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Food Politics in a Time of Crisis: corporate power vs. popular power in the shifting relations of state, society and capital in Venezuela's food system

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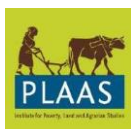


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# Food Politics in a Time of Crisis: corporate power vs. popular power in the shifting relations of state, society and capital in Venezuela's food system

Ana Felicien, Christina M. Schiavoni and Licia Romero

## Abstract

*This piece aims to shed light on Venezuela's current conjuncture, inquiring into food shortages, lines, and 'riots,' by employing a historical, relational and interactive approach to agrifood politics, with a focus on questions of power as related to race, class, gender and geography, as manifested in everyday practices around food. In doing so, we challenge dominant narratives around 'authoritarian populism,' by examining the differentiated impacts of the shortages and the visible and invisible forms of power driving them, through a complex web of relationships among state, society and capital. We look at the past to understand the historical continuities of extractive patterns, with attention to how food has served as a means of creating and maintaining social differentiations over time, particularly the formation of a powerful elite, a middle class aligned with it, and a class of 'others'. To understand the concentration of power in the food system, we focus in on the staple food of corn, as expressed through a maiz-harina-arepa complex. This leads us to emerging trends of authoritarian populism in Venezuela today, different from those portrayed in dominant narratives, stemming from elite alliances long in the making. Key to these trends are the ways in which food is used to exert control over the majority of the population. Arguably, through processes of colonization, modernization, and today, globalization, the entire set-up of the modern industrial food system--i.e., offering foods appealing to the tastes of the masses, but in a highly controlled and controlling way--easily lends itself to being a tool of authoritarian populism, as seen in Venezuela today. The flip side is that food is also being used as a tool for resistance, manifested in a multitude of grassroots efforts. We explore these responses, and the hard questions they raise, emphasizing that today in Venezuela, the urgent tasks of the short-term are defining the contours of broader transformation in the long-term, and that it is within the everyday that the possibilities for emancipation exist.*

**Keywords:** food politics, Venezuela, state-society-capital relations, everyday life, authoritarian populism, social differentiation, race, rural-urban divide, revolution-counterrevolution, grassroots resistance

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## 1 Introduction

With growing interest in authoritarian populism in light of emerging global trends (Scoones et al. 2017), it bears turning to Venezuela, which by many assessments appears an emblematic case. Headlines such as ‘Will Trump’s Populism Turn America into Venezuela?’ (Pethokoukis 2017) are not uncommon, while a steady stream of academic work featuring such creative conceptualizations as ‘participatory competitive authoritarianism’ (Mainwaring 2012) has positioned Venezuela on the cutting edge of this theme. Such analyses are not new. Internet searches related to authoritarian populism in Venezuela yield an abundance of results dating back nearly two decades to the start of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution. They are, however, becoming increasingly numerous in recent years--and increasingly consistent (e.g., Levine 2017, Zahler 2017).<sup>1</sup> A benefit of having such a substantial body of work to draw from is that a recurring narrative emerges, one so powerful that it seems to have been absorbed into the collective psyche to the point where it is little questioned. It goes basically as follows:

The central character is Hugo Chávez Frías, a strong-armed political leader with the double benefit of charisma and high oil prices over the course of his presidency from 1999 through 2012. In 2013 Chavez died, and then in 2014 global oil prices took a sharp fall. With the perfect storm of the loss of Chavez, the collapse of the price of oil, and the government’s misguided economic policies, Venezuela has steadily fallen into a state of economic and political disintegration, with food and other basic necessities becoming scarce, sparking social unrest, as people take to the streets. The government, headed by Chavez’s less popular and charismatic successor Nicolas Maduro, is doing what it can to hang onto power, becoming increasingly authoritarian in the process, while maintaining the populist rhetoric of the Bolivarian Revolution. This is happening in the midst of a broader global surge of authoritarian populism, of which Venezuela appears to be textbook example, and a reference against which to compare other cases.

While there are of course a variety of differently nuanced takes on this narrative, its key features tend to be impressively consistent and durable. What is particularly striking as of recently is that increasingly similar analysis can be seen from intellectuals of the Left as well as the Right. On the one hand, it is possible that this growing consensus across the political spectrum speaks to the veracity of the narrative. On the other hand, there are certain holes in the analysis that merit exploration. Who, for instance, are ‘the people’ at the center of this narrative, and what is their makeup by class, race, gender, and geography? And conversely, how is the Venezuelan state understood? What are the relationships between state and capital? Who controls the products missing from supermarket shelves, and why are certain products available while others are not? What, if any, are the differentiated impacts of the shortages and other economic challenges at present? Why have the majority of anti-government street protests covered by the media taken place in middle- and upper-class areas, and led by a largely young, urban, white crowd? What, if any, are the responses coming from the poorest populations, in rural as well as urban areas, and how do these factor into the analysis?

For those of us living through the realities on the ground today in Venezuela, these are but a small sampling of questions that surface as we interrogate the dominant narrative against our research and our lived experiences, as well as those of the communities with which we work.

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<sup>1</sup> These two works by Zahler (2017) and Levine (2017) both appeared in the Fall 2017 issue of *LASA Forum* under a special section on ‘Debates: On Venezuela.’ We highlight these two pieces out of the many similar ones out there because they perfectly capture the limited range of academic debate on Venezuela at present, as the only two pieces in a ‘debate’ on Venezuela in the publication of ‘the largest professional Association in the world for individuals and institutions engaged in the study of Latin America’.

Here it bears mention of who we are, which cannot be separated from the vantage points from which we write. In addition to scholars and researchers, we are grassroots food sovereignty activists engaged in struggles from the local to the global scales. Two of us are Venezuelans and one is an ally to our movements who has been living and working among us. This piece thus constitutes more than an intellectual project for us. It is an attempt to make sense of what we are experiencing at a moment when many analyses fall short, and to do so in dialogue with the communities and movements whose struggles and forms of resistance at present have been largely invisibilized. Key to this invisibility, we argue, are the limited analytical lenses being employed to understand Venezuelan realities today, along with insufficient reflexivity among many researchers.

This paper thus endeavors to bring in some additional pieces of analysis on the present situation in Venezuela heretofore missing in order to present a fuller and more complex picture of the realities on the ground, and the dynamics at play behind them. In doing so, we aim to generate new insights into debates on authoritarian populism in Venezuela and beyond, from combined academic and activist perspectives. To carry out our analysis, we employ a variety of analytical lenses falling into three broad, interconnected categories. First, among the many different possible angles that could be explored with respect to authoritarian populism, we specifically focus on food and food politics, concurring with Figueroa (2015: 502) as to the power of approaching food as ‘a kind of nexus in and through which social processes at varied spatial and temporal scales converge and interact.’ On one level, the politics of food in Venezuela serve as a fascinating microcosm through which to understand the broader politics of the country. But more than being demonstrative of broader politics, food politics are in fact a key element in them. As this paper lays out, food politics and trends of authoritarian populism are inseparable in the Venezuelan case, and, we would wager, well beyond. The lens of food is thus employed throughout. Furthermore, we build upon Figueroa’s focus on ‘everyday life’ practices around food to help us connect the macro to the micro, analyzing, for instance, how macroeconomic interactions are constituting an attack on everyday life as they play out at the intimate level of the plate, as well as how communities are drawing from everyday food practices as forms of resistance and alternative-building.

Second, building upon Schiavoni’s (2017) historical, relational and interactive (HRI) approach to food sovereignty research, we similarly apply such a set of lenses to food politics in Venezuela writ large. We use these lenses to understand how the circumstances of the present are directly connected to and emerging out of those of the past; to understand the fluid and mutually constitutive nature of the present conjuncture and the alternatives being forged in the midst of it; and to understand the complex composition of both state and societal actors in order to situate current events within the dynamic interactions among them. To the last point, we also draw from McKay (2017), whose state-society-capital nexus helps us to more intricately situate the role of capital within state-society interactions. The shifting set of relationships among state, society and capital over time, we argue, is key to understanding the present situation in Venezuela, as well as broader global trends, as similarly flagged by Scoones et al. (2017). Third, cross-cutting throughout the text is the approaching of questions of power through the lenses of race, class, gender, and geography (particularly, regarding geography, the construction and deconstruction of ‘the urban-rural divide’). This helps us to tease apart the differentiated impacts of the challenges at present upon Venezuela’s highly differentiated society. It also helps us to understand the emerging responses in this light. Each of these sets of lenses helps us to pinpoint the weaknesses of the dominant narratives on authoritarian populism in Venezuela, while helping to approach this subject from new, more complex, and ideally more useful angles.

In the sections to follow, we begin with a look at the past in order to situate trends of the present, honing in on dynamics around Venezuela's most highly consumed staple food. This brings us straight into the current juncture, particularly to the food shortages playing out at present and to the varied responses to them. A careful look at some of the main drivers of the shortages, as well as their responses, points to emerging trends of authoritarian populism coming from the forces opposing the Bolivarian Revolution, which are increasingly gaining ground within the state. Building upon recent work on 'emancipatory rural politics' in counterposition to authoritarian populism, we make a case for the importance of 'everyday life' as a key battlefield upon which authoritarian populism and responses to it are playing out, pointing to important trends of 'emancipatory *rural-urban* politics,' in the case of Venezuela.

### **Historical continuities of extraction**

A nuanced understanding of the current conjuncture in Venezuela today involves going back not to 1999 or just prior, but to the period of colonization, to the inception of interrelated patterns of extraction and social differentiation that continue coevolving into the present. While much has been written on (neo)extractivism as a key feature of Latin America's 'Pink Tide' countries, including Venezuela (e.g., Lavelle 2016; Arsel et al. 2016; Chiasson-LeBel 2016; Lander 2014a), it is imperative to situate present patterns of extraction as part of a much longer historical continuity. Venezuela's 'extractive engine,' as characterized by Lombardi (2003), dates back to Spanish colonization from the 16<sup>th</sup> into the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this period, a 'tropical plantation economy based on slave labor' gave rise to a powerful agroexportation complex through which primarily cacao and later coffee were supplied to Europe and Mexico (Andrews 1985: 12).<sup>2</sup> A key feature of this system was what Ríos de Hernández and Prato (1990) describe as the 'plantation-*conuco* binomial,' in which familial and communal plots called *conucos* served as a source of subsistence for the enslaved and later low-wage labor forces of the *haciendas* of the colonial elite (see also Carvallo y Rios 1984; Hernández 2008; Rojas-López 2012; Ramos Guédez 2005). The *conucos* of the *haciendas* represented a melding of Indigenous and African crops and growing practices, in a common though underrecognized trend throughout the Americas whose legacy persists (Carney 2013).

In 1830, Venezuela was among the first countries in the region to achieve independence, followed by the abolishment of slavery by 1854, both developments a product of popular rebellion. As noted by Andrews (1985), however, most social and economic patterns established under colonization were little altered. These included patterns of dietary differentiation extending from the plantation-*conuco* binomial, with those who labored on the plantations feeding themselves through their own production, while the colonial elite continued with culinary patterns brought over from Europe, relying in part on imported goods. This dietary differentiation was intricately linked with questions of identity and domination, serving to maintain European descendants as distinct from and superior to the rest of the Indigenous, Afro-descendent and *mestizo* majority (Amodio and Molina 2017). Such sentiments are reflected in the remark attributed to Spanish general Pablo Morillo that he could 'handle anything on this earth except for those wretched corn cakes they call *arepas*, that have only been made for stomachs of blacks and ostriches' (Quintero Saravia 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of 'monoexportation' in Venezuela did not begin with petroleum, but with the colonial agroexport complex. In 1775, 75% of the total value of exports was from cacao (Vitale 2002) and in 1897-1898, coffee represented 83% of exports (Lezama and Hernandez 2006).

