support the government would have rushed at the first opportunity to tell me how bad things in the country are, possibly question why I would support Socialism, or at least show some sort of unwillingness to interact with me if he wasn't in the mood for some political encounter; after all, this is how many persons who claim to be Venezuelan<sup>7</sup> behave online. However, this teenager was quite friendly to me. Venezuela isn't as politically-polarised<sup>8</sup> as the Western media makes it seem.

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<sup>6</sup> He told me that he was waiting on his mother and that that's why he was there.

<sup>7</sup> Some are Colombian, and some live lavish lives in the US or Western Europe.

<sup>8</sup> View notes on The Opposition on page 40.

### Conversation with DPRK Diplomats

A diplomat from the DPRK opted to sit beside me on one of the days of the Sao Paulo Forum, and we had walked and talked together on our way from somewhere to Miraflores. He introduced me to the DPRK's ambassador to Venezuela, and we had a pleasant conversation as well.

I told him that we were contacted before by someone from the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries to start a Jamaica-Korea Friendship Association, but that we haven't been able to manage such a task at this point in time. We were pleased to see the DPRK and Venezuela strengthening their ties, and to see the DPRK participating in the Sao Paulo Forum.



## **Week in Petare**

I spent a week in Petare, which I am told is one of the 3 largest slums in the world. In the nights, I slept in an office in a community centre in that is run by the Otro Beta movement in Venezuela, in the Antonio Jose de Sucre barrio. While there, I was told that the persons who live in the area are friendly and open so I could approach them randomly to ask questions. Some persons aren't always in the mood to be approached by random strangers asking questions; as someone who is like that, I wouldn't have thought to engage persons in the community unless I was told so.

### **The “Cacica Urimare” Community Centre**

The community centre is named “Cacica Urimare” after an indigenous leader. I had visited it before in February, and the concept and operations had excited my Comrades in Jamaica because we wanted to do similar things here even before a visit was made to the one in Petare.

It is usually bustling with activity, but there were less persons during the week I spent there in July because they were doing maintenance (like painting the walls, refitting the kitchen to create a bakery, etc.) and preparing for the next term of classes that they offer there. There were still a handful of persons visiting the centre to work in the production centres, to practice dancing, to use the visual arts studio, and to hang out. If more persons had been there, I would have had more to interact with, without seeming random or risking the chance of awkward encounters.

#### **Bakery**

There was a kitchen when I visited in February, but it was being converted into a bakery when I visited in the summer. The bakery would generate more revenue for the community centre and would be better integrated with other operations there.

#### **Mill**

A room was being converted into a mill to be able to produce flour from corn and cassava; some of the equipment was already bought, and the community centre already has some agricultural production that could be used as input. The flour produced by this mill would be used for 3 things: to supply the bakery, to sell to the CLAP network, and to sell to the private sector.

“CLAP” refers to the state's organisation of local committees that manage community-based production and distribution of some goods; it buys food and other supplies and distributes them to outlets so that they are given to the people at prices far below the market price. The community centre would begin to sell flour to CLAP at a low rate and sell the rest to the private sector (nearby shops and restaurants) at the market rate. I suggested looking into the production of pasta from the flour as well.

### Textile Workshop

The community centre has a textile workshop that produces clothes. I had seen it when I visited earlier in the year. This workshop is one of the ways that the community centre generates revenue to keep itself operational. The clothes that are produced and sold there are of a good quality and are cheap compared to what is offered by the private sector. I bought 2 samples, a polo shirt and a pair of pyjama pants, to take back to Jamaica to show others.

### Dance Classes

2 groups of girls – one group of teenagers and a group of much younger girls – were practising dancing. The older group was practising first. I heard some music that sounded similar to something Caribbean, so I went in the room to see, and they invited me to stay; I made myself useful while I was there, as they asked me to do 2 favours to assist them.

The younger group came in later on with a dance instructor, who invited me to stay as well. They played some folk music and did some dances that reminded me of some dances that were done on specific cultural days in school in Jamaica; this led me to ask someone if the music and dance that they practise is Afro-Venezuelan, and he told me yes. Even the clothes that they were wearing seemed similar to Jamaica's national dress, and I found that to be noteworthy. There should definitely be more cultural exchange between our 2 countries.

There is a school in Jamaica called the Venezuelan Institute for Cultural Cooperation that had been offering Spanish classes, free dance classes, and free music classes – they had to suspend operations this summer because the sanctions have prevented them from paying the staff since last year; this also affected a gardening project<sup>9</sup> that LANDS was doing in the yard.

### Music Studio

The community centre has a music studio that persons in the community can use for free. Many young people in Jamaica are interested in music but their interest isn't sufficiently facilitated; it is especially difficult for persons from lower-income households, as they lack time and/or resources that can help them to develop their skills. The presence of a studio for recording music is a game changer, as it provides some of those resources and it builds an enabling environment. In other places that I visited in Venezuela, there were small media houses like radio stations and video studios; the music studio can be developed to facilitate such activities as well, but still serves a great purpose if it remains just a music studio. Such a facility in Jamaican communities would be very appreciated.

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<sup>9</sup> See notes on the Agro-Urban Movement on page 14.

### Health Centre

There is a health centre which offers both traditional services and conventional medical services; they offer check-ups and have medication in compliance with modern medicine standards, but they also offer other things that earn the trust and confidence of the members of the community.

The things that they offer are not only based on indigenous traditions from people in Venezuela, but also things like acupuncture. It is safer to get something like acupuncture done there, a place that has to meet the health and cleanliness standards of a clinic, than at a random place that may not put out the same effort to meet certain strict standards.

### Classes & Skills Training

The community centre welcomes children to get help with their homework and also has its own classes on a variety of practical/vocational things like photography, video editing, electrical work, coding, hair styling, hair cutting, printing/stenography, English language, yoga, textile work, event planning, manicures and pedicures, mobile phone repairs, motorcycle repairs, acrobatics, urban agriculture, and some other things.

The movement has an arrangement with the Ministry of Education to give certification to some of the courses that are offered at the centre, so they get certification from the community centre itself but also certification from a formal school whose standards the community centre's classes meet; this allows persons who take classes at the centre to easily re-integrate into the formal education system if they had dropped out. The classes are offered to persons of all ages, not just children.

Some of the things they teach are responsible use of the internet, including YouTube and social media, to create and disseminate content. I've maintained contact and become good friends with one of the teachers; he is frank with me about the realities and difficulties of the situation.

## Encounters in Petare

Webpage on US Intervention in Latin America

I had a few visitors while staying in the community centre; I had met them earlier in the year and I stayed in touch with some of them. They always ensured that I was okay, that I was comfortable, and that I had food.

One night, 4 of them were hanging out with me. Earlier that day, I had been showing one some information on US intervention in Latin America that we compiled for LANDS; he opted to show the others as we all talked about how far the US is going with its intervention strategy and how it is connected to the current daily difficulties in Venezuela.

They read the citations from the compilation and we visited a few of the actual articles that they were cited from, and they were shocked that the information was just there in plain sight, that the journalists and the politicians are open about their agenda in Venezuela.

Bachaqueros

One day, we descended from the hilly residential area that the community centre is in and hitched a ride to the more commercial area of Petare, where the metro station and many shops are. My friend was telling me about food hoarders who were only recently forced out of the area by police; they had occupied the streets and sold goods that they hoarded. They call them “bachaqueros” like big red ants.

They operate in bands/gangs that buy up large quantities of food or consumer goods to create shortages and then sell those same goods for much higher prices; this is somewhat similar to the concept of ‘scalpers’ in the West, who buy tickets to events and resell them for a higher price after they are sold out, but they do this with food and necessities rather than concert tickets.

They exacerbate the effects of the existing perception of scarcity and they profit from the hyperinflation, as they are able to sell goods for more money than they bought them. It is rumoured that they operate in networks with connections to smugglers on the border<sup>10</sup>.

In a bakery operated by some Comrades from Somos Otro Beta in town in another state<sup>11</sup>, they put a limit on the amount of bread that someone can buy in a day; the limit is 4 loaves, and 1 person definitely can’t consume that much bread in 1 day in any case. This is a measure to limit hoarding by bachaqueros.

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<sup>10</sup> See “August 14 – Notes from the Border Regions” on page 25.

<sup>11</sup> See notes on Somos Otro Beta in Quíbor on page 37.

### Engaging Random Youth

I introduced myself to 4 teenagers, let them know that I'm from Jamaica and that I'm only in the community for a week and asked if we could talk about "the situation in Venezuela" – all of them allowed me to, then I proceeded to ask who they think is responsible for the situation.

One boy was sitting right outside the community centre for several hours, so I approached him first to ask. He seemed young, like 14-15. I asked if he spoke English and he said no, so I let him know that my Spanish isn't great so that I may make mistakes. We got on with the conversation and I asked who he thinks is responsible or who he blames for the situation, and he said that he blames the people, including himself. I asked why, but then he started to get a little frustrated because I couldn't understand everything he said; he directed me to a group of boys to ask them instead, and the main one he pointed to was someone who spoke some English. When he was answering, he was talking about consumption and the inflation, but nothing about politics. I approached the group of boys a little later because I had to attend to something.

A teenage girl who practises dancing in the community centre called me over to assist with something; I took the opportunity to engage her about this as well. I asked her who she blamed for the situation, and she said the same as the boy I first spoke to; she blames the people, including herself. When I asked her why, she also spoke about the economy and not about politics.

After my conversation with her, I approached someone from the group of boys who were sitting near the community centre, across from where I was talking to the first boy I encountered. They were teenagers who seemed to be slightly older than the first boy, like 17-19. The one who I approached spoke English. He had 3 persons beside him, but they didn't join the conversation right away. I asked him about the situation, then I asked him who he holds responsible or who he blames, and his response was "the United States" and I said that I agree; he went on to talk about the economic war. I told him that Jamaica also had an economic war in the 1970s until 1980, and we discussed the similarities. One of his friends left to get something then returned to participate.

This friend joined the conversation and blamed Maduro for the situation, but he agreed that there is an economic war. We (his friend that I was talking to at first, and I) asked if he thinks anyone else could survive this economic war, and he said no; he also said that he thinks Maduro is in a difficult position. He didn't seem to be truly anti-Maduro as much as he was just frustrated with the situation in general; the sanctions play on these frustrations, in my opinion.

They started to ask me questions about Jamaica, after this conversation. They asked me about the size and population of Jamaica, whether I could compare it to one of Venezuela's states, and also about whether human rights are respected there.

### Reflections on the Opposition (Petare)

I took note of how peaceful the conversation was between someone who believes strongly that the problems in Venezuela are due to US intervention, and someone who blamed Maduro for the country's problems. People in Jamaica are far more 'tribalistic' (divisive) in their political opinions; nowadays it will turn into peaceful but loud passionate shouting matches, but differences in political opinions used to escalate to violence.

Some of my friends in Petare are from opposition households. I met one of my friend's parents, 2 supporters of the opposition; they knew why I was in Venezuela and what my political leanings are, but they were nice and friendly to me, nevertheless. They offered me extra food when I only needed to reheat some food that I had from earlier, and the household gave me dinner one night when I hadn't eaten on that day. They told me that they would look out for me if I needed anything and showed me which doors to knock if I needed them, and they meant it.

Interestingly, some opposition supporters cooperate or even support localised social movements like the one that operates the community centre in Petare, even though those movements openly support the president and the government. The political situation on the ground is not as polarised as the West portrays it to be. Some persons are critical of the government and support the opposition, but don't actually believe that Venezuela is a dictatorship. Political polarisation<sup>12</sup> doesn't seem to be a problem in a place like Petare, in my experience and from what I witnessed.

Firstly, being 'opposition' or opposing the government doesn't mean support for Guaidó; he represents a fringe of the opposition that is not popular in Venezuela. There is no popular movement that is pushing for him to become president<sup>13</sup>. People are going about their daily lives; they are not constantly preoccupied with the topic of who is president, as the foreign media would have you assume.

One day when I went into Caracas, I walked around with my friend to run some errands; we passed the National Assembly and a nearby building that the Constituent National Assembly has its offices located. There weren't many police or soldiers, or any excitement; people are just going about their lives as normal.

The 'political turmoil' is created by well-funded and well-armed members of the fringes of the opposition who create havoc for theatrics to justify US intervention. Despite being merely theatrics, the unfortunate reality is that they often put the lives of many people at risk.

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<sup>12</sup> In the sense of whether average persons with different political leanings would be malicious or confrontational.

<sup>13</sup> Read about The Myth of Popular Support for Juan Guaidó on page 40.

## Che Guevara Brigade

### Notes

These were notes that were written during the Che Guevara Brigade, sometimes in transit or when visiting a site.

#### August 8 – General Notes on the Situation in Venezuela

Venezuela is under a near-total blockade by the USA, similar to the one imposed on Cuba. This makes it difficult to do trade with any country, because most countries trade with the USA and need USD currency even when trading with other countries. The USA's hegemonic status amplifies the effect of any sanctions that it decides to unilaterally impose, and we could discuss the former colonial powers (like the UK, France, etc.) in a similar fashion.

The blockade has forced Venezuela to hasten its economic independence, i.e. to be less reliant on trade. Domestic production is replacing imports; as this process of import substitution advances, the effects of hyperinflation will wither, and the Venezuelan people can overcome the blockade.

One could ask why Venezuela didn't seek economic independence earlier or why they didn't diversify their economy, but things are more complicated, and I will address that separately<sup>14</sup>. In those notes, I will try to talk about the difficulties around diversifying the economy, the attitude of economists towards the issue of food sovereignty, and the recent issue with the currency controls.

Venezuela is facing a similar situation to Cuba, but the dynamics of their internal politics differ greatly. Right now, Venezuela needs a strong government to accelerate the transformation to a self-reliant economy. This is not a critique of how much power Maduro has in national politics; he is the legitimate president and the reality on the ground doesn't dispute this. Even those who dislike Maduro can't deny that he is still the President. He has as much power as any other head of government and as much recognition as any other head of state. The political situation that I am trying to describe has nothing to do with the presidency.

The Bolivarian Revolution (as well as support for the government and Maduro) is upheld by a broad alliance of parties, movements, unions, communes, and collectives. The Left here is broad and popular, but its decentralised nature and the impotent 'Democratic Socialist' tendency of the ruling party prevent power from being consolidated in a fashion similar to the consolidation that we see in Cuba. There isn't a Socialist dictatorship in Venezuela, but some people feel that there needs to be one.

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<sup>14</sup> See Considerations with Diversifying the Economy on page 38.

August 13 – Alina Foods  
Happy Birthday, Fidel.

We are visiting the “Alina Foods” factory. A collective of workers have been in control of the factory for 4 years, i.e. since 2015. The operations at the factory were halted by the foreign owners, so the workers seized control. They sold the leftover potatoes and got a loan from a state-owned bank to raise funds to continue operations.

They produce snacks from potatoes, plantains (not bananas), and cassava. They used bacon in the past but stopped because it was being imported. There are 63 workers, and they say that production is profitable. There were 150 workers, but the blockade has hindered things.

The opposition gained control of the state of Mérida and tried to intimidate the workers to leave the site. Workers sometimes had to guard the property themselves.

The government is giving them the necessary paperwork/documents in official recognition of their control of the place; they are already registered as a social enterprise. They are rebranding because the old owners were the ones who used the name and logo of “Alina Foods” – they are also redesigning the packaging of the snacks.

Workers have invented machine parts to create new products; one example was a cutter that creates a special type of potato chips that go well with hot dogs.

Revenue is around 6000 USD per month; this is used for wages, maintenance, and raw materials for production. After wages are paid, all revenue is reinvested in the production cycle. The factory currently operates well below its maximum capacity, largely due to the economic difficulties caused by the blockade, but production is still growing, and operations continue.



August 14 – Notes from the Border Regions

The only place I've seen long lines for fuel are in the border regions with Colombia. There is a lot of vehicular traffic in Caracas but no long lines for gas as far as I've seen, and I frequented everywhere between Petare and Catia. There are many places with food, both fresh produce and cooked meals, and without long lines.

The long lines in the border regions are due to the fact that fuel is ridiculously cheap here compared to Colombia, so a lot of fuel is bought, smuggled to Colombia, and then sold there where it is far more expensive. In addition to what I've seen with my own eyes about fuel, I've read about a similar issue with food, i.e. it is smuggled across the border because it is cheap/easy to get here while being expensive in Colombia; according to Western sources like *The Guardian*<sup>15</sup> and *Reuters*<sup>16</sup>, about 40% of food and medicine from Venezuela was being smuggled into other countries from as early as 2014 and was documented by another Western source as still being a significant issue in 2016<sup>17</sup>.

On another note, I was communicating with my Comrades back home in Jamaica last night when I had some internet connectivity. I discussed some things that I learned about community-based production and CLAP<sup>18</sup>. I learned about some of this in February, but I got a deeper understanding and more details now. Witnessing social enterprises here has softened my stance towards the “social entrepreneurship” concept pushed by Dr. K'nife and others.

I've also now deemed it lazy and very irresponsible to publish raw statistics on public/private sector ratios in the economy because co-operatives and community-based operations are technically considered to be private sector in this dichotomy since they are not owned or controlled by the state, but they are not Capitalist in principle and therefore should not be lumped with the Capitalist private sector.

It is critical to be more careful, especially when discussing production, because much of the bourgeoisie here in Venezuela are lazy merchants who don't produce anything; they import and resell commodities to accumulate capital for themselves while facilitating the depletion of national capital, i.e. they retain small percentages of the large amounts of money that leave the country to buy foreign-produced goods.

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<sup>15</sup> Venezuela to introduce new biometric card in bid to target food smuggling (López 2014)

<sup>16</sup> Venezuela to create fingerprinting system to limit food smuggling (Ellsworth 2014)

<sup>17</sup> Inside the Booming Smuggling Trade Between Venezuela and Colombia (Kaplan 2016)

<sup>18</sup> See page section on “Mill” on page 17.

There is no real national bourgeoisie here, in Venezuela; a national bourgeoisie must be productive and able to increase national capital. I've been told that the bourgeoisie here hasn't even invested in oil; oil production has been done by the state (even before the Bolivarian Revolution) and foreign investors.

A national alliance (in the way theorised by Walter Rodney, Amilcar Cabral, or Chairman Mao) is not feasible here, in Venezuela. The bourgeoisie here is disposable, and there is more than enough fuel to cremate them or land to bury them (they can be given the choice). However, making moves against them is difficult:

- Firstly, Venezuela is the most scrutinised country in the world by Western media.
- Secondly, hostility to a powerful class with capital allows them to be a door for US intervention (as many of them already are).

But yes, we must be more careful in how we discuss the economy here. The economy is still largely Capitalist; Socialism definitely hasn't been accomplished on a national scale yet, but it is being built.

What some persons lazily lump together and refer to the private sector includes:

- foreign investors
- the service sector (tourism, finance, telecommunications)
- big retailers/outlets (large-scale commerce)
- Capitalist producers
- Capitalist landowners
- campesinos/farmers (individual/family scale)
- small retailers/shops (individual/family scale in communities)
- collectives and communes<sup>19</sup>

The 'big Capitalists' surely have a larger share of wealth, but the statistics on other groups are important as well. More careful analysis needs to be done than talking about a public/private sector dichotomy. A couple that operates a small shop in Petare cannot be in the same category as executives in telecommunications companies; both are private sector in a strict sense, and the operators of the small shop are trying to accumulate some capital through retail, but the operators of the small shop do not exploit labour and aren't a part of some oligarchy. A commune that produces enough food for both self-reliance and commerce can't be lumped with a private farm that exploits labour to produce food for profit.

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<sup>19</sup> "25,772 communal businesses have been registered" (Dobson 2019)

Lastly, an anecdote about social enterprise to be mentioned better later: these entities don't identify themselves as businesses (some don't even identify themselves as enterprises), and they don't operate for profit. Money from their small-scale operations is used to develop spaces where they provide education and other social services for free. I will elaborate on such an example with my notes on the Otro Beta movement.

#### August 14 – The Jesus Romero Anselmi Commune

As we visited the Jesus Romero Anselmi Commune, I no longer felt as if I was in a foreign country; most of the people here are Black. This place doesn't look like the government did anything to develop it, but they still had Chavista signs, banners, posters, etc. – I only say this to dispel the myth that people's support for the Bolivarian Revolution is based on poor people depending on the state for welfare. The people in this commune are self-identified Leftists; they were playing music and chanting at the imminent downfall of Macri in Argentina, and they sang along with all the Socialist chants and songs that we used in the brigade, because they knew them before. The names they use in Spanish, here and in other communes, are “Comuna Socialista...” and then their specific names; they identify specifically as Socialist communes.

The commune didn't solely focus on agriculture; a commune is sometimes mistakenly thought of as some primitivist concept where farmers live in a collective. They produce good-quality clothing that is used by both the people in the commune and traded outside to earn money for the commune. I bought 2 dresses for a baby that was recently born in my household in Jamaica<sup>20</sup>.

The municipality that we are in has 12 communes and 98 communal councils. This commune is in a cooperative with other communes; we will visit another commune in the same cooperative today. Over 2000 persons live in this commune. Over 440 hectares of land are controlled by this commune. The houses here are small flats, somewhat bigger than the 2-bedroom houses being built in many housing schemes in Jamaica. The houses seem to each have 2 bathrooms, and they also have a covered laundry area; the generic 2-bedroom model in Jamaica has only 1 bathroom and the washing area is outdoors. The yard space here is much bigger; houses are built further apart, and there are no fences or walls needed to mark boundaries.

The lands surrounding the main residential area have a lot of crops, including yucca, corn, and other things. I saw the largest passion fruit fields that I have ever seen in my life; I've never seen passion fruit production on such a scale before. There is a dense forested area that separates the agricultural fields from a nearby river that the residents visit and use sometimes.

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<sup>20</sup> Her parents loved them, and she was already wearing them in the first week of my return.

## August 14 – The Che Guevara Commune (Day 1)

The Che Guevara Commune takes up 25% of the land in the municipality that it is located in. It also has climate diversity, in that its lowest point is 150m above sea level (where it is warm) and the highest is ~4200m above sea level (it is cold here). It has more than 1300 families or ~3500 people living in it.

This commune is so large that it has 13 zones, each with its own communal council; 7 of these produce cocoa and 6 produce coffee. Their production is based on their climate. There is a complex including a processing plant and a greenhouse; the complex is under joint control of all the communal councils. Coffee and cocoa are produced for commerce while many other things are produced for food/subsistence. The processing plant is clean, well-maintained, and has modern machinery. A lot of chocolate is produced at the plant, and there is a sales office.