Amodio and Molina (2017) emphasize, however, that European disdain for Indigenous foodways was paradoxically coupled with a dependency on them, by necessity, as Indigenous knowledge proved essential for the adaptation of European crops to tropical agroecosystems, and as food from *conucos* served as vital source of sustenance, particularly during times of war. The plantation economy lasted for another century following independence, during which the *hacienda* structure was maintained, while commerce with the exterior switched hands from the Spanish crown to a commercial bourgeoisie descended from English, Germans, Dutch, French, and Italians, among others. This group ran trading companies known as *casas comerciales*, which mediated relations between the *haciendas* and transnational agricultural commodity circuits (Banko 2016). The majority of the population continued to be fed through the *conuco* throughout this period, sustaining the workforce of the *haciendas* (Carvallo 1995; Ochoa and Miranda 2016).

In 1929, the US stock market crash and associated crash in agricultural commodity prices together with the rise of petroleum in Venezuela as an export commodity spelled the end of the agroexportation period, as several new patterns rapidly emerged (Banko 2010; Ríos de Hernández and Prato 1990). One was a flight of capital out of agriculture and into the emerging petroleum industry, with petroleum concessions going mostly to the same wealthy families of the agroexportation complex (Mcbeth 1983). Along with the flight of capital out of rural areas was a flight of people, through mutually reinforcing processes of proletarianization and urbanization, and a subsequent surge in urban poverty, with insufficient sources of employment and infrastructure to absorb these new urban workers (Araujo 2013, Wilpert 2006, Osorio 1985). While the development of the petroleum sector further concentrated wealth while fostering a ‘surplus population’ of urban poor, it also gave rise to a middle class of professional workers who populated the sector. In response to these changes, owners of the former agroexport complex were able to take advantage of its existing infrastructure, an inflow of oil dollars, and the newly acquired purchasing power of Venezuela’s emerging middle class to shift from exportation to importation, giving rise over time into a powerful agrifood importation and distribution complex inextricably linked with petroleum extraction (Ríos de Hernández and Prato 1990).

Petroleum thus served as an energetic surplus to break the plantation-*conuco* binomial, rupturing existing systems of production and consumption. A key development filling this void came in 1936, with the introduction of Venezuela’s agricultural modernization program, supported through petroleum dollars and based on the premise of import substitution of highly consumed foods in growing urban centers. Oriented around a technological package of specialized machinery, ‘improved’ seeds, and agrichemical inputs, Venezuela’s agricultural sector came to be the most highly mechanized of all of Latin America by 1950 (Rodríguez Rojas 2009). The vast majority of these inputs were imported from the US, contributing to an *increase* in importation during the modernization period, despite its import substitution premise (Ríos de Hernández and Prato 1990). Another contributing factor was the simultaneous import of popular processed food brands from the US, from Kellogg’s Corn Flakes to Pepsi Cola, which we will return to shortly. The push for agricultural modernization in Venezuela was part and parcel of the Green Revolution that was simultaneous sweeping Latin America, and much of the Global South, as part of an anti-communist Cold War strategy among the US and allies (Cleaver 1972; Patel 2013). The Green Revolution was personally ushered into Venezuela by U.S. ‘missionary capitalist’ to Latin America and godfather to the Green Revolution, Nelson Rockefeller. With its flourishing oil sector, Venezuela held a special place in the interests of Rockefeller, who made Venezuela his home away from home, establishing his own personal *hacienda* there (Rivas 2002; Hamilton 2011).

Eddens (2017: 4) argues that the emergence of the Green Revolution can be understood as a continuity of ‘colonial hierarchies of race, class and gender,’ under the guise of scientific neutrality, through the production of such binaries as ‘modern/non-modern,’ ‘abundance/scarcity’ and ‘scientific/non-scientific.’ Key to this is race as a crucial factor for the ‘Green Revolution’s co-production of science and social order’ (Eddens 2017: 3). These insights resonate with Venezuela’s agricultural modernization program, which was characterized by a melding of ‘high modernism’ represented by industrial production and white supremacy, manifested in *blanqueamiento* or ‘whitening’ efforts. Lest this link seem like a stretch, one need look no further than the Law of Immigration and Colonization of 1936, which facilitated the entrance of white Europeans into Venezuela, specifically, in the words of then-Agricultural Minister (and coffee plantation owner) Alberto Adriani, for Venezuela to “...diversify its agriculture; develop new industries and perfect existing ones; and contribute to the improvement of its race and the elevation of its culture...” (Ramos Rodríguez 2010: 94). Towards these ends, the Law supported the formation of aptly named ‘agricultural colonies’ (*colonias agrícolas*) of European immigrants on some of the country’s most productive agricultural land, several of which, including the well-known Colonia Turén, exist into the present (Kritz 1975; Ramos Rodríguez 2010).

The colonization policies, and the broader push for both agricultural modernization and whitening of which they were part, were picked up by Pérez Jiménez, who ruled by dictatorship in the 1950s. Inspired by Adriani’s writings on racial superiority and economic development, Pérez Jiménez spoke of the necessity of ‘mixing our race’ with that of the Europeans in order to instill in Venezuelans a ‘spirit of work,’ lest they remain a ‘backwards people’ (Blanco Muñoz, 1983: 67-69). Approximately one million immigrants, the majority of them Europeans, entered Venezuela under Pérez Jiménez’s reign (Kritz 1975). While such policies ended with the fall of the dictatorship in 1958, their influence would endure. Most significantly as related to our theme, they contributed to the growth of an overwhelmingly white Venezuelan middle class, including a rural white middle class of producers engaged in capital-intensive practices. The latter is represented by the influential confederation of mid- and large-scale producers, FEDEAGRO (Confederación de Asociaciones de Productores Agropecuarios), an actor to which we will return.

Along with the agricultural colonies was another form of colonization under the modernization agenda, in the introduction of Venezuela’s first chain of supermarkets, CADA, in 1948, supplying both the capital area and the commissaries of petroleum extraction zones (Hamilton 2011). This development was also spearheaded by Rockefeller together with the Venezuelan government, as part of a broader package of agrifood system reforms including market-oriented land reform and a major trade deal between the US and Venezuela for exchange of US food and agricultural goods for Venezuelan oil (Anido and Quintero 2009; Hamilton 2011). The absolutely pivotal impact of the arrival of the supermarket to Venezuela, particularly in the realm of everyday life, cannot be overstated. Perhaps most significant was the contribution of supermarkets to above-described processes of dietary differentiation extending from colonization. Further solidifying the connections between food consumption, identity, and social status, supermarkets served as a vehicle for the newly emerging middle class to have a taste of food elitism, literally and figuratively.

Over the course of the history presented thus far, two interrelated sets of cross-cutting processes bear highlighting: a) processes of social differentiation along lines of race, class, gender and geography reflected in and reinforced by various forms of differentiation within



the agrifood system and b) the development of an intricate web of relations among state, society and capital. The latter set of processes can be understood as the ‘state-society-capital nexus,’ as characterized by (McKay 2017: 4), in which the state is approached as ‘a terrain of contested and strategic relations among political forces attempting to appear neutral and “outside” of the society’. Chief among these political forces are those aligned with classes of labor, representing ‘society’ in state-society-capital nexus and those aligned with classes of capital (i.e., with ownership and control over the means of production), representing ‘capital’ in the nexus. How actors within the state align with either at a given time is largely dependent on the dual imperative of capital accumulation on the one hand and ensuring a certain level of social harmony on the other hand.<sup>3</sup> The balance of forces among state, society and capital, shaped by the dynamic tensions between accumulation and legitimation, play out as highly contested processes over time. In the Venezuelan context, we can see how patterns of accumulation have been determined by commercial activities based on rent appropriation of monopolistic and oligopolistic nature, starting with the colonial agroexport complex, followed by petroleum extraction and associated activities. Through the articulation of private interests with political power, these processes have shaped the architecture of the state.

Key to the development of the state-society-capital nexus in Venezuela was the creation of a middle class, through the insertion of mid- and large-scale farmers of European descent into the countryside, supported through agricultural modernization programs linked with ‘whitening’ immigration policies, and the cultivation of a cohort of middle-class professionals around the petroleum industry, sustained through supermarkets that made durable consumer goods readily accessible. The rise of the middle class was part of a political project of modern state-building, or what Hamilton (2011: 1) describes as the conversion of Venezuela into a ‘reliable US ally with...a solid middle-class electorate’. By many accounts, these efforts were successful, with Venezuela in the late twentieth century commonly regarded as ‘one of the developing world’s success stories, an oil-rich democracy that was seen as a model for economic growth and political stability in the region’ (Anderson 2017). This ‘Venezuelan exceptionalism,’ as termed by Ellner and Salas (2006), continues to abound in the predominant narratives on Venezuela. It bears asking, however, whom this ‘model democracy’ served, bringing us back to questions of who are ‘the people’ in such analyses. Luis Tinker Salas (2015: 46), who grew up in an exclusive enclave of one of Venezuela’s oil camps, has reflected that “Oil never fully transformed Venezuela, but rather it created the illusion of modernity in a country where high levels of inequality persisted.” Indeed, little mentioned in predominant narratives is that more than half of the population was living in poverty at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution (Weibrot 2008), *with hunger levels higher than those today*, even in the face of the current crisis.<sup>4</sup>

A glance back over recent history challenges the fragile illusion of Venezuela as a model democracy and bastion of modernist tranquility in an otherwise tumultuous region. A particularly telling moment was when structural adjustment policies served as the final straw for an increasingly fed up population, leading to the Caracazo, or ‘explosion of Caracas’ of 1989. While the Caracazo has been examined elsewhere (Nuñez Nuñez 1990; Maya 2003;

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<sup>3</sup> See also Fox 1993 and O’Connor 1973 regarding accumulation and legitimation, as well as Schiavoni 2017 for a discussion related to Venezuelan agrifood politics.

<sup>4</sup> According to FAO data (FAO 2002; FAO 2017), the number of people undernourished was an average of 4.9 million people over the period of 1998-2000 (representing 20% of the population of 24.5 million in 2000), and an average of 4.1 million people for the period of 2014-2016, at the height of the shortages (representing 13% of the population of 31.5 million in 2016). Thanks to Reinaldo Iturriza (2017) for leading us to these data sets in his piece on the misreporting of hunger in Venezuela (<http://supuestonegado.com/web/hambre-en-venezuela/>).

Hardy 2007; Ciccariello-Maher 2013a), what is important to emphasize here is that it signaled the *visibility* of the long-invisibilized excluded majority, as hundreds of thousands of people of Caracas's hillside *barrios* rushed down into the center of the capital in a massive popular uprising that rapidly spread across the country. While the military was ordered to open fire on civilians, yielding a death toll officially in the hundreds but believed to be in the thousands, the social revolt unleashed by the Caracazo would not be contained.

### **Another side of history**

This brings us to another side of history - that every development presented thus far happened in a context of tension between the elite and the 'others' whom they attempted to subjugate, never fully succeeding. As recognized by numerous historical accounts, the Indigenous peoples, African descendants, and *mestizos* comprising the majority of Venezuelans over time have been a rebellious lot, from Afro-descendent rebellions and Indigenous uprisings (e.g., Rodriguez 2001, Rojas 2009, Tiapa 2014) (including when a group of enslaved, formerly enslaved and Indigenous peoples stood up to the most powerful *casa comercial* of the agroexport complex in the 1730s), to more covert forms of resistance. Such resistance from below was pivotal to the fall of colonization (once Independence leader Simon Bolivar caught on to the importance of enslaved and Indigenous peoples to the struggle for independence), continuing into peasant struggles over land post-Independence, and later flowing into struggles of *guerillas*, students, workers and women, among other 'others,' during the period of democratization. The push for modernization and whitening described above was one of many attempts to quash such rebellion, as was the broader project of 'democratization,' as detailed in Ciccariello-Maher's (2013a) popular history of Venezuela. The rebellions seen throughout Venezuela's history can be understood as the outcome of an ever-increasing tension between the furthering of extractivist patterns of accumulation among a small elite, on the one hand, and the coalescing of popular unrest among the vast majority of the population, on the other. Sanoja and Vargas Arenas (2014: 113) situate the Caracazo as part of a trajectory directly connecting rebellions of the past to those of the present, emphasizing that these developments 'did not arise in a capricious manner, but on the contrary resulted from class struggle, from the resistance and multiple social rebellions that began to be forged the sixteenth century against the colonial government of the Spanish, expressed today as a necessary process to settle the historical debt that the national State has with the socially, culturally and economically excluded majority of the population'. The rise of Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution can thus be understood as a direct continuation of the Caracazo, through which 'the popular sectors...came to assume their own political representation' (Vargas Arenas and Sanoja 2004: 32).