I spoke to a Venezuelan Comrade about how communal councils are elected and how they function; in each locality, members of communal councils are elected to specific positions or portfolios. For example, if there is a Culture portfolio, someone is elected to that; the person who comes 2nd for each council position serves as a deputy or substitute. The Comrade was elected to the Communications position in one of the communal councils in Petare. In the council that he is in, there are 5 positions for Finance (and therefore 5 deputies/substitutes).

Communal council elections are a standardised process nationwide; each council is elected every 2 years. Some communities have more positions than others; they create positions based on their needs, so a communal council may have a position for management of water, management of pests, or something specific to a community that isn't in all communities.

## August 15 – The Che Guevara Commune (Day 2)

The commune has a communal bank with its own digital currency and own app to circumvent the blockade and the USD.

The commune gives loans to its members in coffee; people 'borrow' coffee from the commune in weight, sell the coffee outside of the commune for cash to do whatever they want/need to do, then repay the 'loan' in coffee.

The commune has a relationship with Proinpa Foods (an industrial producer that we visited; I didn't write notes on them during the visit).

Apart from crops, the commune also raises livestock for subsistence.

We left Mérida and headed to Lara.

August 15 – Nueva Esperanza Apartments

We visited an apartment complex called “Nueva Esperanza” in Carora, Lara – it is being built and developed by the “Pobladores” movement. The same movement seized a building in Caracas and turned it into a school.

Each building in the complex is an L-shape with 16 apartments; each apartment has 3 bedrooms and bathrooms. Each building also has an accessible roof with a covered area a bit bigger than the stairwell, and large uncovered areas. There are 4 buildings (i.e. 64 apartments) so far. Each pair of the L-shaped buildings is organised in a way that leaves a quadrangle for recreational space (including communal events).

Every family pays a maintenance fee of 300 Bs.S. The fee is very small, considering that 1 USD is about 13,000 Bs.S, so 300 Bs.S is like 0.02 USD. Even in February when 1 USD was 3,300 Bs.S, 300 Bs.S would have been 0.09 USD.

The complex falls under a communal council that is also responsible for some nearby areas, but they also have their own committees within the complex for production, organisation, planification, finance, formation, and communication.

There is a building that was being used for food and social services but is now used for administration (the office of the auditor, a warehouse) and a doctor’s office. The doctor’s office can be used/visited by persons who don’t live in the complex.

The complex is being expanded; the existing 4 buildings and 2 squares comprise 1 ‘terrace’ and 2 more terraces are being built for a total of 12 buildings (that would be 192 apartments, a total of 576 bedrooms). 110 families want to live in the complex. A family must do 60 hours of community service to earn an apartment.

The movement buys materials (cement and steel) from the government, and the government delivers the materials, but the residents and the members of the movement do most of the labour themselves. Many of the residents are elderly or at least middle-aged, so some of the labour is done by workers who are hired from the outside. Guarimbas<sup>21</sup> (violent persons on the fringes of the opposition) try to attack the project and residents, so they set up a watch in the nights.

Children and their parents befriended me and a handful of other Comrades; I interacted with them a lot, and I also spent some time interacting with some of the construction workers, both the ones who live there and the ones who were hired from the outside.

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<sup>21</sup> Read more about Guarimbas in the section about Leopoldo López on page 41.

#### August 17 – Alfareros del Gres

Workers seized control of the operations of this brick factory in 2012; it was operated by Spanish investors before that. The factory has been in operation non-stop since the workers took control, i.e. they have never needed to shut down production on a workday due to lack of supplies or a dispute or something like that. Workers' control is recognised through their registration as a social enterprise, but they are going further by seeking total ownership instead of only control.

This is a large-scale industrial operation, though only 60 persons work here; a lot of the production processes are automated. The factory, as is, produces 190,000 bricks per month. They will also begin producing tiles. The workers that we've seen seem content. The factory doesn't feel hot, despite the heavy machinery and this being one of the hotter parts of Venezuela. There are specific parts of the factory that are hot, but those places have the most automation (we don't see any workers staying there, only passing by).

#### August 17 – A Refitted Brewery

We visited a factory that was once a brewery that produced beer. The owners tried to halt operations (which would cause the workers to lose their jobs), so the workers seized control and dismissed the owners in 2013. 62 workers work at the factory. Before seizing control, they had to work 12 hours per day. After seizing control, all workers' shifts are now only 6 hours per day.

Instead of beer, they now produce flour, animal feed, and water; beer production required the input and processing of a lot of grain and water, so a lot of the old equipment was easily repurposed to produce flour, animal feed, and water.

The sale of animal feed is the main source of their revenue, while they truck water to communes and public facilities, even in other states. There is a lot of Communist imagery at the site.

#### August 19 – Arrival in Maizal

When I imagined communes, I imagined a homestead and a few houses or a small compound surrounded by some farmland, something like the size of a high school in Jamaica. La Comuna Maizal is the 3rd commune that I have visited; all 3 are huge areas. You can't stay from 1 building and see everyone and everything and the people don't all live in some compound.

These are communal spaces, but people have their own houses and yards. Some houses in the other communes are in clusters or rows like housing schemes or 'normal' neighbourhoods, but some are far apart like a typical rural setting. This commune doesn't have housing; the members of the commune live in other neighbourhoods among non-members, but convene at the communal grounds for work, production, meetings, cultural activities, and other things.

## August 20 – The Maizal Commune (Day 1)

Having arrived in the night, we could barely see the surrounding areas of the place we slept in. In the morning, we could see pigs, corn, cows, etc. – all the food that was eaten for dinner and breakfast are produced here by the commune.

The point of all these anecdotes isn't to paint some romantic/feel-good sense, but rather to show that communal life is neither some Anarcho-Primitivist nonsense nor the abolition of certain personal comforts like living spaces and privacy.

We visited a 'cultivation house' which is a large complex with over a dozen large greenhouses, with space between them. At the time, they were trying an experiment with rice in the spaces outside between the greenhouses. The place that we stayed is not "El Maizal" – it is not their main territory, and neither is this place that has the greenhouses and the rice experiment.

The territory of the Jesus Romero Commune is more consolidated; the territory of the Maizal commune is split among different communal properties. The importance of noting this is to remind ourselves that we don't need contiguous properties for projects or territory if we want to build a productive commune; a commune doesn't need to begin as a single do-all physical site.

We later visited the main complex that the commune controls, the gigantic complex that they call 'El Maizal' – it has some workshops and factories surrounded by large crop fields. They have a gas distribution plant where 80 persons work. We visited a corn packing plant immediately after, where the shells are removed from corn and then the corn is packed into large bags. The trash from the shells is used as pig feed; the commune has a pig farm at another site. At this main site, they recently built a factory to produce corn flour; they currently have a single machine with 750hp that can produce 720 tons of flour per month (working 10 hours per day, 6 days per week).

## August 21 – The Maizal Commune (Day 2)

We visited a pig farm that is one of the production sites owned and operated by the commune. 29 workers work here, producing ~4000 tons of pork per month. The workers get paid much more than minimum wage and are entitled to free lunch on workdays.

This was the last day of our stay in Lara. We headed to another state for 2 days of rest before we headed back to Caracas to reconvene.

## Post-Notes

These are notes written after the Che Guevara Brigade; some things may be about encounters that took place during the Che Guevara Brigade, but they were not written until after it ended.

### Invitations

I've been invited to visit and stay in multiple countries, though I'm not sure if I can. Comrades from Colombia were the most insistent with their invitation; one is from a movement that focuses on Afro-Colombian struggles, and she suggested that I visit the far North of Colombia where many Afro-Colombian people live. A Comrade from Argentina said that I should visit Argentina and that he would host me in his home.

Venezuelan Comrades and other persons I met insisted that I visit Venezuela again, and promised accommodation; I took their invitations seriously because they have hosted me already so I know that they can and would. I was hosted by Comrades in Petare, I was offered some help with accommodation from a Comrade in Caracas, and I was hosted by a family in Carora<sup>22</sup>. I was told by very specific persons that I have homes in Venezuela. I hope that I can return with other Comrades from the Caribbean to show them what I saw.

In the future, I hope that other Comrades from LANDS can form delegations to have these experiences, whether with me or instead of me. I am grateful for the bonds that I have built with people that I have met, but I want to eventually have a less central role in the face and image of the organisation, and I want the organisation's relationship with other organisations to be less dependent on my personal relationships with other people.

### Medication

I had taken some medication with me for the entire trip in general but for the Brigade especially, because it is guaranteed that persons will feel ill at some points. I brought some medication for headaches, diarrhoea, and vomiting; I didn't need all of these things, but they became useful to my other Comrades. I also bought some sinus medication, but it ran out before the Brigade started, so I had to stop in a pharmacy to get more.

Hearing of medicine shortages in the media, you would think that a pharmacy's shelves are empty or that there is less variety, especially in a pharmacy outside of Caracas. On the contrary, compared to Jamaica, the pharmacy a wider variety of over-the-counter drugs for simple things like sinusitis, and the prices were also ridiculously cheap. I was pleased. I could have waited until I had arrived in Venezuela before I bought medication.

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<sup>22</sup> See page 29.



### Encounter with an Eco-Socialist

I met a Comrade who wore an Eco-Socialist shirt, and I was pleased to see it. I told her that I've gotten into arguments with dogmatic Westerners who say that Eco-Socialism doesn't need to be a distinct tendency with its own name because Socialism is already environmentalist; this would be the same as saying that Marxism-Leninism doesn't need its own name because Marxism is already inherently in favour of national liberation and anti-imperialism, a claim which would ignore the reality that many Marxists in the early 20th century were not concerned with those things.

We both agreed that Eco-Socialism is a necessary tendency because Socialist states have historically focused on industrialisation, and that a focus on degrowth runs contrary to what most of those governments have practised; most Left governments have taken power in undeveloped countries and have made industrialisation and economic growth their priorities. This is not an indictment of those governments, and we know that Capitalism is worse because it professes infinite growth, but Eco-Socialism is still a necessary tendency, especially in the Global North where populist Social-Democratic policies focus on increasing the living standards and consumption power of the average person.

The necessity of some sort of climate austerity and the understanding that we have to put limits on our growth goes beyond rejecting Capitalism's infinite growth; one can reject Capitalism's model of infinite growth without understanding that there needs to be an active effort towards degrowth of the economy that already exists. Eco-Socialism also has to be internationalist, to ensure that climate austerity is adopted where it is most needed, rather than forced on the already-marginalised people in the countries in the Third World.

### Removing Populism from Socialism

Venezuelan Comrades told me that they are getting accustomed to some things during the crisis, and some of these things are normal in other countries that aren't said to be having crises. For example, they eat less now than they did before the crisis, but they still eat more than anyone in my family. One admitted to me that they also use a lot of energy without much regard for wastage; you'll see air conditioning in the poorest areas, something that was shocking for me as a Jamaican, and persons will have windows open while the air conditioning is on, because the price of fuel and electricity are ridiculously cheap there. Cuba, compared to Venezuela, is much more austere with energy use. Venezuelans were openly self-critical about these things, and some felt that the government made things too easy in an unsustainable way; they never had to think much about sustainability before, but they're doing it now. This is not an indictment of the government, as they were simply pleasing the people. They will emerge from the blockade stronger than before.

### Visit to Cultural Centre

The bus that we were using on our first day of the Brigade was not fit to take us for the entire journey, so we stopped at a cultural centre in small town in the state of Cojedes to wait for new buses to come so that we could change. The cultural centre was amazing; there was a lot of open space. I went in to use the restroom, and I had passed a classroom filled with young people who seemed to be practising for a theatre event, and a large open area filled with some other people practising dancing. The place was very clean, and I wish we had things like this in Jamaica; a lot of persons are interested in the arts.

### Tatuy TV

We visited Tatuy TV, a media house in Mérida. The persons who work here are not full-time journalists; they are all workers from other places, i.e. they have other jobs and they do the media work for Tatuy TV voluntarily.

The way that Tatuy TV operates is very different from the tendency that we see among the Left in the West, where activists or opinionated persons try to become career journalists in pursuit of attention/fame or an income. From watching Tatuy TV's content, you don't really see the faces of whoever is behind the work as they are not trying to become mini celebrities; at most, you will see long lists of credits. In the West, everyone wants to have their own blog or podcast, to build a sort of brand for their unchecked<sup>23</sup> personal opinions; things become more about the personalities, preferences, and egos of the individuals involved in content creation, rather than the point or mission of the content itself.

Tatuy TV's content is intended to educate and agitate. Some Comrades and I have some issues with some of their content, but we get where they are coming from, and we freely discuss these things with them, and they get what standpoint we are coming from. We (Comrades in the brigade and I) were impressed by what we saw, we built friendships with some of the Comrades from the organisation, and some of us did a lot of small activities with them separate from the main activities in the brigade.

Going forward, Tatuy TV and LANDS may have a working relationship, as they indicated interest in that. This will of course mean that we need to strengthen our Communications portfolio, and to prepare as well to develop Education as its own portfolio in the Secretariat.

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<sup>23</sup> These opinions are often developed in isolation or within a tiny group, rather than a collective debating process.

### Visit to Community Centre (Merida)

We visited a community centre in Mérida that was somewhat similar to the one in Petare<sup>24</sup>, but it was not operated by the ‘Somos Otro Beta’ movement. The building was at the corner of the block across from a park, and it had 3 floors. This area of Mérida seemed to be quiet.

The ground floor had a library and a bakery; the revenue from the bakery is likely used to fund other things at the centre. Some of us worked in there for the day, making arepas for dinner later in the night.

The floor above the ground floor had some bookshelves, a meeting area, and some offices; some activists operate a radio programme from there as well. Before arriving at the building, we were told that it’s a space that a lot of clubs and social movements use to do their work.

The top floor had an office, a kitchen, and a large balcony area. When we arrived, there were some teenagers participating in a rap battle, with many others spectating. We could see a lot of persons entering and leaving while we were there.

The main difference between this place and the one in Petare is that the one in Petare seems to focus a lot more on offering services; they have education, in that they offer multiple classes<sup>25</sup> that attendees can materially benefit from, and they also have a clinic. This place in Mérida seemed to be a general community space, though nonetheless a valuable one.

We need community spaces like this in Jamaica, whether or not they will offer classes and skills training like the one in Petare. In both urban and rural areas, we could use more communal spaces for people, especially youth, to come together. In urban areas in Jamaica, there aren’t enough social spaces, so many inner-city youth convene on the street corner unless their community has a sports field; youth who aren’t wealthy are considered to be idling or loitering when they convene somewhere like a library or public space, as they are often considered to be wasting their time if they’re even at an internet café. In rural areas, people live far apart, and it would still be useful to have hubs for social activities. Petit-bourgeois youth may convene in green spaces in gated communities, or entertainment venues like restaurants and cafés; there aren’t enough developed and well-maintained public green spaces for youth to access otherwise. It would be important for youth to have spaces that they feel that they own and belong to, especially if there are scheduled activities or specialised areas for them to study, have meetings, share ideas, socialise, play, produce works of art, engage in skills training/practice, hold simple events, etc.

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<sup>24</sup> See notes on The ‘‘Cacica Urimare’’ Community Centre on page 17.

<sup>25</sup> See notes on Classes on page 19.

### Visit to Recreational Centre

We visited a large recreational centre in Mérida, and we were told that there are several of them around the country. After this visit, I saw one in Barquisimeto in Lara and in another city and state that I don't remember<sup>26</sup>. The one we visited is a large cubic building with colourful external walls and 5 floors, and the 2 others that I saw looked the same from the outside.

When we entered, the ground floor has a front desk and a large playground. There were a lot of children playing when I got there, but they were leaving by the time that I got the chance to take some pictures; I had to attend 2 activities and a tour of the building. The tour started from the top:

- On the top of the building, there was a big basketball court with covering and a good quantity of seating. There were large translucent surfaces on all sides, so we could look out and see the city and surrounding neighbourhoods.
- On the top floor below the basketball court, there was a large area for fencing and a decent-sized area for table tennis; the fencing area had lockers and several lanes for fencing, while the table tennis area had 5 tables. Fencing equipment was freely available for anyone to borrow and use.
- On the floor below that, there was a boxing gym and another room that I'm not sure what it's used for. The boxing gym had 2 boxing rings and some training equipment like punching bags. The other large room had some mats, lockers, tyres, and some mirrors; it's possible that it's a multi-purpose room as I can imagine it being used for yoga or for training for some types of sports.
- On the middle floor, there was a massive gym with well-maintained equipment. I was told that they were bought 5 years ago and that they're expensive. Many persons were using it at the time that we visited, including what seemed to be a football team doing some fitness training. This gym was better than any expensive private gym that I have seen in Jamaica.
- On the floor just above the ground floor<sup>27</sup>, there was an auditorium where we held a meeting, some stands for social enterprises to display their products, some studios for community media initiatives. and restrooms.
- I went to the ground floor on my own to take pictures of the playground; it is bigger and has more things than any playground that I have ever visited before.

Access to this facility is free. When I told persons how much a gym membership costs in Jamaica, they looked at me as if I had committed a crime; the crime is Capitalism, but I am not the one committing it.

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<sup>26</sup> I was resting and we were in a bus on the way to Caracas.

<sup>27</sup> Some persons call this the first floor and some call it the 2nd floor while calling the ground floor the first floor.

### Visit to Pico Bolívar

We went to Pico Bolívar by cable cars. A Comrade took the opportunity to discuss Venezuela's potential for tourism. Being from Jamaica, I took the opportunity to discuss some of the negative sides of Tourism with him. I said that we need to be careful and that we should avoid falling into some of the same traps that Caribbean islands have, where underpaid workers are used to keep prices low for entitled white foreigners who visit the country to get treated like gods who need to be pampered. I definitely saw Venezuela's potential for eco-tourism and I also gave some ideas for cultural tourism; these forms of tourism depart from the colonial all-inclusive resort model, making it easier to avoid some negative things, but they are still not immune.

### Somos Otro Beta in Quíbor

We spent 2 days in the town of Quíbor in Lara with the Somos Otro Beta movement and visited 2 places that they operated. My Comrade from Petare, who introduced me to the movement during my first trip to Venezuela in February, explained to me that Somos Otro Beta isn't a single movement, but rather a collaboration of multiple movements and organisations; the Comrades who led the Somos Otro Beta operations in Quíbor were also from the October 7 Collective, another organisation that operated in that city. I was too busy at the time to write any notes, but I remembered enough to include this in the post-notes.

They had taken control of a large building that was used as a public library before the local government<sup>28</sup> abandoned it. The movement negotiated with the government for official control of the building so they could transform it into a community centre like the one in Petare. They had promised to maintain the library while doing other projects like the movement does in other places

There is enough outdoor space to be used for cultivation, and there is some paved space that can be used for some sports. The space indoors is enough to fit an auditorium, a kitchen, a cafeteria, several classrooms, some offices, and activity-specific zones/areas/rooms. The movement already plotted out a floor plan for how they intend to use the space. They will need to make some repairs to the roof and install some plumbing fixtures, but the place is surely promising.

They also operate a bakery. There is a decree in the bakery, made by the October 7 Collective, that says that no individual is allowed to buy more than 4 loaves of bread per day. This suggested that the area had been struggling with food hoarding as well<sup>29</sup>; they produce more than enough for everyone, but a handful of persons could together buy everything and hoard it if there was no regulation enforced.

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<sup>28</sup> This local government was not PSUV-aligned at the time that it abandoned the library.

<sup>29</sup> Read about Bachaqueros on page 20.

### Considerations with Diversifying the Economy

Many wannabe economists love to give a simplistic comment that some countries simply need to ‘diversify their economy’ to be better off; it has become an annoying platitude. It is true that a country is better off avoiding dependence on trade of a high-value product, but it is not that easy or simple to diversify the economy of a country with a high-value product. The Venezuelan government is trying nonetheless, and we are not saying that they shouldn’t; the main point here is that things are not that simple or easy.

Neoliberalism pressures countries towards specialisation and dependence on trade. By eroding barriers to trade that may actually be useful in protecting certain sectors of the economy, important sectors can become risky investments because of unbeatable competition from trade, or prices for domestic goods being impacted by international market dynamics.

Capital is coercive; it’s what forces farmers in many countries to prefer producing cash crops rather than focusing on food, and this is a legacy of colonialism<sup>30</sup>. The economies of Third World countries have been organised around the needs and wants of consumers in the West. If an entitled European consumer is willing to pay more money for a cigar or some sugar than the average worker in Cuba or the Dominican Republic is able to pay for corn, that is pressure to produce tobacco or sugar instead of corn. The market is the language of daily life, and the people and interests with more money are the ones who are more heard. This is not something that the governments of either Cuba or Venezuela can control; they exist in a larger global economy that is Capitalist and that doesn’t care for the people or the goals of their governments.

Another problem is what neoliberal economists themselves call ‘Dutch Disease’ as explained by both the IMF<sup>31</sup> and The Economist<sup>32</sup>, where the export or even mere discovery of a high-value resource leads simultaneously to economic growth and increased demand for the exporting country’s currency, leading to higher domestic prices and strengthened currency; they coined this term specifically in reference to oil-rich countries.

It becomes difficult for such a country to export agricultural produce for competitive prices, because what’s cheap in its own currency is expensive for others, and dropping prices is not an easy option when costs/prices of inputs are rising domestically. It becomes easier for the consumers in such a country to buy imported food than to buy locally-produced food, so the business and workers from agriculture and other sectors suffer.

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<sup>30</sup> “emphasized production of cash crops for export and nothing to promote food stuff production can be seen in the economy of post-independence Nigeria” (Adeyeri and Adejuwon 2012, 11)

<sup>31</sup> Dutch Disease: Wealth Managed Unwisely (Ebrahimzadeh 2018)

<sup>32</sup> What Dutch disease is, and why it's bad (C.W. 2014)

To make things easier for domestic producers, an oil-rich country could ensure its domestic prices of fuel are much lower than it sells things for to foreign countries; the thing is that Venezuela already does this, having fuel so cheap<sup>33</sup> that I've been told that the price of a bottle of water is the same price as filling dozens of trucks with fuel; one consequence of this is that cheap oil/fuel is smuggled out of the country into neighbouring Colombia<sup>34</sup>, allowing a black market to boom. On the inverse, rising the domestic prices of oil to be closer to international prices would upset the people and exacerbate the damage done by Dutch Disease, simply by increasing domestic production costs<sup>35</sup>, as well as household expenses and therefore labour costs.

Of course, one does not need to think about all these things before simply saying the words “X country just needs to diversify its economy” – they just need to open their mouths and repeat a single phrase they came across once or twice as if they are cheap parrots, without doing any investigation or analysis of why the economy hasn't been diversified or what factors impact the ability to diversify an economy.