Inequities around food were among the immediate causes of the Caracazo, as the poor endured long lines to access basic goods, while middle-class merchants hoarded these goods to speculate on rising prices in the face of inflation, and the elite carried on with their day-to-day food habits largely unaffected (Battaglini 2011), with striking parallels to the present. Directly prior to and following the Caracazo, headlines such as 'Prices of sugar, cereals, and oils go up' and 'Distressed multitudes in search of food' (ibid.) abounded in the national press, while the *New York Times* (1989a) reported 'shortages of items like coffee, salt, flour, cooking oil and other basic products'. This reflected growing tensions around food access, disproportionately impacting the poor, signaling that Venezuela's high modernist food system based on importation, industrial agriculture, and supermarkets, as championed by Rockefeller, was not in fact serving the interests of the majority (Nuñez Nuñez 1990). If a goal of the Bolivarian Revolution was to restore legitimacy by 'settling historical debt,' a first line of

order was to confront the inequalities around food facing its population. This implied the dual, if at times divergent, tasks of addressing the immediate material needs of the more than half of the population living in hunger and poverty, largely urban, while working to shift the historical patterns that had forged deep divides in Venezuela's agrifood system.

The importance of food and agriculture was reflected in Venezuela's new national constitution, drafted through a participatory constituent assembly process and passed by popular referendum in 1999, which guarantees the food security of the population, 'through the promotion of sustainable agriculture as a strategic basis for integrated rural development' (Ministerio de Comunicación e Información 1999). In response to this popular mandate, a variety of state-sponsored initiatives have been carried out, in tandem with citizen efforts, under the banner of 'food sovereignty.'<sup>5</sup> Fundamental to these have been processes of agrarian reform. In contrast to past reforms that exacerbated differentiation in the countryside, giving rise to various forms of 'petty-capitalist farming' (Llambi 1988), these have been explicitly aimed at valuing and recognizing the peasants and landless rural workers of Afro-Indigenous origins marginalized under past state policies. This has involved a holistic approach in which redistribution of land is complemented by a wide variety of supportive programs including in education, housing, healthcare, and media/communications (Wilpert 2006, Lavelle 2013, Enriquez 2013; Davila 2014). Fishing communities have benefited from similar programs, and from the banning of industrial trawling off the Venezuelan coast (Sharma 2011; Schiavoni and Camacaro 2009). These rural initiatives have been complemented by a range of largely urban-based food access programs, reaching schools, workplaces, and households (Alayón López 2016). Equally important to food sovereignty efforts are diverse forms of popular organization, from territorially-based communal councils and *comunas* to sectorally-based farmers and fishers councils, among others. Supported through a series of Popular Power laws, these forms of organization, considered cornerstones of the Bolivarian Revolution, contribute to broadening direct popular participation in the food system (McKay et al. 2014). Together, these state-led and citizen-led efforts form a complex web of agrifood system initiatives that has been woven and re-woven over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, reflecting shifting political conditions (Schiavoni 2017).

Such initiatives have seen important gains and limitations. Among the most notable outcomes to date was the surpassing of the first Millennium Development Goal of cutting hunger in half in advance of 2015, as recognized on numerous occasions by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO 2013, 2015). Over 2008-2011, hunger was reduced to an average of 3.1% of the population, while Venezuelans on average were consuming 121% of the baseline daily calories recommended by the FAO for an adequate diet (FAO 2017) – gains largely attributed to the above-mentioned food distribution programs, as well as an increase in purchasing power among the poor that broadened access to supermarkets and other outlets. While many of these advances were supported by oil revenues of Venezuela's nationalized petroleum industry, in an important break from the past, such advances came largely from a reinforcement of the agroimport complex, not from alternatives to it. The efforts toward agrarian reform in the countryside, while also receiving significant investment (Davila 2014), were happening on largely parallel tracks. While some important inroads were made in connecting the two, there was far from a rupture of the historic power of those who controlled the agrifood system. Thus, more feeding programs meant more food import, which meant increased consolidation of the agrifood import complex, reinforced through multiple

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<sup>5</sup> For explorations of food sovereignty as a concept and movement, see Patel 2009; Wittman et al. 2010; Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010; Edelman 2014; and Edelman and Borras 2016. For such explorations as related to Venezuela, see Schiavoni 2017.

mechanisms of the state. Among these mechanisms is the granting of dollars from oil revenues to private enterprises, at highly subsidized rates, for the import of food and other goods deemed essential. These dollars are from petroleum revenues, from which Venezuela derives 95% of its foreign exchange--the same revenues that are funding social programs. This means that dollars from the state, while going into many social programs, have also been flowing into the private agrifood import complex over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, amounting to major subsidies for the most powerful companies (Gavazut 2014). For those benefiting from these arrangements, both directly and indirectly, there is little incentive to alter this system.

It is important to contextualize both the advances and shortcomings of food sovereignty construction under the Bolivarian Revolution in the history presented above. Without explicit recognition of patterns of dispossession, accumulation, and consolidation of power via the agrifood system over time, as well as the rich history of resistance to these, one is left with the impression that the agrifood policies of the Bolivarian Revolution arrived to a rather blank slate, and/or arrived on a political whim. This brings us to a trend across much of the literature on Venezuela, in which the government's reliance on oil to fund its social programs is approached as *the* fundamental contradiction of the Bolivarian Revolution, with many analyses taking as their starting point how petroleum extractivism and rentierism are at odds with a revolutionary project, rather than how a revolutionary project arose in response to extractive structures of the past, seeking to transform them while being deeply embedded within them, with the inherent constraints and contradictions entailed. Many of the theses focused on extractivism, rentierism, and 'petro-socialism' applied to Venezuela under the Bolivarian Revolution (e.g., Lavelle 2016; Chiasson-LeBel 2016; Purcell 2017; Lander 2014b, 2017) are reflective of the broader literature on Latin America's 'Pink Tide,' in which patterns of extraction dating back to agroexportation under colonization, followed by similarly violent processes of agricultural modernization are little mentioned, as are forms of resistance to these. The 'Pink Tide' is then seen as a discrete cycle with a definitive start, and for some, already a definitive end. Similarly lacking from much of the literature is a positioning of the Bolivarian Revolution within a 'dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution', as described by Bello (2017). Analyses of Venezuela that do not take sufficient account of revolutions and rebellions of the past tend to miss how the Bolivarian Revolution represents an unleashing of long-coalescing popular power and an attempt to harness the state toward the furthering of this power (Ciccariello-Maher 2013a). On the flip side, if the revolutions of the past are not sufficiently appreciated in many analyses, neither are the counterrevolutions of the present, in the form of multiple ongoing attempts to delegitimize the Bolivarian Revolution and dismantle its gains—as we will return to shortly.

### **Power in the food system: the *maiz-harina-arepa* complex**

The processes of accumulation and differentiation vis-a-vis Venezuela's agrifood system over the course of history can be synthesized in the case of the country's most widely consumed food, a corn patty called the *arepa*, made from flour known as *harina precocida de maiz* (precooked corn flour). To explore this, we will focus on what we call the *maiz-harina-arepa* (corn-flour-*arepa*) complex, which allows us to read this history from production to consumption. This complex dates back to pre-colonial times, when corn figured prominently within Indigenous cosmovisions and foodways (Escalona and Escalona 2001; Saturno 2016; Lovera 1988). Across this period, a rich diversity of corn in terms of colors, textures, flavors, and agroecological adaptations was inextricably linked to the *conuco* and other Indigenous polyculture systems. With the colonial invasion, a process of differentiation of production

models and foods for the purposes of accumulation was initiated. Within this dynamic, the Spanish grain of preference, wheat, came to take on a complex relationship with corn, in which the two, together with *casabe* made from cassava, another Indigenous staple, formed a corn-wheat-*casabe* complex that helped sustain the Triangle Trade of the colonization project (Amodio and Molina 2017). All the while, wheat was upheld as superior, associated with civilization and progress (Amodio and Molina 2017, Lovera 1988). For the most part, wheat was supplied through importation, as it was not adapted to Venezuela's agroecosystems, with the exception of the Andean region, where it was, and continues to be, grown.

Patterns of production, processing, and consumption of corn remained largely unaltered for many years. This changed in the 1960s, when precooked corn flour was introduced as a product of the modernization process, with reverberations across the agrifood system. On the production end, corn was extracted from the *conuco* and inserted into industrial monoculture production, dependent on certified commercial seed varieties of multinationals like Pioneer and Cargill (Vielma et al. 2005) and increasingly homogenized, to the extent that commercial hybrid white corn comprised 95% of the corn grown in Venezuela by 1992, by FAO estimates (FAO 1994). No less dramatic were the changes to the processing of corn for precooked corn flour, in which the kernel is 'dehulled, degermed, precooked, dried, flaked, and milled' (Peña-Rosas et al. 2014: 2). In the process, its more nutritional outer layers are removed and used separately for industrial animal feed (Peña-Rosas et al. 2014; Gwartz and Garcia-Casal 2014; Ranum et al. 2014), yielding a nutritionally poor substance lacking in vitamins and minerals that then requires fortification to meet basic nutrition standards (Ablan and Abreu 1999; Garcia-Casal and Layrisse 2002). This phenomenon, in which original nutrients are removed while others are artificially added, can be understood as a form of 'nutritionism' or 'nutritional reductionism,' as described by Scrinis (2012), placing Venezuela on the cutting edge of trends that are today coming under fire by health advocates (Patel et al. 2015). Precooked corn flour was largely destined for the *arepa*, which had been prepared in essentially the same way since pre-colonial times (with the exception of the introduction of the *pilón*, a type of wooden mortar, by enslaved Africans during colonization). Preparation mainly took place at home, largely managed by women, while pre-prepared homemade dough was also vended on the streets by women known as *areperas*. The introduction of precooked corn flour dramatically reduced its preparation time, making it integral to processes of proletarianization and urbanization, and in little time, this became the principal staple of Venezuela's poor working class. By the 1990s, per capita consumption of precooked corn flour was 80 grams on average per day across the population, and 110 grams on average among the poorest sectors (Garcia-Casal and Layrisse 2002).

The homogenizing effects of the rise of precooked corn flour in Venezuela cannot be overstated. Within four decades, it came to represent 88% of all corn consumed (Abreu and Ablan 2004). Through these changes, the basis of the Venezuelan diet shifted from a wide variety dishes produced through the diversity of the *conuco* to *arepas* of homogenous taste, texture and appearance, made from industrially grown and processed white corn. Such phenomena share some striking parallels with the rise of industrially processed white bread in the U.S. from 1890-1930, through which bread was transformed from 'brownish, heterogenous and unruly' to 'white, sliced and modern' as a materialization of concerns over purity, hygiene, and sanitation that 'were irrevocably entangled with larger anxieties about racial purity' (Bobrow-Strain 2013: 266-267). Similar trends can be seen across the *maiz-harina-arepa* complex, in which racially laden discourses of 'quality control,' from management of seeds to food handling processes, stripped these processes from the Afro-Indigenous majority who had been feeding itself. Particularly strong was the gender

dimension, as the site of the processing of corn for *arepas* shifted from the home, controlled mainly by women, into enterprises controlled mainly by men.

From the first commercialization of precooked corn flour into the present, there is one brand that has become synonymous with it, to the point that it is used interchangeably with the generic term '*harina precocida*,' in a phenomenon common with monopolies called trademark vulgarization (Vallenilla 2009). That brand is called Harina P.A.N. 'Harina P.A.N.' is such a household term that little consideration is given to the power of the dual acronym and homonym contained in its name, which is also an example of what is known in marketing as 'sound symbolism' (Klink 2000). As an acronym, P.A.N. stands for Productos Alimenticios Nacionales, National Food Products, while P.A.N. is a homonym of *pan*, meaning bread. Despite the humble origins portrayed in Harina P.A.N.'s marketing campaigns, the family behind this brand, the Mendoza Fleury, comes from a long lineage tracing back to the colonial elite, appearing among the families associated with the *casas comerciales*, and later the petroleum concessions, and related to the first president of the Republic, Cristóbal Mendoza (McBeth 1983; Araujo 1968). With key posts in both the government and private sector over time, this family's history is demonstrative of the multifold linkages across the state-society-capital nexus. Today they are among the most powerful families in the country and are best known as the owners of Empresas Polar, the consortium responsible for supplying the most widely consumed foods and beverages in Venezuela, particularly *arepas* and beer. These two are directly linked, in fact, as precooked corn flour emerged as a byproduct of the corn that was being used as an ingredient in Polar's beer (Vielma 1998). Polar is the largest private company in Venezuela, with transnational linkages including serving as Venezuelan subsidiary of PepsiCo, and with its products reaching global markets.

At present, Polar controls an estimated 50-60% of Venezuela's supply of precooked corn flour, the most-consumed staple food of Venezuelans, and particularly of the poor (Schipani 2017; Curcio 2016). Such a degree of control is only possible through a combination of vertical concentration, strategic linkages with the state, and well-crafted marketing penetrating both public and private spaces, including the most intimate spaces of everyday life. On the production end, Polar's Fundación Danac, with a germplasm collection of more than 600 corn varieties, has come to control much of the genetic base of Venezuela's certified corn seeds, with much influence over research and seed certification (Chassaigne-Ricciulli et al. 2012; Chassaigne 2010; Bastidas et al. 2015; Fundación Danac 2017; Diario Qué Pasa 2014). Polar (via its subsidiary REMAVENCA) also has direct links with corn producers via contract farming arrangements, as well as links with large-scale producer groups that form part of FEDEAGRO (Vielma et al 2005). The principal benefit to Polar of its degree of control over corn production in Venezuela has been the orientation of much of the country's agriculture sector around the near-exclusive production of varieties of white corn<sup>6</sup> with the highest yields in the kernel extraction process of precooked flour production. On the distribution end, Harina P.A.N. has traditionally reached customers through a variety of retail outlets, particularly supermarkets, and more recently, high-volume 'hypermarkets'. In addition to being a key shareholder of the Cada supermarket chain, Polar played a leading role in the spread of hypermarkets in Venezuela when it partnered with Dutch firm SHV to launch Venezuela's largest hypermarket chain, Makro, in 1992.

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<sup>6</sup> White corn comprises more than 40% of harvested surface area nationally, according to the agricultural census of 2007 (<http://censo.mat.gob.ve/>).

Polar's involvement in the retail sector secured important distribution channels, but a primary task was to secure its market. Among the first ways it did so was to target Venezuelan housewives, again paralleling the spread of industrial white bread in the US, in which women's 'lives, habits, and desires represented the most important battlefield' and in which the housewife was seen as 'either a competitor or a customer' (Bobrow-Strain 2013: 272-274). Among Polar's strategies was employing the slogan "Se acabó la piladera," "The days of the *pilón* are over," referring back to technology used over generations by Afro-Indigenous women, and portraying the *pilón* as drudgerous and backwards in its ads. This was complemented by a more 'grassroots' strategy of training thousands of women to go into neighborhoods to teach other women how to make *arepas* from Harina P.A.N. (Caldeira and Tovar 2013). Polar's strategies targeting women also included differentiations by class, including specific 'bottom of the pyramid' (BOP) marketing strategies targeting poor women (Ozegovic 2011; Ireland 2008). From its initial strategy focused on housewives, Polar continued in its attempts to penetrate not only the market, but the everyday lives of Venezuelans, with Harina P.A.N. The result has been a broad-based set of approaches reaching multiple segments of society, from traditional approaches like billboards, tv, and print media, to the sponsorship of key cultural events, especially baseball games, where beer and *arepas* go hand-in-hand, to playing a leading role in research and publishing through the its Fundacion Polar, to a prestigious award for scientists (el Premio Polar) to forms of 'corporate social responsibility' that have garnered it international attention (Schipani 2017). Through these and other means, Polar has positioned its Harina P.A.N. as the 'brand of birth of all Venezuelans,' (Torelli 2013). Given its ubiquity in Venezuelan households, this might not be a far-off claim.

There are several elements within Polar's marketing strategy that are worth highlighting in light of our theme. First is the visible shift over time from Harina P.A.N. evoking modernity and moving away from a primitive past to what has now become a nostalgic view of an idyllic past evoked through the same product. Connected to this is the iconic image of a woman's face on its package, a sort of Venezuelan version of Aunt Jemima, in a trend not uncommon to food marketing (Roberts, 1994). With Afro-Indigenous features and her hair wrapped in a kerchief, she appears the embodiment of an *arepera*, a user of the *pilón* that Polar had deemed an antique of the past, her features standing in stark contrast to the whiteness of the flour contained within the package. While the significance of an apparently rural, working-class, Afro-Indigenous woman as the face of a brand that is on many levels of product of whitening, urbanization, and masculinity remains open to interpretation, the parallels with the complex relationship of dependency and disdain of the colonizers of the food and foodways of the colonized, as discussed above, are rather striking. And of course, from a pragmatic marketing standpoint, this is a face with which the majority of Venezuelans, representing the majority of potential customers, are likely to relate. Finally, another trend seen throughout much of Polar's marketing of Harina P.A.N. is its evoking of national identity, in which Harina P.A.N. is equated with the *arepa*, which is equated with Venezuela and *venezolanidad*. This connects to a number of observations made by Ichijo and Ranta (2016: 61) on food, national identity, and nationalism, including how perceptions of food impact how we view ourselves and our national identities; how food can serve as an important means of 'concretizing' national identities; and how '[t]his has in turn helped to construct and reproduce food images, tastes and qualities as belonging to or originating from a particular national setting.' With this combination of nostalgia for an idyllic past, use of popular imagery reflecting the majority of the population, and evoking of national identity, Harina P.A.N. might be thought of as a 'charismatic food,' to borrow from Kimura's (2013: 19) conception of 'charismatic nutrients' whose cachet 'depends on sociopolitical networks built around them.'

Polar's reach within the psyche of many Venezuelans, even influencing how they see themselves and their nation, speaks to its tremendous amount of symbolic accumulation, while its vertical integration throughout the *maiz-harina-arepa* complex and its monopolistic control of Venezuela's top-consumed food (among other highly consumed products of Venezuela's food basket, including cooking oil and margarine<sup>7</sup>) speaks to its tremendous amount of material accumulation. Together, these represent a convergence of diverse forms of power, spanning what Gaventa (2006: 29) describes as visible forms (highly visible, in many instances) to invisible forms that influence 'how individuals think about their place in the world' as well as their 'beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the status quo – even their own superiority or inferiority.' The implications of Polar's multiple forms of power are many, from the sequestering of the energetic base for the social reproduction of the population; to the definition of practices of 'everyday nationhood' (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008); to the colonization of taste and the creation of addiction. To the last point, Abreu and Ablan (2004) highlight that precooked corn flour, vegetable oils, and refined sugar are the principal foods from which Venezuelans on average derive their energy, each of which Polar is a principal supplier. Perhaps most telling of the sheer extent of the penetration of Polar into the everyday of Venezuelans is the common equation of its products, most of all of its Harina P.A.N., with food itself. That is, the idea that without Polar's products, there is no food. This phenomenon has not been lost on Polar, who maintains the ability to keep its products off of the shelves just as readily as its ability to keep them on--a point to which we will return.

Since its emergence in 1999, the Bolivarian Revolution has navigated a complex and often tenuous relationship with Polar, as well forging its own alternatives within the *maiz-harina-arepa* complex, particularly through partnerships among state institutions and farming communities. These partnerships are mainly around national-level planning and coordination of corn production coupled with public financing, with a portion directed toward agroecological production, primarily by cooperatives on former *latifundio* lands recovered through the agrarian reform process.<sup>8</sup> There have also been some efforts in the processing realm, including the establishment of twelve state-run corn flour plants and the nationalization of several private plants that had been engaged in illegal practices, although these have yet to reach a significant scale of production. Another strategy for trying to ensure the population's access to this staple food has been the regulation of retail prices as well as monitoring of private sector practices. Current circumstances have called for a reenvisioning and reinvigoration of both productive and regulatory capacities of the state. While the revolution has made some incremental gains into corn flour production, Polar continues to maintain relative hegemony. Beyond its physical control is its cultural and symbolic control, as the brand of preference of most Venezuelans. However, while relations between Polar and the government have been tense over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, they have not been entirely oppositional, with the two in fact having deep ties across distinct ambits of the *maiz-harina-arepa* complex. Key among these is the provision of raw materials for Polar's products, especially white corn, both directly supplied by government-supported cooperatives (responding to limited capacity of the state to absorb production, plus national preferences for Polar's products) and through the above-mentioned provision of dollars for importation at highly subsidized rates, of which Polar is among the top recipients (Gavazut 2014). Such linkages are being further solidified in the present conjuncture, as we turn to next.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://empresapolar.com/negocios-y-marcas/alimentos-polar>

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Gabriel Gil, 10 January, 2018



### Food lines and fault lines

We can see from the above how the contours of the Venezuelan food system are shaped by the pushes and pulls of state, society, and capital over time, in a delicate balance of forces characterized by both deep tensions and deep ties, with repercussions felt throughout everyday life. The fragility of this balance came to the fore in recent years, particularly in 2013 onward, in the form of large food lines that became emblematic of present-day Venezuela, seen across the globe through images reproduced many times over by the international press. The next set of images to reach international audiences, first in 2014 and then much more intensely in 2017, were of ‘the people’ taking to the streets. The image was of spontaneous ‘food riots’ that were over time combining with more organized ‘pro-democracy’ protests, as part of a global surge of popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes. The riots, according to the narrative, were sparked by the lines, which were a product of scarcity brought about by the drop in oil prices combined with government mismanagement. This combination of factors has come to mark is what widely regarded as the current conjunctural crisis of Venezuela’s food system, as part of a broader conjunctural political and economic crisis facing the nation. We will now take a closer look at the current conjuncture and some of its defining features.

Starting with the lines, it is important to look at their composition, their location, and what products are being sought. In terms of composition, those in the lines have been overwhelmingly poor working-class women. This has constituted an attack on everyday life at the household level (Davies 2017; Alzuru 2015), as well as an indirect attack on everyday life of the popular organization of the Bolivarian Revolution, in which women have played a key role (Guédez 2015). The lines have been largely outside supermarkets, and are to access *certain specific items* that have gone largely missing from supermarket shelves. These consist of the most consumed industrially processed foods of the Venezuelan food basket, particularly precooked corn flour (Curcio Curcio 2017). It is the selectivity of the missing items - that is, that the items missing are those deemed most essential to the population - that tends not to make the headlines, and that points to holes in narratives on scarcity. That is, while precooked corn flour went missing, corn-based porridge remained available; while milk powder went missing, fresh dairy products like cheeses remained available, etc.

There are a number of additional elements pointing to holes in the scarcity narrative, three of which we will highlight here. First is that the same items missing from shelves have continued to be found in restaurants. Second is that *by their own accounting*, private food companies including Polar continued to maintain steady production levels at least through 2015 (Curcio Curcio 2017). A representative of Polar, in fact, spoke of the recent addition of new products including teas and gelatins to their Venezuelan lines in a 2016 interview.<sup>9</sup> Third is that even before widespread government responses to the shortages kicked in (as described below), corn flour consumption levels among both higher- and lower-income sectors of the population remained steady from 2012-2015 (ibid.). Thus, while the shortages have generated tremendous anxiety and insecurity, and while accessing certain goods has become more time-consuming and complicated, Venezuelans have indeed found ways to access them.<sup>10</sup> In addition to enduring the lines, another access channel has been through an illicit parallel economy, through which goods such as corn flour are sold at prices many times the original cost. While individuals have turned such practices into business opportunities, private enterprises have done so as well, in the form of both hoarding of goods for speculative

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<sup>9</sup> The interview can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSmShwmm17U>.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Pasqualina Curcio, June 2016

purposes as well as smuggling them across the Colombian border, with regular discoveries of stockpiles serving as further indication of goods being intentionally diverted from supermarket shelves (Mills and Camacaro 2015).