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<sup>33</sup> “a full tank these days costs a tiny fraction of a U.S. penny” (Smith 2019)

<sup>34</sup> See “August 14 – Notes from the Border Regions” on page 25.

<sup>35</sup> Production costs include the transportation of goods between production and processing sites.

## General Notes

### The Opposition

Reflections on the Opposition (General)

Political polarisation doesn't seem to be as serious among poorer Venezuelans as one would imagine. Jamaica has a history of political polarisation where streets or entire communities would be controlled by gangs that were affiliated with either of the 2 major political parties, and someone could be shot for just wearing the colour of one political party in the other party's street. There was open warfare between militants of both parties in the streets, leading up to the 1980 election in Jamaica, and political violence was still seen as normal<sup>36</sup> during my childhood.

The theatrics of political polarisation really seem to be from the political class and concentrated in Caracas. I met opposition supporters in Petare and Carora who have been friendly to me, despite knowing my alignment why I was there. I've stayed in touch with them.

The Myth of Popular Support for Juan Guaidó

There is no doubt that you'll see slogans and politicians' names spray-painted on walls at different parts of the country; 2 opposition candidates from the 2018 presidential election had their names and faces spray-painted on walls in Lara<sup>37</sup>, and both government and opposition politicians have their names spray-painted on walls in Caracas and Mérida. One name that I didn't see, anywhere, was Juan Guaidó; this isn't to say that his name is absolutely nowhere, because I won't deny the possibility, but I personally didn't see it anywhere. I think there is a higher chance that you will find the name of Henrique Capriles than that of Juan Guaidó.

Remember, Juan Guaidó was never a candidate in any presidential election before declaring himself president. This campaign to paint him as some popular alternative to Maduro is engineered by foreign media. He has never needed to run any real campaign for the presidency, and his claim to presidency was never tested by the ballot. His party refused to participate in the presidential election in 2018 and attempted to defame the politicians from other opposition parties who had decided to run against Maduro.

I've witnessed, for myself, that many people support the government. I also know that there are also many people who dislike the government like in any typical country, but I can't honestly say that there are many people who support Juan Guaidó. He is not some democratic saint, or the leader of some popular movement that is being repressed; he is simply an opportunist who is seeking political power with the backing of the US.

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<sup>36</sup> In Jamaica, Violence Is the Issue (Rohter 1997)

<sup>37</sup> I expected to see Henri Falcón's name there, but I was surprised when I saw Javier Bertucci's as well.



## Leopoldo López

Leopoldo López is a much more influential figure in the opposition than Juan Guaidó; he is the leader of the party that Guaidó is in. Still, he is seen as “a divisive figure within the opposition”<sup>38</sup> and “is often described as arrogant, vindictive, and power-hungry”<sup>39</sup> by his own peers. He was jailed for his involvement in the violent riots in 2014 and has not been held accountable for decisions he made which resulted in deadly political clashes in 2002<sup>40</sup>.

Some paint him as a popular figure of resistance to the government, but he is on the far-right fringes of the opposition, and there weren't mass demonstrations in support of him when he was on trial<sup>41</sup>. Actually, “the fact that he played some role in the contentious events of 2002 is widely known in his home country and has likely colored how many Venezuelans view his role”<sup>42</sup> in the riots by the Guarimbas in 2014. The riots received wide media coverage, but the opinions<sup>43</sup> of the many people who didn't support them were ignored.

## Direct Support from the US

At this point, it is not secret that the Venezuelan opposition has direct support from the US. They have sent over 90 million USD to the opposition this year<sup>44</sup>, and they have openly endorsed some specific dangerous incidents like Juan Guaidó's self-proclamation as president, the February 23 border incident<sup>45</sup>, and the April 30 coup attempt<sup>46</sup>. They have also been calling Venezuelan military officers to offer bribes and do other things to pressure them to turn against the government<sup>47</sup>.

They were quick to vouch their support for Guaidó's bid to oust Maduro. They also supported a coup attempt in 2002<sup>48</sup> and had allegedly met with the terrorists who attempted to assassinate the president in 2018<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> 5 Things To Know About Venezuela's Protest Leader (Peralta 2014)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> He made a “fatal route change” for an opposition protest that resulted in clashes and deaths (Lovato 2015)

<sup>41</sup> His court dates had “generally attracted only small groups of supporters outside the courthouse” (Lovato 2015)

<sup>42</sup> The Making of Leopoldo López (Lovato 2015)

<sup>43</sup> Venezuela protests: the other side of the story (Walsh and Law 2014)

<sup>44</sup> Over \$40 million in July (Zengerle, et al. 2019) and over \$50 million in September (Cohen 2019)

<sup>45</sup> Footage Contradicts U.S. Claim That Nicolás Maduro Burned Aid Convoy (Casey, Koettl and Acosta 2019)

<sup>46</sup> The VP and Secretary of State “were quick to vouch their support” (Montoya-Galvez and Lynch Baldwin 2019)

<sup>47</sup> “incentives to Venezuela's military to turn against President Nicolas Maduro” (Rampton 2019)

<sup>48</sup> US 'gave the nod' to Venezuelan coup (Borger and Bellos 2002)

<sup>49</sup> Inside the August plot to kill Maduro with drones (Paton Walsh, et al. 2019)

### The Promise of Life Support After Regime Change

Let me first establish that I don't think regime change in Venezuela will be successful, and I am not speculating on the possibility of regime change and what may happen after. This section is strictly to speak of the opposition's expectations, which exist whether we like them or not, and why they are dangerous and detached from reality<sup>50</sup>.

The opposition is recklessly collaborating with the US on strategies that are aimed at wrecking the economy of Venezuela and making daily life miserable. This benefits them as they have fat pockets while the rest of the country is battling an economic crisis. There is a scarcity of US dollars caused by the sanctions which prevent Venezuela from exporting oil or interacting with much of the global financial system which is dominated by the US, so US dollars have become ridiculously expensive in Venezuela; the opposition having direct funds from the US government allows them to have power and influence that they would not have under normal circumstances.

The opposition expects that they can take power in Venezuela with the promise of rebuilding the country from the crisis, but the effects of the sanctions will be long-lasting, especially if Venezuela is reintegrated into the global economic system. They expect that they will take power and then they will get a lot of aid and favourable treatment from the US.

It is understandable that they expect aid and help from the US, but they are delusional if they think that it will solve the crises that Venezuela is facing. Help from the US is rarely humanitarian; they don't care about funding social services that won't make money. If anything, the US' main interest would be getting returns on the investments that they have made, and they would count their regime change efforts as such. If they're spending tens of millions of dollars to fund a change in government, they expect to be able to get something back.

Let us assume that the opposition knows that any investment the US makes in the future will be something that is economic, in terms of investing in developing or maintaining an industry; will even that be a reasonable expectation? Yes, it is reasonable that they will try but it's not reasonable that it will work. This isn't the first time that the US has been betting on or hoping for regime change in a country; they also salivated for Michael Manley to lose leadership of Jamaica<sup>51</sup> to a politician who was US-friendly, Edward Seaga. The US went out of its way to help Seaga during his leadership in Jamaica<sup>52</sup>, but that still failed and the economy was left in ruins<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Read about Political Effects of the Blockade on 50.

<sup>51</sup> "the Reagan administration hailed the change as a victory over leftist influence in the Caribbean" (Cody 1986)

<sup>52</sup> Rules Bent for Jamaica, Helping US Industry (Gerth 1982)

<sup>53</sup> "This island has become a promise unfulfilled." (Cody 1986)

## The Unintended Effects of the Blockade

### Economic Effects of the Blockade

Both liberals and conservatives in the US support US imperialism, but they have different methods; the conservatives have more aggressive and overt approaches like we saw with the Bush administration in 2001-2009 and like we see now with the Trump administration, while the liberals who once supported these approaches are admitting that they don't work to further the US' agenda in these countries. While overt aggression is extremely damaging and does end up serving a part of the US' agenda, they are somewhat correct in that overt aggression will not work to bring regime change in Cuba or Venezuela.

Listen carefully to the rhetoric of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and you'll notice that they still vilify the Cuban government and speak about it condescendingly even when attempting to be peaceful. From an article in the Guardian in July 2015<sup>54</sup>, it is evident that Clinton still wanted regime change in Cuba:

- She said that “no region in the world is better positioned to emerge as a new force for global peace and progress” and that “That progress had been promised to Cuba for 50 years.”
- She went on to complain that the aggressive strategy that has been used in the past have not been effective in accomplishing that; she says that it's unwise to wait “for a failed policy to bear fruit.”
- Supporting the goals of the policy but not the approach, she recommends to “replace it with a smarter approach that empowers the Cuban private sector, Cuban civil society and the Cuban-American community to spur progress and keep pressure on the regime” to get “Cuba to reform its economy and political system more quickly.”
- The end goal is still regime change, but a softer method, because she still sees the Cuban government as adversaries and admits that the intention of a more friendly policy is still to be antagonistic to the Cuban government; “Engagement is not a gift to the Castros, it is a threat to the Castros. An American embassy in Havana isn't a concession, it's a beacon.”

Hillary Clinton served as Secretary of State for 4 years in the earlier part of the Obama's presidency. In the later years of his presidency, Obama had pursued very aggressive policies against Venezuela, despite attempting to soften up on Cuba. Donald Trump has reversed Obama's policy of reproach towards Cuba, choosing to be aggressive instead, but he has continued Obama's anti-Venezuela policies and has been brutal to both countries.

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<sup>54</sup> Hillary Clinton calls for end to Cuba embargo in attack on 'outdated' policy (Siddiqui 2015)

I'm not usually a fan of distinguishing between liberals and conservatives, because there is not much difference between them in juxtaposition to Socialists; Socialists and Communists are squarely on the Left, while liberals range from centrist to centre-right, and conservatives are simply right-wing. Their economic policies are pretty much the same; Obama is a neoliberal, much like the former president Ronald Reagan who we call a conservative. "Fiscal conservatism" is a big part of liberal economics; the terms have been muddled because both 'liberal' and 'conservative' mean many different things in different contexts and different areas of policy.

Where I draw distinctions in this section, I use the term liberal is to refer specifically to neoliberals, and I use the term conservative is to refer specifically to neoconservatives. Neoliberal ideology is mostly concerned with economics, and concepts like free trade, whereas neoconservatism on the other hand is mostly concerned with foreign policy and is associated with the US' most aggressive warmongering policies; they are not mutually exclusive, but they have different areas of priority.

Their stances on Cuba are an example of 2 approaches to the same goal; liberals believe that trade relations will influence Cuban society to reshape itself in the US' favour, while conservatives prefer an aggressive approach that attempts to bring the Cuban people to their knees.

The approach towards China is another example, where Obama was pushing the TPP<sup>55</sup> as a way to cement the US' foothold in the Pacific through a free trade agreement, but Trump and his much more Nationalistic tendencies oppose free trade, so they scrapped those plans. This has left much ground for China to push for an alternative trade agreement which increases its influence on some of the countries that would have joined the TTP with the US, and the Trump administration's response to China's growing influence includes a trade war and significantly increased military activity in the Pacific rather than promoting free trade and letting the economic dynamics play out in the US' favour to increase its influence in these countries.