Political economist Francisco Dominguez (2016), who lived through Chile of the 1970s and whose research includes Venezuela, notes striking parallels between present-day Venezuela and Chile under Allende in the period prior to the US-backed coup of 1973, as have others (e.g., Curcio Curcio 2017; Camacaro and Mills 2015; Harnecker 2016). During this time, as Bello (2017: 16) reminds us, US President Richard Nixon, regarding Chile, ordered the CIA to ‘make the economy scream.’ This included a covert financial blockade along with support for the right-wing counterrevolution, manifested in shortages, lines, stockpiles and street protests, among various other forms of disruption that parallel what is being seen today in Venezuela. Furthermore, this was done in a context of depressed global prices of copper, upon which Chile depended for its foreign revenue. This drop in copper prices, together with the ‘failed socialist policies’ of Allende, were ostensibly to blame for Chile’s troubles, as reinforced through an international media campaign. While the extent of US involvement in Chile’s counterrevolution would not be fully understood until years later when key documents were declassified, there are already ample examples of overt US aggression toward Venezuela to point to, in the form of a string of intensifying economic sanctions spanning the Obama and Trump administrations, as well as an all-out economic blockade that has made it extremely difficult for the government to make payments on food imports and manage its debt (Weisbrot 2017, Harris 2017, Mision Verdad 2017). Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, ex-CEO of Exxon Mobil (an offshoot of the Rockefellers’ Standard Oil), sums up US policy toward Venezuela in his statement that, ‘We are evaluating all of our policy options as to what can we do to create a change of conditions where either Maduro decides he doesn’t have a future and wants to leave of his own accord or we can return the government processes back to their constitution’ (BBC 2017). Another State Department representative, in a recent press briefing on Tillerson’s upcoming Latin American tour, largely focused on Venezuela, was quoted as saying:

The pressure campaign is working. The financial sanctions we have placed on the Venezuelan Government has forced it to begin becoming in default, both on sovereign and PDVSA, its oil company’s debt. And what we are seeing because of the bad choices of the Maduro regime is a total economic collapse in Venezuela. So our policy is working, our strategy is working and we’re going to keep it on the Venezuelans. (US Department of State 2018)

Bello (2017: 16-17) also reminds us, however, that ‘US intervention [in Chile] was successful because it was inserted into an ongoing counterrevolutionary process’ that ‘was largely determined by internal class dynamics’ and that ‘the Chilean elites were able to connect with middle-class sectors terrified by the prospect of poor sectors rising up with their agenda of justice and equality’. This reflection could not more perfectly capture the dynamics in Venezuela as well, which have long been characterized by the dialectics of revolution and counterrevolution, in which the middle class plays an absolutely pivotal role. This brings us to a shortcoming of McKay’s (2017:5) state-society-capital nexus, which is that little mention is made of the middle class, other than that, ‘Although there are certainly other class fractions and transitional classes such as semiproletarians and petty bourgeoisie which at times are in contradictory class positions, their socio- economic and political interests are influenced by [the] principal contradiction’ between labor and capital. While this may be the case, the role

of the middle class has proven key to shifting state-society-capital relations in Venezuela, as also reflected in the case studies of Bello (2017), meriting greater analytical attention.

This brings us to another key feature of the present conjuncture, which are the street protests characterized as ‘food riots’ in the dominant narrative, particularly the latest and most intense round of them in 2017, to which we now turn. An important piece of context underlying these is that while the food lines began to become a phenomenon in 2013, they intensified over time, and are attributed with being a key factor in the transfer of control of the National Assembly from *chavista* majority aligned with the Bolivarian Revolution to opposition majority under the MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable) at the end of 2015. Among MUD’s campaign strategies had been its ‘La Ultima Cola’ (‘The Last Line’) commercial, depicting dissatisfied people standing in the ‘last line’ they would have to endure - to vote for the MUD, which would do away with the lines once in power.<sup>11</sup> Of particular note was the working-class appeal of the commercial, with the composition of the people in the line reflective of the majority of the population, in contrast to the wealthier and whiter base associated with the MUD. It did not take long for the MUD to return to this base, however, upon its ascent into the Assembly, with the 2nd Vice President of the new National Assembly, Freddy Guevara, openly calling for ‘the people’ (i.e., MUD supporters) to take to the streets causing mass disruption, ‘until the only option of the dictatorship would be to accept the less traumatic solution’ (El Nacional Web 2017) – in ominous echoing of Tillerson’s quote above.

What ensued was an assortment of manifestations, drawing from peaceful resistance tactics associated with global social justice movements, on the one hand, and acts of violence on the other. Largely limited to the wealthiest areas of several cities despite their portrayal in the media as nationwide,<sup>12</sup> these ranged from street barricades and vandalism, to picnics and barbecues, to candlelight vigils, to physical assaults, to the hurling of ‘puputovs’ of human feces (Gupta and Veron 2017). But within this seemingly disperse set of tactics was precision on certain fronts, including a systematic attack on state-run social programs, such as the burning of buses providing subsidized public transportation and vandalism of public health facilities (Primicia 2017). Especially strong was the attack on the agrifood apparatus of the state, including arson of the National Institute of Nutrition, vandalism of laboratories for the production of ecological farming inputs, and multiple burnings of food supplies destined for government feeding programs, including one on the magnitude of 40 tons of food, as well as the burning of vehicles associated with these programs (Alba Ciudad 2017, Blanco 2017; Koerner 2017; Telesur Tv 2017). Also among the burn targets, tragically, were people, specifically those seen as fitting the characteristics of *chavistas* (i.e., poor and brown-skinned). The most visible of these burnings was that of Orlando Figuera, a young Afro-Venezuelan supermarket worker, whose gruesome burning alive as countless onlookers did nothing to intervene, in a scene strikingly Victor Hugo-esque<sup>13</sup>, was captured on video (Grandin 2017). While Orlando did not survive his attack, dying shortly after, another burn victim of similar demographics, Carlos Ramirez, did, albeit with severe burns covering his body. Ramirez described pleading for his life, shouting “Don’t kill me! I’m not *chavista*! Please don’t kill me!”<sup>14</sup> as a group of street protesters brutally beat him and set him ablaze (The Prisma 2017).

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXeMn2sBqis>

<sup>12</sup> Guarimbas were located in only 18 out of 335 municipalities in the country:

<http://www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/garcia-carneiro-solo-cinco-municipios-pais-generan-violencia/>.

<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, chapter 8 of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, ‘Billows and Shadows.’

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNyFap5IhhE>

The racial elements of these attacks associated with the violent street protests, known as *guarimbas*, are apparent, and speak to what Cannon (2008: 731-732) has described as a ‘class/race fusion’ with ‘deep roots in the country’s history’. The protesters are for the most part the grandchildren of the middle class that emerged over the period of modernization and whitening, with important links to the country’s elite, forming a middle-class-elite alliance known as ‘*sifrinaje*’ (López 2015). While this has been largely obscured by the media, a rare exception is found in a *Bloomberg* article on the nightlife of the protesters (‘The Manhattan of Venezuela Parties Against a Backdrop of Crisis’), whose gathering spots included upscale rooftop shisha bars, with one protester quoted as saying ‘You protest in the morning, but that doesn’t mean you stop living’ (Rosati 2011). While the protesters were not homogenous, those featured in this article challenge the narratives of repressed masses, while also highlighting the differentiated impacts of the protests, in which some managed to maintain their everyday lives in relative comfort, while others struggled to maintain theirs. Regarding the latter, another form of violence of the protests, largely invisibilized, was their impacts on daily life of the poorest sectors, who did not have the luxury of missing work, for whom basic life activities became daily struggles, between transportation shutdowns caused by roadblocks and fear of physical violence. Particularly disadvantaged were the domestic and service sector workers who had to travel to and from the wealthier areas where the *guarimbas* were concentrated on a daily basis. Food access, already difficult from the shortages, lines, and vandalism against government food programs, was further impeded due to the majority of supermarkets being concentrated these wealthier areas.

The dynamics of the *guarimbas* and their differentiated impacts reflect a continuity from the past, in which the elite looked upon the Afro-Indigenous majority with a complex and contradictory combination of subordination, disdain, and dependency. The working-class people in the vicinity of the *guarimbas* were expected by the protesters to continue to serve them, while remaining largely invisible, and to the extent that they were visible, were looked down upon. This ‘othering’ of the Afro-Indigenous majority associated with the Bolivarian Revolution by middle and upper classes of the opposition, through, for example, use of racist slurs and images, has been well documented (e.g., López 2015; Eisen 2014; Ciccariello-Maher 2016; Cannon 2008). And yet, the elephant in the room is that the involvement of the working-class majority has in fact been a key missing link for the legitimacy of the *guarimbas*, with their absence thus far glaring. This has left elements of the opposition scratching their heads as to *¿Por qué no bajan los cerros?* (‘Why don’t the hills come down?’), referring to the hillside *barrios* of Caracas, well-known hotbeds of rebellion. This same question has also surfaced as a topic of debate in academic circles of both the Right and Left (e.g., Stefanoni 2017).

Meanwhile, similar dynamics played out in the countryside, where a series of ‘farmer protests’ were featured in the media. These occurred in two main enclaves of agricultural modernization: the Andean region and the agricultural colony Colonia Turén of the Plains region. Those in the Andes happened concurrently with the urban *guarimbas*, reproducing their tactics and even surpassing their levels of violence, as they blocked the transport of produce destined for markets across the country. These were led by agricultural intermediaries and mid-scale producers, under the supposed legitimacy of their identity as *gochos*, or ‘hard-working mountaineers’ (Eisen 2014), whose ‘pride has never been fully separable from racial superiority’ (Ciccariello-Maher 2016: 57). Meanwhile, in Colonia Turén, hundreds of large-scale European-descended farmers held a Tractorazo, or tractor protest, called by FEDEAGRO, in May of 2017 in protest of Maduro’s proposal of a constituent assembly process, and demanding more subsidies for industrialized agriculture as a way out of the

‘agrifood crisis.’ While in both cases presenting themselves as struggling for the rights of farmers as a whole, both the *gochos* of Andean *guarimbas* and the tractor-based farmers of Turén were in fact those who control much of the means of production, including serving as intermediaries to small-scale producers in the sale of inputs, often through speculative practices. In parallel to the dynamics of the urban *guarimbas*, small-scale farmers of both the Andean and Plains regions refrained from the protests.

Interestingly, the Tractorazo presented a very similar image to the ‘tractorcades’ organized by progressive farm groups in the US in response to the farm crisis of the 1980s and several times since (Roman-Alcalá et al. forthcoming), even though the contexts of the two diverged significantly. This might not be a coincidence, given that within the *guarimbas*, imagery typically associated with the Left also abounded, as magnified by the international press. According to Ciccariello-Maher (2016: 49) in his analysis of the 2014 *guarimbas* that set a precedent for those of 2017: ‘When the Venezuelan right took to the streets under the guise of spontaneous popular resistance to an authoritarian regime, it had patiently studied the tools, imagery, and social media techniques more often associate with progressive or leftist causes’ to ‘integrate [its] protests seamlessly into the narrative of global revolt and resistance’ - with support from US government-funded channels, as he has documented.

With their combination of nonviolent resistance techniques and blatant acts of violence, the *guarimbas* might best be described as ‘Occupy Wall Street meets the Ku Klux Klan.’ While this has only served to further isolate the popular sectors from the opposition and is among the many reasons why the ‘hills haven’t come down,’ the image reinforced by the international press is that of ‘the people’ rising up in response to a ‘humanitarian crisis’ wrought by an ‘authoritarian regime.’ Even for those unfamiliar with the situation on the ground here, however, a closer look behind the headlines and images shows some glaring contradictions. This is especially the case of the *guarimbas* as food riots narrative, given the class and racial composition of the protesters crying ‘*hambre*’ (‘hunger’), described above. Furthermore, a quick glance over social media, such as the postings of Freddy Guevara, dispels any illusion of the spontaneous nature of the protests. Finally, both the targets and tactics of the *guarimbas*, including the burning of food as opposed to a redistribution of it (and food that was specifically destined for the poor), and the burning of people, are a stark departure from what has been observed of food riots over time, from EP Thompson’s (1971) detailed analysis of 18th century food riots in Britain, to more recent analyses of ‘food rebellions,’ associated with the food price crisis of 2007-2008 (Holt-Giménez et al. 2009), which point to certain shared logics of those engaged in these activities, particularly around principles of fairness associated with the collective ‘moral economy.’