All of this is said to establish that Donald Trump's policies depart from neoliberalism, and liberal economists like Jeffrey Sachs have condemned the blockade<sup>56</sup> against Venezuela; other economists have criticised other policies like tariffs on foreign goods because they are not in line with free trade. The blockade is not in line with neoliberalism because neoliberalism is about free trade, the removal of all barriers from trade; the US has never practised this perfectly but there will still be things we can say are more/less neoliberal than others or not neoliberal at all. This is not to discount the destructive nature of either Donald Trump's policies or neoliberal policies, as both are destructive, and the US uses its power to impose its own interests in any case.

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<sup>55</sup> The Trans-Pacific Partnership

<sup>56</sup> US sanctions on Venezuela responsible for 'tens of thousands' of deaths, claims new report (Buncombe 2019)

We can look at what neoliberalism has done to Haiti if we want just one example of how it ruins economies while benefitting the US. The US imposed neoliberal policies on Haiti, forcing them to cut their tariffs on rice because it was a ‘barrier to trade’ according to neoliberal ideology.

Tariffs are taxes on imported foreign goods to protect local goods from competition. Haiti had tariffs on rice; imported rice was taxed so it would be more expensive than local rice, so it was more likely for average Haitians to buy Haitian rice than American rice. “A significant portion of the economic, social and political predicament in Haiti can be traced to the decline of its agriculture sector. Up to about 30 years ago, Haiti was self-sufficient in the production of rice”<sup>57</sup> but things changed.

In order to access IMF loans in the mid-1980s, “Haiti was required to reduce tariff protections for their Haitian rice and other agricultural products and some industries to open up the country’s markets to competition from outside countries”<sup>58</sup>. The impact of this was so great that “By 1988, so much American rice had invaded the country that it became unprofitable for many Haitian farmers to continue planting”<sup>59</sup>.

“Cheap foreign products drove farmers off their land and into overcrowded cities”<sup>60</sup> and former US president Bill Clinton admitted to pressuring Haiti “to dramatically cut tariffs on imported U.S. rice”<sup>61</sup> which worsened the situation. In the 1990s, “Haiti was forced by the US, IMF and the World Bank to open up its markets even more”<sup>62</sup>.

As the competition drove Haitian farmers out of business, Haiti now produces much less rice and depends heavily on imports. As of 2010, it was said that “Haiti depends on the outside world for nearly all of its sustenance”<sup>63</sup> including “80 percent of all rice eaten.”<sup>64</sup>

Of course, “for Haitians, near-total dependence on imported food has been a disaster”<sup>65</sup> as it has “put the country at the mercy of international prices”<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Trade liberalization killed Haiti’s rice industry (Panchu 2010)

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> With cheap food imports, Haiti can’t feed itself (The Associated Press 2010)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Trade liberalization killed Haiti’s rice industry (Panchu 2010)

<sup>63</sup> With cheap food imports, Haiti can’t feed itself (The Associated Press 2010)

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Neoliberalism has eroded Haiti's food security. "Haiti imported only 19 percent of its food and produced enough rice to export, thanks in part to protective tariffs"<sup>67</sup> in the past, but now Haiti imports most of its food and was the US' "third largest buyer of rice, importing almost 300,000 metric tons per year"<sup>68</sup> by 2010.

To neoliberal economists, however, "food security" should not be a real concern. For example, one can look at statements made by a popular economist in Jamaica named Damien King, who mocks the concept of food security. This is a conversation that took place on Twitter<sup>69</sup> on the 8th of September 2018.

Damien King: "What is this "Food security" about?. Describe this apocalypse we're preparing for that "food security" is insuring us against? All the worlds ships are destroyed? Are we prepared to endure a continuing low standard of living, overpaying for food, just in case it comes to pass?"

Someone Else: "Local food production equals low standard of living? Really?"

Damien King: "Yes, because it is produced at a higher cost. So consumers have to spend more on food and have less for rent, transportation, and entertainment. Hence, lower standard of living."

Neoliberal ideology envisions a world free of conflict, a world free of political economy where politics and power imbalances don't coerce, and a world where disasters or things like war and sanctions won't interrupt trade. If there is a problem, they blame it on a barrier to trade. In their theories, you'll more quickly see arguments that barriers to trade lead to conflict and that removing barriers to trade prevents conflict than you'll see them talking about how conflict can negatively affect countries that are dependent on trade.

Neoliberals actually seem to even promote dependence on trade, and not by accident; they believe that each country should specialise in what it is most efficient in producing, and trade to attain whatever else they want or need. This is a cute ideal, but it is unrealistic. One conclusion that they draw from this is that if Country A produces food less efficiently than Country B, it should import food from Country B instead of trying to produce its own since producing its own will be more expensive for the consumers than importing.

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<sup>67</sup> With cheap food imports, Haiti can't feed itself (The Associated Press 2010)

<sup>68</sup> Trade liberalization killed Haiti's rice industry (Panchu 2010)

<sup>69</sup> Damien King on Twitter (King 2018)

The problem with dependence on trade is already known all too well by people who live in countries in the Caribbean or other places that have small economies or that import a lot of their important goods like food.

The market value of something that we specialise in may be high at first but may plummet at some point for reasons beyond that country's control, which would reduce its buying power. Jamaica invested heavily in bauxite production in the 1980s, and it hit us hard when bauxite prices declined<sup>70</sup>; more recently, Venezuela's economy started to face some difficulties when the price of oil dropped by about 50% in 2014<sup>71</sup>.

A conflict or natural disaster far away from Jamaica can still affect global prices of fuel, food, and other commodities, leading to these things becoming more expensive to produce or transport from wherever they were being imported. The blockade imposed by the US against Venezuela has led to fuel shortages in Cuba, because the US is outright preventing ships from transporting oil from Venezuela to Cuba<sup>72</sup>. This is a barrier to trade in the most serious sense, so I am not accusing neoliberals of supporting the blockade; however, the point is that the barrier to trade is one that wasn't imposed by Cuba or Venezuela, but Cuba is nevertheless affected by it.

Likewise, one retort that neoliberals would bring up if you try to discuss Haiti is that American rice is subsidised and that they don't support subsidies. It is true; the US government subsidises its agriculture<sup>73</sup> and that helps its agricultural exports to undercut the prices of agricultural goods in other countries like Haiti<sup>74</sup>. It's not only the abolition of tariffs by the Haitian government that accounts for the price difference between Haitian and American rice, but the farmers in the US outright receive money from the US government. We acknowledge this and we acknowledge that neoliberals criticise subsidies, considering that free trade agreements usually argue against both subsidies and tariffs. However, the Haitian government and people are not responsible for the US' policy of subsidising American farmers, and the economists' criticism of the US' policies won't protect Haiti's economy from the US' tariffs, magically spawn food on Haitians' tables, or solve its economic problems. The reality of the world we live in is that countries, especially smaller and less powerful ones, are vulnerable to things beyond their control. Food security is a real concern for us, and no country knows it better than one that is under a full blockade from the US; this is where we get to discussing Venezuela.

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<sup>70</sup> "In a classic Third World pattern, the main export lost its value by half" (Cody 1986)

<sup>71</sup> A "50% drop in crude oil prices in the second half of 2014" (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2015)

<sup>72</sup> The US government "has sanctioned ships and firms delivering Venezuelan oil to Cuba" (de Córdoba 2019)

<sup>73</sup> An "aid agency has called on the United States to stop subsidising American rice exports to Haiti" (Doyle 2010)

<sup>74</sup> "the policy undermines local production of food" (Doyle 2010)

Despite having Socialist governments, the reality of Cuba and Venezuela is that they exist in a global Capitalist economy; the dynamics of capital inevitably affect and coerce them. In Cuba, for example, a lot of effort is put in maintaining the Tourism industry that pampers bourgeois tourists because it is a major source of income. Cuba is desperate for capital, especially since it has a blockade imposed on it. Likewise, China does whatever it can to protect foreign countries' investments into its economy because it is desperate for capital to develop itself.

Before the financial sanctions and the blockade, Venezuela was exporting a lot of oil to the US and other countries; this allowed them to earn large amounts of foreign currency so that they could afford to import food and commodities. It was easier to import food than to produce its own for the most part; as a result, the urban areas consumed a lot of imported food. This wasn't really a problem because they could afford to keep doing it. With the blockade now imposed on Venezuela, things have changed significantly; the new scarcity of foreign currency combined with the longstanding demand for foreign products has led to serious hyperinflation beyond what can be blamed on the government's monetary policies.

1 USD was as much as 3,300 Bs.S in February. and some economists blamed the existence of currency controls and preferential trading for the problems with Venezuela's currency; retailers were given preference for the sale of foreign currency so there was scarcity and they could sell foreign currency on the black market for higher prices than the official rate. In line with neoliberal recommendations, the government actually lifted controls on its currency which led to hyperinflation at an unprecedented rate. 1 USD was around 10,000 Bs.S when I arrived in late July, and around 17,000 Bs.S by the time I left in late August. The decision to lift the currency controls has been very unpopular among the people. Again, the current crisis of hyperinflation is the result of demand for imports combined with a lack of foreign currency to be able to buy those imports; the sanctions and blockade have severely damaged Venezuela's ability to export, and therefore its ability to earn foreign exchange.

In the minds of idealist economists, food security is not a real concern<sup>75</sup>; in reality, it is a serious issue for Haitians, Venezuelans, and people in other Global South countries. Now, Venezuelans are trying to be self-reliant in food production because their reality requires them to.

The hyperinflation and the increasing difficulty of daily life in Venezuela are intended effects of the blockade, but Venezuela's steps to becoming self-reliant are unintended effects. With the prices of goods soaring from lack of imports, there is an opportunity for Venezuelan nationals to produce to meet the gap in demand left by lack of imports.

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<sup>75</sup> See page 38 for Considerations with Diversifying the Economy.



The blockade insulates Venezuela's economy from the global Capitalist economy, having the exact opposite effect that free trade had on Haiti. Compared to Cuba, Venezuela has much more land and resources, as well as its own fuel, so it is more able to have a robust self-reliant economy. The neoconservatives took a big gamble, as they tried to pressure Venezuela until it would crumble, but it has not crumbled; instead, the global Capitalists are killing Capitalism in Venezuela. Import substitution is accelerating, and more young people are joining communes; I met a Comrade who was from the capital, Caracas, but moved all the way to the rural parts of Lara to join a commune there. Communes are being built even in urban areas like Caracas and Petare, but they are not physically contiguous communes; people are still organising themselves into communal councils and other social structures to manage socio-economic matters.

With global capital destroying its own ability to influence Venezuela's internal affairs and dynamics, the Bolivarian Revolution has a chance to accelerate itself to achieve Socialism. I discussed this with a Cuban Comrade, and we both believe that some of the things I saw would be what a Communist society looks like. When I was in the communes, I could almost forget entirely about the hyperinflation. These people are organising their economies in real material terms rather than maintaining the economics of speculation.

I would ask myself, and a very few Comrades would ask me, what Communism would look like; before my trip to Venezuela, I did not know. I always thought that my generation would try to build Socialism and that Communism would be for 2-3 generations later. After what I saw when I visited Venezuela, Communism feels less like a distant ideal. I still believe that Communism is something for 2-3 generations after mine even if mine or the one after it accomplish the construction of Socialism, and I don't think that Venezuela will somehow achieve a stateless and classless society right now or soon, but it can accelerate on its path to Socialism, and it is a beacon of hope that resistance to Capitalism and imperialism are possible.

This is not to say that I am in favour of the blockade, or to downplay its brutal effects on the lives of the Venezuelan people. It is a crime against humanity, and it must be condemned. However, we have seen that we cannot control the actions of our enemies; we see that decades of the entire world condemning the US' blockade on Cuba has not brought about an end of that blockade, but the Cuban people still resist it. Cuba and Venezuela do not need the USA; if they must learn to survive without the USA, they will. Of course, the US knows this, which is why they design their sanctions to also sabotage relations between their targets and other countries; they try to force other countries, including their own unwilling allies, to drop economic ties with countries they dislike, i.e. Cuba, Iran, the DPRK, and others.

The main problem with the sanctions is that the US also punishes third parties for trading with the countries that they place sanctions on, so they try to stop other countries from trading with them by weaponizing the power of their currency. As the US' currency loses its role in world trade and as the US' actions undermine their own credibility, more countries will start to trade in other currencies and there may even be calls for relocation of multilateral bodies like the UN. The US will strain itself until it has no muscles to flex.

#### Political Effects of the Blockade

Another unintended effect of the blockade is that more Venezuelans realise that US intervention doesn't benefit them. Whereas the causes of Venezuela's problems were more obscure to some persons before, most Venezuelans – including supporters of the opposition – can now directly link their daily suffering to the US sanctions that have been imposed on the country.

Even someone who hates Maduro and continues to vilify him had to admit that the regime change strategies being used by the US government and Venezuelan opposition are harming Venezuelans and destroying their lives. Here are excerpts from an article he wrote<sup>76</sup>:

“Over the past two years, Washington has imposed increasingly punitive economic sanctions on Venezuela. These sanctions have restricted the government's access to external financing, limited its ability to sell assets and, most recently, barred it from trading oil with the United States.”

“The sanctions were designed to choke off revenues to the regime of Nicolás Maduro. Its architects claimed they would not generate suffering for Venezuelans. The reasoning was that Mr. Maduro would quickly back down, or the military would force him out before the sanctions could begin to have an effect. That was wrong.”

“The risks of famine — and what needs to be done to stop it — are lost in the conversation among Washington policymakers and the Venezuelan opposition.”

“Tell the opposition's intellectual elites that sanctions are exacerbating the country's crisis and you are likely to be met with silence or be told that this is false, that the country's economic crisis began long before.”

“There is a stark contrast between their claims and the views of regular Venezuelans. A recent survey by the local pollster Datincorp found that 68 percent of Venezuelans believe sanctions have negatively affected their quality of life.”

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<sup>76</sup> Trump Doesn't Have Time for Starving Venezuelans (Rodríguez 2019)

Note that the unintended effect here is that the people directly blame the sanctions for their suffering and that anti-American sentiment is more easily brewing in the country; the brutal effects of the sanctions, in terms of it creating food shortages and making life harder for Venezuelan people, is not an unintended effect. They have attempted to strangle Cuba in the same way.

In 1960, officials in the US State Department assessed the political situation in Cuba when Fidel Castro was at the head of the revolutionary government, and they had to admit that “The majority of Cubans support Castro”<sup>77</sup>, and concluded that “The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through disenchantment and disaffection based on economic dissatisfaction and hardship.”<sup>78</sup>

They recommended a policy “that every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba. If such a policy is adopted, it should be the result of a positive decision which would call forth a line of action which, while as adroit and inconspicuous as possible, makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.”<sup>79</sup>

They then identified that the main thing to use as an economic weapon against Cuba “would be flexible authority in the sugar legislation”<sup>80</sup> because sugar was Cuba’s main export, just like US sanctions now target Venezuela’s main export, oil<sup>81</sup>.

The US is essentially saying that the internal political situation of a country is not in their favour, so they are willing to create misery for people so that they will either blame their own government for misery or they’ll try to change their government just to please the US because they fear starvation.

The US is playing a sick game with itself, but no-one is winning. The West was misled to believe that Venezuela was a ticking time bomb that just needed a little more pressure; their expectation was that this pressure would lead to an explosion that would work in their favour, as their agenda is destabilisation and regime change. However, sometimes pressure turns graphite into diamond, as we have already seen in Cuba; the Bolivarian Revolution is simply becoming more hardened.

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<sup>77</sup> US State Department (Document 499 1960)

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> U.S. Targets Venezuela With Tough Oil Sanctions During Crisis of Power (Wong and Casey 2019)

The Venezuelan Left now has an opportunity to rediscover itself under new conditions, and to reach out to those who are becoming increasingly aware of the sadistic nature of US foreign policy. Hopefully power can be consolidated in a similar enough fashion to what we see in Cuba, but with Venezuela's own national characteristics. Life in Venezuela is not easy; it is neither a communal paradise nor a grey dystopia, but the people are getting by. I am confident in the people's ability – through their parties, unions, collectives, communes, and movements – to resist the heavy hand of US imperialism.

US State Department officials even warned against militant opposition towards Cuba from the outside, knowing it would not work, saying that it would only strengthen the Left in Cuba<sup>82</sup>. It has been difficult to penetrate Cuban society and to create internal opposition in Cuba, which is why they resorted to economic warfare.

Venezuela is a much larger country with much more people, land borders with other large countries including US allies, and an organised domestic political opposition that existed before and still exists during the revolutionary process in Venezuela. This is why the US has openly sponsored political violence in Venezuela<sup>83</sup>, and has sent over 90 million USD<sup>84</sup> to Juan Guaidó, the opposition's self-proclaimed president.

Many people don't want violence<sup>85</sup>, and the opposition's violent tactics are turning people off, even those who are critical of the government; nevertheless, violence is the only way that the adventurists in the opposition have managed to seek the attention that they desperately crave. If they can't win by creating a popular alternative to the government, they'll just create chaos while the US wages economic warfare to make the lives of the people miserable. Left alone without US influence, the government won't collapse.

#### Summary of Effects

In short, there are 2 unintended effects of the blockade and the US' wider strategy:

- economically, Venezuela is becoming self-reliant and the revolution has less need to make concessions to the neoliberal world system
- politically, the right wing has remained fractured and even opposition supporters have seen the US' actions as hostile to the nation as a whole

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<sup>82</sup> "opposition to Castro from without Cuba would only serve his and the communist cause." (Document 499 1960)

<sup>83</sup> US finances violence in Venezuela (Legañoa Alonso 2014)

<sup>84</sup> Over \$40 million in July (Zengerle, et al. 2019) and over \$50 million in September (Cohen 2019)

<sup>85</sup> Venezuela protests: the other side of the story (Walsh and Law 2014)

## Characteristics of Political Mobilisation

Political mobilisation in Venezuela is very different from in Jamaica.

In Jamaica, there are 2 main political parties and they have their own branches like women, youth, young professionals<sup>86</sup>, and labour unions<sup>87</sup>. There is a sense of cohesion and the parties' branches fall totally under the party, with the exception of the unions which have a greater degree of an independent identity<sup>88</sup>. You either support one party or the other; the parties don't have coalitions with other organisations that aren't subordinate to them or seen as one of their branches. Also, we don't really have social movements in Jamaica; the activist space is dominated by NGOs.

In Venezuela, things are different. The Bolivarian Revolution is supported by a broad base of political parties, unions, social movements, communes, and collectives. Some political parties that support the Venezuelan government have existed from before Hugo Chavez or Nicolas Maduro started their political careers. There are many people and organisations in Venezuela who don't support or aren't aligned with the ruling party but still support Nicolas Maduro.

### Caracas

In Caracas, the pro-government political mobilisations are massive. I can never see where they start or end, as they are always an endless sea of people. You can see multiple flags of different political movements and parties, like the PCV and ORA.

### Mérida

We were told that Mérida is an opposition state and that we should take extra measures with our security because it was one of the opposition strongholds during the Guarimba riots in 2017. You could see cracked windows and bullet holes in buses.

Nevertheless, we never really encountered any problems apart from some minor jeering when we visited Pico Bolívar. The jeering usually seems to be only playful, though we were warned of the risk of escalation into violence.

While we had a demonstration in the streets against some newly-announced sanctions, random persons on the street cheered along, some joined us, some waved from their windows with their pro-government flags and banners, and I vividly remember a truck driver smiling and cheering along even though it meant he was in traffic. Someone even took a photo with some of us. We got a few bad stares, but all of the persons who gave us bad stares were white.

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<sup>86</sup> In each of the 2 major parties, the petit-bourgeois youth have their own wing separate from the main youth wing.

<sup>87</sup> The unions aren't officially branches of the party, but each party has a large general union affiliated with it.

<sup>88</sup> The NWU is affiliated with the PNP and the BITU is affiliated with the JLP.

## Lara

Lara has a strong presence of communes and communal bodies. The PPT, a pro-government party which is distinct from the PSUV, has very strong support in Lara. When we had a meeting with the Governor of Lara, she was wearing a PPT jacket instead of a PSUV jacket even though she is from the PSUV. The PPT is one of the parties that existed before the Bolivarian Revolution or before the political careers of either Hugo Chavez or Nicolas Maduro. The PPT is stronger in some municipalities in Lara than the PSUV is.

We saw persons of all ages involved in activities held by the commune that we visited in Lara. A sense of unity and collective pride existed there. We had some difficult conversations there about some internal issues<sup>89</sup> in the Bolivarian Revolution, but unity was still able to be maintained through necessary compromises.

## **The Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV)**

It's important to note that the Communist Party of Venezuela openly supports Maduro and the government. They had supported Hugo Chavez, they have endorsed Maduro in the last 2 presidential elections, and they have maintained a coalition with the PSUV, the party of Maduro and Chavez, during legislative elections.

I don't know how popular the PCV is, but I have met more persons – both young and old – who are from the PCV than from any other party, including the ruling party. I know more than a handful of PCV supporters who I met in Jamaica, and even more that I've met in Venezuela.

The PCV isn't uncritical of the government, and their analysis of the situation<sup>90</sup> is very different from the PSUV's analysis of the situation, despite the fact that they're allies. Of course, different persons or organisations don't need to agree with each other on everything to be allies; the point of noting this all is that the people and organisations who support Maduro don't do so blindly or without reason, and Maduro's supporters are sensible people who can think for themselves. I knew this before visiting Venezuela, but I needed to point it out to others who ignore the support that Maduro has and only focuses on the expressions of the opposition. In the West, common discourse will find every reason to explain why some people support the opposition in Venezuela, but their discussions always omit reasons that people support the government; sometimes they make silly assumptions that the people only support the government because of welfare, but even this is false as I witnessed for myself that self-governed communes and community-based initiatives that don't benefit from the government are still ardent supporters of the government.

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<sup>89</sup> Their grievances were with local PSUV authorities, not Nicolas Maduro or the national government.

<sup>90</sup> The Crisis of Rentier Capitalism in Venezuela: A Conversation with Oscar Figuera (Pascual Marquina 2019)

There are grievances which are negative sides of the PSUV's relationship with the PCV, but those specific things are typical in any multi-party democracy where a dominant coalition partner takes pride in its 'majority' within the coalition and feels no need to make concessions to their minor allies. These things are issues with the PSUV as a party and many of its functionaries, not specifically Maduro; I know this well because I've encountered issues with some of them myself and heard of some things from others, but these others are still people who support Maduro and the government. Criticism of the PSUV is distinct from criticism of Maduro.