Arguably much more fitting of a ‘food riot’ or ‘food rebellion’ in the Venezuelan context would be the above-mentioned Caracazo of 1989, as has been noted elsewhere (e.g., Bello 2009). Articles of the *New York Times* archives of this period include accounts of mass graves, people lined up at morgues in search of loved ones, imposition of curfews, cutting of civil liberties and press freedom, and death estimates upwards of 600 people (New York Times 1989a; New York Times 1989b; Uhlig 1989), with a doctor quoted as saying ‘no country is prepared for what we have confronted this week’ (Uhlig 1989). Interestingly, however, little international outcry against government repression was to be found in the media of this time, with President Andres Perez being looked upon sympathetically for having ‘inherited a deteriorating economic situation’ that necessitated a variety of ‘tough’ measures (New York Times 1989b). Today, in contrast, amidst widespread denunciations of government repression regularly featured in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, a total of 14

deaths associated with the 2017 *guarimbas* have been directly traced to government security forces, while 23 have been directly traced to opposition violence (Venezuelanalysis 2017). While any acts of violence on the part of the government merit concern, attention, and investigation, it bears asking why the international outcry has been so great now, as opposed to the time of the Caracazo, and, why, as a media watchdog group has posited, ‘the imperfect state of democracy in Venezuela’ is source of such outcry while many atrocities in the world today go under-reported (Media Watch 2017). ‘The answers’, they conclude, ‘could hardly be more obvious’ (ibid.).

This brings us to petroleum, as a key reason why Venezuela has attracted so much interest, as acknowledged in the media, as well as a central part of the dominant narrative presented in the introduction, in which petroleum is identified as essential to what had made the government under Chavez so popular (i.e., high petroleum prices along with his charisma) and what has made the government of Maduro less popular (i.e., low petroleum prices along with his lack of charisma). We will highlight several brief points with regard to this. First, economist Luis Salas demonstrates that while indeed petroleum prices were on an uptrend for much of Chavez’s presidency, the price of petroleum being at or around \$100/barrel was an exception as opposed to the norm. This occurred in the last stage of Chavez’s presidency, between 2010 and 2012, whereas the average price per barrel over the course of his presidency was in fact \$55 (Salas Rodríguez 2016). *This happens to be right around where the price of petroleum is at the time of writing.* Second, economist Pasqualina Curcio has demonstrated that the shortages are in fact part of a broader trend seen over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, through both periods of high and low prices of oil, particularly at politically heightened moments such as the lead-up to elections (Curcio Curcio 2017). Furthermore, the shortages seen at present did not begin in 2014, when oil prices dropped, but beforehand, in 2013, while oil prices were still high.

All of the above complicates simplistic narratives around the present conjuncture in Venezuela. Something missing from many of these analyses, which tend to be centered on the government and state, is the absolutely key role of capital and its relations with the state. Bearing in mind the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic, it is imperative to look at the role of the elite in the current conjuncture, whose power extends throughout much of the agrifood system and who is using this moment of ‘crisis’ to further consolidate its power while simultaneously attempting to dismantle the redistributive agrifood policies described above. The latter is toward several ends. First, it is materially attacking much of the population, disproportionately impacting the poor working class, while further frustrating an already frustrated middle class. Second, it is attacking the legitimacy of the government, both internally and externally, particularly through discrediting Venezuela’s reputation as a global reference in the fight against hunger and in efforts toward food sovereignty, as recognized by the FAO.

Within this scenario, three key actors of the elite have deployed a repertoire of actions using populist appeal to gain legitimacy while advancing the interests of capital. First was the ‘Ultima Cola’ campaign of the MUD to gain access to the Assembly, after which it moved quickly to try to dismantle key agrifood policies of the Bolivarian Revolution, including agrarian reform laws and food distribution programs. MUD deputies especially attacked the newly passed Seed Law that had been a product of mass grassroots mobilization, mocking its recognition of the *conuco* and the seeds of Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities. In addition to inciting violence of their base, MUD deputies passed a declaration of ‘humanitarian crisis’ in Venezuela, quickly picked up by the international press, along with an

appeal to the US for intervention. The US government responded with a series of measures including increasingly tight economic sanctions that have ironically hampered the government's ability to respond to crisis, as mentioned above. Meanwhile, as seen with the Tractorazo, FEDEAGRO has used the shortages as a pretext for advancing capital-intensive forms of agriculture, its promotional materials employing '*campesino*' imagery strikingly similar to that of the country's agrarian social movements, while it attempts to roll back their gains in agrarian reform. In the midst of all this, Lorenzo Mendoza, owner of Polar, has emerged a savior figure (e.g., 'The Billionaire Mogul Fighting to Feed Venezuela's Hungry Masses' (Tomaselli 2017)), within circles of both domestic and global elite, receiving both a *Financial Times* 'Boldness in Business Award' and Woodrow Wilson 'Award for Corporate Citizenship' in 2017 alone. In an interview with *Financial Times*, Mendoza said 'I have lots of families depending on me' and spoke of his desire to 'bring Venezuela back to prosperity' (Make Venezuela great again?). He has publicly hinted at presidential candidacy on numerous occasions. These events are not isolated but highly interconnected, as seen, for instance, in a FEDEAGRO member turned MUD deputy organizing a 'Special Commission for the Study of the Agrifood Crisis' attended by representatives of Polar and FEDEAGRO, and in Mendoza's regular appearances in FEDEAGRO assemblies--public manifestations of alliances that run deep.

These elite alliances are not only in opposition to the Bolivarian government, however, but are also connected to it in complex ways. As related to food, these are largely centered around the importation complex and manifested through a series of interactions, both direct and indirect, and both within and outside of the law. Of the dollars of the state designated for imports, the vast majority, around 90%, go to the private sector, for importation of both food and raw materials and also to maintain their operations (Salas 2016). Top recipients include the country's largest national and transnational food suppliers, such as Cargill, Polar, and Nestle (Gavazut: 2014). Curcio Curcio (2017) has documented that the government has consistently given clear priority to the import of food, with dollars allocated for food import growing by 571.7% from 2003-2013, and with continued prioritization of dollars for food import since the fall in oil prices. However, despite the private sector receiving steady amounts of dollars for import of essential goods, the shortages intensified. While a 'flight of dollars' (*fuga de dólares*) among the private sector is well known to exist, this has been met with insufficient government oversight and enforcement, through a combination of corruption and incapacity. Regarding the former, there have been a number of highly visible cases of corruption among public officials and the private sector connected to the food import complex, in addition to those which have gone unreported.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the latter, where there have been attempts to mitigate these practices, officials have faced personal attacks, including assassination attempts, framing, and defamation, on numerous occasions, speaking to the power of the interests involved.<sup>16</sup>

The many problems associated with Venezuela's food import and distribution complex point to various areas for much-needed reforms, from monetary policies to regulatory bodies. The nature of these reforms is subject to lively heated debate, particularly around contentious

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<sup>15</sup> A well-known case is that of 'Pudreval,' in which several thousand tons of imported food that had been destined for government distribution programs was found rotting in containers.

(<http://www.eluniversal.com/nacional-y-politica/140420/se-pudrieron-alimentos-valorados-en-bs-10-millones>)

<sup>16</sup> A high-profile example was the physical attack of the superintendent of the government agency charged with overseeing flows of goods (SUNDDE) as he was overseeing an aggressive campaign against practices of hoarding, smuggling, and speculation in 2013.

(<http://www.eluniversal.com/sucesos/131004/ultimados-tres-sujetos-durante-ataque-a-eduardo-saman>)

topics as exchange rate and price controls, around which there are a variety of analyses and proposals (e.g., Weisbrot 2016; Mallett-Outtrim 2017; Curcio 2017). These debates are critically important. What we want to emphasize, however, in light of our theme, is that the problems we have highlighted above are symptomatic of the fundamental structural problems of a food system based on imports and dominated by the interests of capital, through deep alliances that have been forged over the course of history. There are no quick fixes. This points to the need for wholesale change of this system, beyond individual reforms, which food sovereignty activists have indeed been calling for and working toward, building upon a history of resistance. This brings us to the next section.

### **Resistance: ‘En guerra hay que comer’<sup>17</sup>**

The many manifestations of resistance at the current conjuncture, often missing from the analysis despite their importance, are deserving of their own paper(s), for their sheer magnitude and diversity, the complexity of their interactions across the state-society-capital nexus, and the hard questions they raise. Indeed, this is a focus of forthcoming work on our parts, in addition to an area in which we are personally engaged. What we aim to do here, as we near the end of this paper, is to paint some broad brushstrokes of resistance at present and raise some initial insights and questions, toward contributing to debates around emancipatory politics.

First, if everyday life is the main battleground upon which the difficulties at present are playing out, it is also the frontline of resistance. Not unlike when ‘Mississippi sought to starve black residents into compliance with the racial hierarchy’ in the US Jim Crow era, making ‘mere survival of black agricultural cooperatives [...] a matter of resistance,’ (White 2017a: 21-25), so too can the day-to-day carrying on of poor working-class Venezuelans be appreciated in this light. This survival as resistance extends well beyond the realm of the individual to the collective, expressed in forms of mutual support and solidarity, without which daily survival might indeed be impossible. When the shortages began, this was among the first lines of defense to be activated, as neighbors, for instance, shared and bartered food and other essentials with one another. Thus, while one of the responses to the shortages was the above-mentioned ‘parallel economy’ of contraband goods, another arguably much farther-reaching response was what might be called a ‘parallel solidarity economy’. Related to this was the activation of survival techniques from the past embedded in communities’ collective consciousnesses. These included a reclaiming of traditional food preparation techniques, *by necessity*, as the foods missing from supermarket shelves were substituted with foods that remained locally available, *through prior efforts toward food sovereignty*, like plantains, cassava, and sweet potatoes for processed starches, fresh sugarcane for refined sugar, etc. Perhaps most emblematic of the early days of the shortages was the substitution of corn flour with freshly ground corn for the preparation of *arepas*, as many dusted off their grandmothers’ grinders and put them to use. Another development of this moment was unprecedented numbers of urban dwellers growing what they could on window sills, patios, and in community spaces, adding momentum to what had already been a nascent urban agriculture movement.

Such practices born out of daily survival connect to Figueroa’s (2015: 505) conception of ‘everyday life’ as ‘an ongoing, living process [that] is continually “leaking out the sides”, so to speak, of capitalist structures; its “residue” confounding the attempts of abstraction and alienation to contain it.’ It is in those spaces of everyday life where the workings of capitalism

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<sup>17</sup> ‘In war, one must eat’ - reflection of a Venezuelan food sovereignty activist on the present conjuncture



have yet to fully penetrate, explains Figueroa, that seeds for contextually meaningful food sovereignty are to be found, manifested in everyday practices around food. The rapid unfolding of such survival techniques in Venezuela's urban *barrios* speaks to an enduring connection to agrarian life among many urban residents, despite waves of agricultural modernization, depeasantization, and urbanization (Schiavoni and Felicien forthcoming). Similar trends have manifested in the countryside, where diets have also been penetrated by industrial foods, and where communities have contended not only with food shortages, but also with diminished access to industrial inputs including seeds, feed, and agrichemicals, also subject to shortages and price speculation. Such conditions have prompted shifts among small-scale producers, from commercial varieties to traditional varieties of staple foods, as well as shifts away from agrichemicals toward agroecological practices, with certain parallels to Cuba's special period, albeit with less formal coordination. Furthermore, more rural people who had not been directly engaged in agriculture have been returning to food production, some pooling land and resources into joint efforts.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly, urban folks have been joining such efforts as well, as a growing number of linkages are being made across the urban-rural divide to facilitate food provisioning in the face of the shortages (ibid.).