Maduro is not a perfect leader; no-one is. This doesn't mean that the PCV only supports him because he is the 'lesser evil' – it means that disagreements and criticism can exist among different forces which are aiming for the same general long term goals, especially about the path to take to get there and the pace of following that path. Criticism of the government doesn't have to mean that persons want to change their government; many organisations and people want changes but push the government to make the changes rather than to try to overthrow the government, and that is the approach that the PCV and many other organisations and movements take. They see progress as a process, and they understand themselves to be a part of that process. rather than finding themselves antagonistic towards the government's efforts.

It's also important to note that the PCV takes a more hardline position on some issues. They opted not to re-join the National Assembly when the PSUV made peace with some sectors of the opposition, because they still see it as a body that it is contempt; they see the current assembly as "the key tool of imperialist aggression"<sup>91</sup> – they support the Constituent National Assembly instead, and believe that it "should have taken forceful action"<sup>92</sup> against Juan Guaidó when he proclaimed himself to be president. Outside of Venezuela, the Constituent National Assembly is painted as a body that was solely created to increase the PSUV's power, but this is clearly not the case if a party that is critical of the PSUV has endorsed the body and has even complained that it doesn't go far enough in making moves against the opposition.

The West spreads the idea that Maduro is an authoritarian dictator; however, inside Venezuela, some people complain that he isn't authoritarian enough. Those who support or empathise with the opposition should be somewhat relieved that it is Maduro and the PSUV who are in power, and not someone from the PCV or the average supporter of the government who impatiently wait on the government to make certain moves and wish that the government would brutally crackdown on the big Capitalists and some opposition leaders.

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<sup>91</sup> The Crisis of Rentier Capitalism in Venezuela: A Conversation with Oscar Figuera (Pascual Marquina 2019)

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Internationally, those who bash Maduro and the Venezuelan government don't only do so from the right-wing; many self-labelled Socialists in the West also bash Venezuela because it still has a market economy, or other things that give them reasons to say that Venezuela doesn't have 'real' or 'pure' Socialism. Ironically, these clowns are not anywhere close to building Socialism in their own countries, and they make excuses for compromising and supporting weak Capitalist candidates all the time. I prefer to listen to the PCV than to some Western chauvinists.

The PCV leader says that the party openly discusses Venezuela's internal contradictions with international allies but specify that their struggle with the PSUV is an internal one and that they unite with the PSUV against the opposition locally and against the US internationally. It's not the place of outsiders to get involved in the internal struggles of Venezuela's Left; Comrades will of course offer their opinions and share them with each other, but that is not the same as bashing and discrediting. There is a responsible way in which Comrades and allied organisations can offer advice to each other or even to engage in critique with each other; it can be harsh, but these things should be done with discretion and in specific spaces.



## Perception of Police

My friends and Comrades from different parts of Venezuela have very different views/opinions on police. My Comrades in Caracas and Petare have very negative views of the police, despite being hardline supporters of the government. This shows that their opinions of the police and of the government don't impact each other much, if at all.

I attended a memorial service for 6 Comrades who were murdered in Barinas<sup>93</sup>; there was a sense that the police were not doing enough to address the incident. Despite their negative views on police, the Comrades who mourned their deaths were hardline supporters of Maduro and the government; the murdered activists and the Comrades who mourned them were Chavistas after all, and the movement that they were from also strongly supports the government. They have held demonstrations, but they are not of the same nature as the opposition demonstrations.

When we stayed in the apartment complex in Carora<sup>94</sup>, there was an interaction with police that made me and some other Comrades uncomfortable, because of our general feelings about the police in the places that we are from; a Comrade from Brazil explained how police in Brazil are reactionary, and Comrades from Caracas and Petare showed some slight discomfort. The police were there for our own protection and offered to escort us, and they interacted mainly with an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was with us as security; a Comrade was telling me that the police officers' intentions were good but that people would look at it in a negative light. However, the people in Lara who were hosting us said otherwise; she told us not to worry and that "the police here are different" as the Comrade from Brazil explained how bad the police in Brazil are.

I felt more comfortable after this, i.e. after our hosts in Carora told me that the police actually have decent relations with the people, even though the police in Caracas seem to be less successful with that. At another point, a Comrade from Mérida told us that the police in Mérida aren't very aggressive or violent. A friend from Petare told me that the police in different parts of Venezuela are different, that police in Caracas and Petare are awful and don't respect human rights but that I can trust what I'm told by Comrades from other parts of Venezuela.

We sometimes hear of how brutal police in Venezuela are, and the point of this section is to show that their character is not reflective of the character of the Bolivarian Revolution. After all, supporters of the government are open and honest about their negative views on police, and some of the police themselves are involved in the attempts to discredit or unseat the government.

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<sup>93</sup> Venezuela: Six Chavista Militants Killed in Fresh Rural Violence (Koerner 2019)

<sup>94</sup> See "August 15 – Nueva Esperanza Apartments" on page 29.

## On Peaceful Coexistence

I had a conversation with a Comrade<sup>95</sup> about the topic of China and its role in countering the US' hegemony and said that I would one day consider writing to the Communist Party of China on the matter. Like Khrushchev and the revisionist leaders who came after him in the USSR, China has been pursuing a policy of peaceful coexistence with the West; the idea is to maintain global peace and stability and prevent war. I have also engaged a Comrade from Cuba on this topic.

What exists in the world right now is not peaceful, and what they are trying to prevent is not violence; violence is already happening everyday as a result of US hegemony. Economic warfare continues against Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, the DPRK, and other countries. The world has watched while the US and its allies attempt to destroy Iraq, Libya, and Yemen<sup>96</sup>. The peace that we are trying to preserve is an illusion, while people in particular countries experience violence daily.

While progressive governments have good intentions in reconciliation with the West, they are attempting to avoid war and the most overt forms of violence while leaving themselves vulnerable to continued strategies by the imperialists to weaken them and strike again later. We saw this with the Cuban government attempting reconciliation with the US, as it has been doing for decades, with the intention of ending the brutal blockade; however, we saw that the US was intending to replace an old regime change strategy to one that they considered smarter<sup>97</sup> and more effective.

While making it clear to the world that they are allies, certain countries have still negotiated with the US on an individual basis instead of forming a strong united front. Cuba, the DPRK, and Iran have all negotiated to improve their own standing – and this is understandable and expected that each country will put itself first and that such negotiations are conventionally bilateral, but conventions have all been based on existing practice rather than things set in stone. The problem is that the US will negotiate with one country while attacking 3 of its allies, and the country that it's negotiating with is backed into a corner to be nice and maintain a smiley face with the US because it's backed into a corner about its own conditions.

But peace between the US and other countries is a fantasy. Even during peace time, the US won't respect other nations' sovereignty; it was built by the destruction of many other nations as it expanded its borders Westward under a "Manifest Destiny" doctrine. As we pretend that a peaceful world under the current conditions is possible, we weaken ourselves every day; at what point do we say that enough is enough? When will we challenge and overthrow the hegemony?

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<sup>95</sup> This was during the Brigade.

<sup>96</sup> China has sent important food aid to Yemen, but they are still facing daily violence and are at risk of famine.

<sup>97</sup> "replace it with a smarter approach" (Siddiqui 2015)

How many more countries will be invaded or bombed? How many more people need to suffer the brutal effects of blockades and economic warfare? We condemn these things, but we allow them to happen. Why do we aim for peace with an entity that commits so many acts of evil? Why does it satisfy us to have peace with a government that is bombing and destroying another country at the very same time?

Where do we draw the line? It wasn't drawn after the wars in Viet Nam or Korea, it wasn't drawn after the invasion of Grenada, it wasn't drawn more recently after the invasion of Iraq which killed hundreds of thousands, it wasn't drawn after the destruction of Libya, it hasn't been drawn after decades of a genocidal economic policy towards Cuba, and it hasn't been drawn after the US decided to engage in economic warfare against the peoples of Venezuela and Iran.

At the end of the Sao Paulo Forum, Maduro spoke of one day going on the counter-offensive against imperialism; true anti-imperialists are eager for the conditions to be right to do this and for it to be done. One could argue that it is already being done by the people's movements resisting neoliberal policies and puppet governments in Haiti, Honduras, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Chile, and other countries.

Still, I want to know; when do we move, from just surviving despite imperialism, to overthrowing imperialism? We will have no room to construct Socialism if we always have to worry about the imperialists intervening and violently re-imposing Capitalism on our peoples.

This idea that we must try to aim for peaceful coexistence and resist confrontation at all cost is not working, considering that the cost is that people are suffering and even dying in the violent conditions that the hegemony has imposed on them. The times of 'peace' that we have are not peace in the real sense, and the balance of power isn't shifting; imperialism continues to grow stronger while countries that are resisting imperialism are focusing on their own survival. We are not buying time when we accept the imaginary peace; we are weakening ourselves with delusion as we let our guard down. Peace does give us some time to manoeuvre, but we often get too complacent in these times rather than reminding ourselves that we are in a constant struggle.

This is not a rejection of peace. We want peace, but we can't keep letting our guard down in these times of nominal peace. This is also not a call for war; war is already being waged by imperialists so anti-imperialists wouldn't be starting one. This is also not a call to take any sudden reckless actions to intensify war, but it is a call to recognise the reality we live in and that our efforts towards peace may not actually be bringing about peace for our peoples. This is something to bear in mind, going forward. Our final goal can't be coexisting with imperialists who don't value our lives.

The most radical thing we can do, then, is to reshape our international relations in light of this reality. Again, this doesn't mean supporting any sort of violence. It can be something as simple as radically changing our trade relations to decentre the West and give it less power. Our dependence on trade with the powerful Western countries gives them the power to coerce and control us. They have hegemony over the global economy, and demanding to remain assimilated in this current economy will always have us on our knees.

Individually, progressive Nationalist governments in the Third World have been doing this. They have tried to take control of natural resources from the hands of multinational entities, and they have faced sabotage and intervention; this is not a critique of these countries. This is a critique of the other nations which sit and watch this happen, offering nice-sounding critique after the fact but not doing anything concrete.

We cannot live like this. We cannot be smiling with the West while it strangles Cuba and other nations that we care about. The international community must draw a line and take concrete action, something more than just verbally denouncing the blockade at UN sessions each year, or more than throwing shade with vague language to criticise the US. If this spineless faux-clever approach that we take to the world's problems now was the same one that we had applied to the problem of Nazi Germany and other fascist regimes in the 1930s, the Nazis would have dominated the world at the time.

### **Other Things**

There are good things that happened that don't have detailed notes, like a meeting with someone who will soon be sent to head Venezuela's diplomatic mission to Jamaica, an Afro-descendants' meeting in November that we got invited to, public canteens where people who don't have food can eat for free, a visit to a potato farm, a visit to an archaeological museum that focuses on the history of indigenous peoples in Western Venezuela, our visit to the national pantheon, things I learned about veterinary services in Venezuela, and some other things.

**Conclusion**

My experiences in Venezuela are anecdotal, as anyone's experience would be if they spent a considerable amount of time there and wrote a report. This does not mean that I spent time to talk to more than 30 million Venezuelans or that I know everything about Venezuela, but I know enough to say the things that I have said.

Despite the limitations of my observations and analyses, I think they are important experiences that depart from the narratives that are actively pushed by Western media. The things that I witnessed and experienced were not 100% positive; nonetheless, they have reaffirmed my confidence in the Bolivarian Revolution and in people's movements in other countries – including my own – in general.

This report doesn't have a particular central/single aim beyond documenting the things that I witnessed and experienced so that they are not lost in memory. Where some things are highlighted, the reasons that they're being highlighted are explicitly stated. Things in this document may be cited as a reference for the organisation's positions on issues in the future.

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