This surge in interest in alternatives to industrially produced foods and revaluing of the countryside have provided openings for organized movements that had already been working toward such transformations, who quickly worked to forge connections between newly emerging grassroots responses and existing popular organization under the Bolivarian Revolution. Critically important was the extensive groundwork that had already been laid to facilitate such linkages, including existing popular structures, legal frameworks, and institutional alliances. All of this was activated as food sovereignty shifted from what had been a largely political goal of the Bolivarian Revolution to one of immediate material urgency. As one longtime activist and government official explained, reflecting back on the food sovereignty efforts of the revolution, 'We had the vision, and had many things in place, but what we lacked was urgency... Now we have the urgency, we know what we need to do, and have what we need to do it.'<sup>19</sup> An example can be seen in the rural Comuna Maizal, a product of both the agrarian reform process and the construction of *comunas*, mentioned above. When the shortages struck, the members of Maizal, comprised of 1500 families, had already been at work toward food sovereignty since 2009, particularly in the areas of corn and livestock production, and were able to help meet the food needs not only of themselves, but also of surrounding communities, reaching up to 15,000 families (Alba TV 2018). They have even picked up where the state left off, reclaiming state-run factories that had been abandoned due to shortages and inefficiencies in management, and, together with workers, putting them back into production to meet local food needs. Another grassroots effort, one rising directly out of the conjuncture in 2015 called Plan Pueblo a Pueblo (Plan People to People), has built upon the preexisting organization of the *comunas* to forge direct links between rural producers and urban inhabitants, reaching over 40,000 urban working-class families with regular distributions of affordable fresh food within one year of its formation, and over 60,000 families at present.<sup>20</sup> Working directly through the *comunas* has enabled Pueblo a Pueblo to reach a scale largely unparalleled by similar initiatives elsewhere, while avoiding the common pitfall of elitism and exclusivity in local food activism (Schiavoni and Felicien forthcoming).

There are other grassroots initiatives, old and new, that, while they might not be on the scale of El Maizal or Pueblo a Pueblo, are symbolically important for the glimpses into possibilities

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, Gabriel Gil, 10 January, 2018

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Ulises Daal, 15 January, 2018

<sup>20</sup> Alfredo Miranda, personal communication, 5 January, 2018.

for transformation they afford. One such example, emerging in 2014, is the Feria Conuquera, a large monthly alternative market in Caracas featuring agroecologically produced fresh foods and artisanal versions of many of the products missing from supermarket shelves. Beyond a market, the Feria serves as a hub of education and organizing around food sovereignty as well as functioning as a collective bringing together urban, peri-urban and rural food producers, herbalists, and artisans of varied backgrounds. What unites them all is the common identity of *conuquero/a*, meaning one who works a *conuco*. Recalling the historic importance of the *conuco* described above, the assumption of this identity is seen as a form of resistance, rooted in struggles of the past, and is at once a political stance against the industrial food system and a reminder of shared origins. Another initiative is Mano a Mano Intercambio Agroecológico (Hand to Hand Agroecological Exchange) based in the Andes since 2010, challenging the control of intermediaries in circuits of distribution by forging direct links between urban and rural dwellers around principles of solidarity and horizontality (Romero 2012).

These and other grassroots efforts intersect in a variety of ways, as they attempt to break cycles of dependency around the import complex while working to forge a new food system. A key area of convergence is around seeds, as expressed in the Plan Popular de Semillas (People's Seed Plan), an offshoot of the new national Seed Law, which many of these same activists themselves had helped to create (Camacaro et al. 2015; Pérez et al. 2016). As the Law was passed right in the midst of the shortages at the end of 2015, including shortages of seeds and other inputs, a key focus has been on rapidly implementing it from the grassroots up, with an emphasis on seed production, organized around the Plan. The Plan has thus served as a centerpiece linking diverse forms of organization including nucleuses of production and seed sovereignty brigades in various part of the country, including the Andes, Plains, and Amazon regions, as well as urban areas (Romero et al. 2016; Pérez 2016)

While such grassroots responses were among the first to emerge in the face of the crisis, a host of government responses soon followed suit. Among the first was a reorganization of public management in prioritization of food sovereignty, including the creation of three separate ministries out of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land in early 2016. These were the Ministry of Urban Agriculture, believed to be the first of its kind globally, to support the surge of urban production that had arisen in response to the shortages; the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture to prioritize fish, both marine and freshwater, as an alternative source of protein; and the Ministry of Agricultural Production, as a continuation of the former ministry. In reflection of competing production paradigms within the state (Schiavoni 2015), the Ministry of Agricultural Production prioritizes mid- to large-scale industrial agriculture, while a number of programs that had been supporting small-scale farmers were either cut or folded into others. At the same time, the Ministry of Urban Agriculture supports a diversity of small-scale, agroecologically oriented efforts, rural as well as urban and peri-urban. There has also been a prioritization of food sovereignty across other agencies of the state, including those not explicitly connected to food and agriculture, such as the Ministry of Women<sup>21</sup> and the Ministry of Comunas<sup>22</sup>, with the latter overseeing a Communal Growing Plan developed together with *comunas* to coordinate their production efforts around several key crops. Finally, in July of 2016, the Great Sovereign Supply Mission was created as an umbrella body focused on securing national supplies of food, medicine, and other basic goods, from a national security perspective, involving links between public institutions, the military, and citizen bodies, in response to the war-like characteristics of the current conjuncture, raising the issue of the role of the military vis-a-vis food sovereignty efforts.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.minmujer.gob.ve/?q=noticias/la-agricultura-venezolana-en-manos-de-las-mujeres>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.safonapp.gob.ve/?p=6850>

Among the government responses to the crisis, that most intimately linked with popular organizing and most touching upon everyday life, as well as being a space of negotiation across the state-society-capital nexus, are the *Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción*, Local Provisioning and Production Committees, known as CLAPs. CLAPs were initiated in 2016 as a response to the shortages, as a way of supporting food access, starting with the poorest fifth of the population, and now reaching well over half. The basic functioning of the CLAPs is that the government purchases food directly from suppliers, both private and public, and coordinates with organized community bodies to distribute mixed food packages by household. Communities are responsible for organizing themselves into CLAPs, conducting community censuses, and organizing regular community distributions, in which the food is sold at subsidized prices in units of 12-15 kg. Through a massive coordinated push from both above and below, CLAPs reached and estimated 2 million families in their first year, and today there are more than 30 thousand CLAPs throughout the country with the stated aim of reaching 6 million families with regular distributions over 2018, which would be nearly three-quarters of the population (Radio del Sur 2017, Correo del Orinoco 2018). As the flagship food program of the Bolivarian government at present and the most visible and tangible response at the conjuncture, CLAPs have received much attention, both positive and negative, sparking extensive debate. Among the opposition are those who see CLAPs as a last gasp of the Maduro government in a populist strategy to maintain votes, a perspective reflected in much of the media. CLAPs are also subject to heated debate in food sovereignty activism circles of the Bolivarian Revolution, with some seeing them as a reversal of the transformative visions that many have been working toward.

In critically examining these and other debates around the CLAPs, it is instructive to take a look back over history, to instances when similar efforts arose in the context of revolution-counterrevolution dialectics. A particularly striking example are the JAPs of Chile, in response to the counterrevolution at the time of Allende, mentioned above. The JAPs, short for *Juntas de Abastecimiento y Control de Precios*, Provisioning and Price Control Boards, were community bodies similarly responsible for coordinating local distribution of essential goods by household in response to practices of hoarding and price speculation. A key aspect of the JAPs, according to Cerda Castro (2014: 3) is that, “Beyond a form of organizing the provisioning of the population”, they were ‘an instance of political action from the everyday.’ This reflection on the JAPs connects to another instance of emergency food provisioning in the context of revolution-counterrevolution dialectics, seen in the ‘survival programs’ of the Black Panther Party initiated in the late 1960s in cities throughout the US, in the face of a systemic assault on the black population (Abu-Jamal 2004; Henyen 2009; Patel 2012). These included the Free Breakfast for Children Program and a Free Food Program distributing bags of goods not unlike those of the CLAPs. Panther co-founder Hewey P. Newton likened the survival programs to ‘the survival kit of a sailor stranded on a raft. It helps him to sustain himself until he can get completely out of that situation. So the survival programs are not answers or solutions, but they will help us to organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of their situation’ (Newton 1972: 102). While internal debates abounded within the Panthers as to how much of their energy to devote to the survival programs versus other political work (Abron 1998), Abu-Jamal (2004: 71) explains that they were at once an instrument of ‘political development and radicalization of the people’ *and* a means of serving urgent human needs in the face of ‘real poverty and subsistence issues affecting many in the community.’

What we can glean from the Panther survival programs and the JAPs of Chile is that the balancing of immediate material needs and broader transformative work is a tension common to revolutionary projects in the face of counterrevolution, and further that the very act of meeting material needs can itself be revolutionary, when embedded in a broader agenda of transformation. The dual charge confronting the CLAPs of meeting immediate needs while furthering the revolution under the given circumstances is reflected in a number of ‘half and half’ conditions characterizing the CLAPs at present, conditions in many ways reflective of the crossroads at which Venezuela’s agrifood system lies today. First, according to the national coordinator of the CLAPs, 50% of the food in the CLAPs is imported, while 50% is domestically produced, conditions at once reflective of the country’s historically entrenched food importation complex as well as the efforts of recent years to strengthen national production. A second condition brings us back to the state-society-capital nexus and has to do with the partnerships between the government and the private sector sustaining the CLAPs, in which companies are guaranteed access to raw materials in exchange for selling up to half of their processed goods to the state. A third condition has to do with the CLAPs’ double mandate of guaranteeing emergency food provisioning while also strengthening communities’ productive capacities, reflected in the ‘A’ and ‘P’ of the CLAPs. At present, approximately half of the CLAPs are directly engaged in production, while half have yet to be (Contrapunto 2017). The question of model of production represents yet another layer of tension. A fourth ‘half and half’ is reflected in the state-society partnership represented in the CLAPs, which came as a proposal from above that has been met by massive mobilization from below. In this sense, CLAPs can be understood as sites of direct state-society interaction around food, across multiple scales, from the local to the national. The tensions inherent in this balance of forces go in two main directions. On one end is the risk of the CLAPs promoting relations of clientelism between benefiting communities and the state, particularly local state officials, and on the other end is the risk of CLAPs displacing other forms of popular organization, particularly the communal councils and *comunas*--each possibility a subject of extensive debate in food sovereignty circles.

In the midst of all these tensions, and while many logistical challenges remain (particularly in remoter areas, where distributions are less frequent and regular than in urban hubs), CLAPs have yielded tangible results in reducing lines and increasing overall security. One national poll in 2016 (the same year CLAPs were launched) indicated a 57% average reduction in shortages of goods by household<sup>23</sup> and another indicated 58%<sup>24</sup> of the population supporting them. Thus, right now, as they are, CLAPs are important vehicles for food security in the face of the challenges of the current conjuncture. The question that interests us here in light of the theme of this paper is what is the emancipatory potential of the CLAPs, or how can they be vehicles not only for food access, but also *food sovereignty*? Here the work of Fraser (2017) can be instructive. Building upon Polanyi’s ‘double movement,’ Fraser (2017: 38) describes a ‘triple movement’ among political forces of social protection, marketization, and emancipation (i.e., the overcoming of domination), in which ‘each can ally, in principle, with either of the other two poles against the third.’ Applied to the CLAPs, their most obvious and immediate orientation is that of social protection, but, as seen above, this social protection is directly dependent upon the forces of the market. The continuing or strengthening of such an alignment, that is, tipping the balance of any of these half and half scenarios further in favor of capital, could, following Fraser (and following what we have observed of the domination of capital in the Venezuelan agrifood system), run counter to emancipation. The alternative, we argue, is the alignment of the CLAPs with the existing multiple fronts of resistance that

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<sup>23</sup> <http://hinterlaces.com/monitor-pais-baja-indice-de-desabastecimiento-en-hogares-a-573/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.avn.info.ve/contenido/hinterlaces-58-venezolanos-respaldan-clap>

we have just outlined above--or tipping the balance of the CLAPs further in the realm of popular power. That is, the alignment of CLAPs with the *comunas*, with efforts like Pueblo a Pueblo and the Popular Seed Plan, and with other manifestations of everyday resistance that are taking on a myriad of forms. This is not a one-way challenge for the CLAPs, however, but also a challenge for movements engaged in more radical political work to get more serious about and engaged in the pressing needs of social protection currently confronting the population. This is a task to be taken up collectively, with the CLAPs as a key vehicle, among others, or as 'one expression of one response,' in the words of Nicolas Maduro<sup>25</sup>. This points to a multi-way challenge of overall convergence of resistance efforts at the current conjuncture, toward the ultimate goal of emancipation.

Another caveat of Fraser (2017: 41) is that the 'triple movement' framework does not imply a wholesale rejection of markets in emancipatory projects, but 'a new synthesis of marketization and social protection.' This brings us to a key point, and a key vulnerability facing the Bolivarian Revolution, which is that such a synthesis has yet to happen. This places grassroots food sovereignty efforts in a vulnerable position vis-a-vis the market, particularly in the face of inflation and speculation that, along with the shortages, have disrupted access to basic goods like necessary inputs. This has produced a treadmill-like scenario in which for every response, there appears a new attack, and for every attack, a new response. Meanwhile, through a mix of complicity and necessity, the state is protecting agribusiness elite against economic vulnerability through such support as the provision of primary materials, guaranteed purchase of goods, provision of subsidized dollars, etc., while this is the very sort of support that should ideally be going to socioproductive projects such as the *comunas* right now. While this reality reflects certain limits of the state, it also represents certain limits on the part of movements, who, prior to the conjuncture, had distanced themselves somewhat from questions of the market, as if the market (and social protection) were something separate and distinct from questions of emancipation. However, while this had been part of the political culture among both movements and the state, the current conjuncture is pushing a rethinking/reconceptualization, as the importance of the market - and of social protection in the face of destabilization wrought by the market - has become painfully apparent.

In the face of the conjuncture, there are some signs of new syntheses of marketization, social protection, and emancipation emerging. Examples include the creation of new alternative currencies (e.g., 'el panal' of the the Comuna El Panal in Caracas) to facilitate local food production, distribution, and consumption in the face of shortages and inflation,<sup>26</sup> currency which is already being taken up horizontally by other grassroots efforts outside the *comuna*; collaborations among *comunas* like Maizal and efforts like Pueblo a Pueblo with CLAPs to maximize joint food distribution capacities; partnerships among CLAPs and cooperatives resulting from the agrarian reform process in the production of seeds and seedlings to support local agricultural efforts; and efforts by the Jesus Rivero Bolivarian Workers University to develop technological innovations to substitute costly and increasingly scarce imported machine parts in order to address an urgent need for food sovereignty efforts in the realm of local processing. These and other rapidly unfolding developments reflect movement toward greater economic autonomy, among other elements of an agenda for 'agricultural resistance,' as described by White (2017b), framed under the banner of '*agricultura cero divisas*' or 'zero-dollar agriculture' among Venezuelan social movements.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdg9rJNrUcQ>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-economy/venezuelan-community-group-launches-currency-to-combat-cash-shortage-idUSKBN1E92RG>

Such developments present unprecedented openings toward food sovereignty construction in Venezuela at the same time that they bring to the fore challenging questions for movements to grapple with. First, recalling the ‘half and halves’ above, how to address immediate food needs while at the same time taking progressive steps away from dependency on the corporate agro-import complex? And within this process, how to deal with the deeply entrenched ‘colonization of taste’ that feeds and is fed by this dependency, such as the appeal of ‘charismatic foods,’ epitomized by Harina P.A.N.? And how can popular organizing efforts be oriented around these two interconnected challenges, on multiple fronts, while neither competing with each other nor being co-opted by the state? All these questions point to the fact that in Venezuela’s current conjuncture, the urgent tasks of the short-term are defining the contours of broader transformation in the long-term, and that it is within the everyday that the possibilities for emancipation exist.

## **Conclusion**

Going back to the questions posed in the introduction, we suggest that the situation confronting Venezuela today is in fact far more complex than the dominant narrative abounding both in the media and in much of academia, deserving of deeper probing with more finely sharpened tools. Through the lens of food, together with a historical, relational and interactive understanding of agrifood politics and a focus on questions of power as related to race, class, gender and geography, new elements emerge that are key to understanding the present conjuncture. These include:

- Food as a vehicle for social differentiation over time, most fundamentally, in the creation and maintenance of an elite, a middle class aligned with the elite, and a class of ‘others’
- Concentration and consolidation of power in the agrifood system, maintained over time through elite alliances, both within and outside of the state, through both overt and hidden forms of power
- Trends of increasing homogenization, uniformity, and controllability of the agrifood system, from production to consumption, through highly racialized notions of science and modernity
- The forging of intimate relationships with specific ‘charismatic foods’ through practices of ‘everyday nationalism’
- Dependency upon monopolized supply channels and on supermarkets for access to such products
- The disappearance of such products constituting an attack on everyday life, particularly the everyday lives of the ‘others,’ and particularly along lines of gender
- The implication of the state in the products’ disappearance, while the role of private capital remains largely hidden
- Attempted consolidation of power by the elite through proposals for the restoration of the missing products (and of ‘order’ more generally), in counterposition to state programs and policies, with appeals to the working class ‘others’
- A rallying of the middle class in the name of ‘the people,’ against the government and its alliance with the ‘others,’ involving a cooptation of global social justice imagery combined with racialized acts of violence
- All the while, a further strengthening of state-capital relations, constituting a further concentration and consolidation of power in the agrifood system

While far from a comprehensive list, these elements and others, we argue, constitute emerging trends toward authoritarian populism in Venezuela today, stemming from elite alliances long in the making. Such trends dovetail with many of the attributes of authoritarian populism described by Scoones et al. (2017: 2-3), most notably: a) a depiction of politics as a struggle between ‘the people’ and some combination of malevolent, racialised and/or unfairly advantaged ‘Others’; b) the justification of interventions in the name of ‘taking back control’ in favour of ‘the people’, returning the nation to ‘greatness’ or ‘health’ after real or imagined degeneration attributed to those Others; and c) and the capture of democratic institutions to legitimate dominance. At the same time, these trends also raise some new elements that have not yet been very much explored in the literature on authoritarian populism. Chief among these are the invisible - or sometimes so visible as to effectively be invisible - mechanisms of control in the realm of everyday life that facilitate the exertion of dominance over a given population, especially over the working poor. This is particularly the case with regard to everyday practices around food. Arguably, through processes of colonization, modernization, and today, globalization, the entire set-up of the modern industrial food system--i.e., offering foods appealing to the tastes of the masses (tastes that have been conditioned over time), but in a highly controlled and controlling way--easily lends itself to being a tool of authoritarian populism, as is being seen in Venezuela today.

There are important implications of this both for broader scholarship on authoritarian populism and scholarship on Venezuela in particular. Starting with the former, we see the theme of authoritarian populism as connected to food, particularly as connected to the distribution of power in the food system, as being a key area for future research, and urgently so. In fact, we would point to the food system and the politics around it as an important starting point for nearly any study of authoritarian populism in a given location. Recalling the necessity of a historical lens, superimposed with lenses of race, class, gender and geography, this highlights the importance of studying the many ways in which food has been used as tool of control and domination over time, from rationing practices to maintain plantation social order under slavery (McKee 1999) to food deprivation as retribution for political activity in Jim Crow Mississippi (White 2017a) to destabilization of the food supply toward political ends, as seen in Chile under Allende (Dominguez 2016)--practices which can shed light into the present. As Dentico (2015: 1) reminds us, in her reflection on nutrition and pathologies of power:

The linkage between food and health is intuitive. As people we can't survive without food. What is less obvious is the extent to which those two dimensions of every person's life – the way we eat and our wellbeing – mirror the democratic fabric of a society, the tenure of the social pact in any given community, and ultimately the degree to which citizenship is and can be exercised.

Just as food can be ‘at the center of a liberatory agenda’ (White 2017a: 33), a point well known to food movements across the globe, so too can it be a mechanism for the curtailing of basic rights and liberties--a point well-known to those in power that it bears reminding ourselves on the Left as well.

Getting back to present-day Venezuela and the dominant narratives surrounding it, not only do important drivers of the challenges at present tend to get obscured, but so too do the multitude of responses coming from the grassroots, particularly, to borrow the words of Monica White (2011: 13), ‘less formal, but no less important, forms of resistance.’ This phenomenon cannot be separated, we argue, from the common portrayal of the Venezuelan

working class as passive victims rather than active agents. The stereotypes and ‘othering’ that led to the common perception that the majority of Venezuelans were blindly following Chavez, with his petrodollars and charisma, invisibilizing the agency of those who put--and kept--him in power, are doing the same today as they invisibilize, among other things, the unprecedented grassroots advances toward food sovereignty manifesting at present. Such stereotypes of the poor and poverty are so pervasive that it went seemingly unquestioned when a *New York Times* article on starvation in Venezuela (Kohut and Herrera 2017) featured a picture of people eating one of Venezuelans’ most popular dishes, or when an article in *The Guardian* entitled ‘Hunger eats away at Venezuela’s soul as its people struggle to survive’ (Graham-Harrison 2017) reported that in the fishing village of Chuao, ‘Diets have shifted back to patterns more familiar to parents and grandparents, to fish, root vegetables and bananas’<sup>27</sup>--the type of dish many a foodie would pay dearly for.

While such contradictions might be painfully, even laughably, apparent for the average Venezuelan, pieces like those of the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* serve as powerful mechanisms to reinforce the dominant narrative on Venezuela, as international audiences soak them up with little questioning. While this might be excusable for the public at large, it bears questioning why the same dominant narrative is being reproduced so seemingly uncritically in intellectual and academic circles, including those of the Left. Could it be that as academics, we do not always leave our own biases at the door either? This is where the importance of reflexivity comes in, as well as the importance of praxis-based partnerships among scholars and grassroots movements, to ensure that that which we might not be directly experiencing ourselves, from our own places of power and privilege, does not become invisibilized, or that we do not fail to question narratives that fit comfortably within our own realities.

The case of Venezuela has much to contribute to debates in emancipatory rural--and, we would emphasize, *rural-urban*--politics, not the least of which for the glimpse into real-life efforts toward food sovereignty construction it offers—the good, the bad, the surprising, the inspiring—especially given the extent to which ‘analytical categories for “actually existing” political systems fail to capture important gray areas’, as pointed out by Fox (1994: 180). Such gray areas are many when it comes to the simultaneously enviable and unenviable position social movements find themselves in when the state is transformed ‘from simply an enemy to something more complicated’ and they are ‘forced to grapple with the contradictory realities of working with and through government rather than against it’ (Wolford and French 2016: 5). The highly dynamic, complex, multilayered and intimate relationship that many movements here in Venezuela have had--and continue to have--with their government, in all its imperfection, is something that has so befuddled intellectuals both inside and outside of the country, that, grasping for the familiar, e.g., in search of ‘civil society *as we conceive it*’ (Ciccariello-Maher 2013b, author’s own emphasis) and failing to find it, premature conclusions are reached that in turn serve to invisibilize, dismiss, and even degrade struggles on the ground. Or, as Fraser (2017: 36) puts it, ‘focusing on what is absent, we ignore that which is present.’ Not only is this a disservice to oppressed peoples here (and elsewhere), but it is a disservice to other scholars who in turn are not able to draw valuable lessons from the richness of what is happening on the ground. Here it bears highlighting the reflections of Ciccariello-Maher, who has studied the intimate and often highly contentious relationship among grassroots movements and their government in Venezuela:

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<sup>27</sup> Bananas are in fact a recurring theme in the recent articles on hunger in Venezuela, further connected to racialized stereotypes of poverty, ‘othering,’ and the exotification of the poor, trends described by Sheller 2013.



...it seems as though, simply for supporting and identifying with a project of political transformation, these radical organizers have been disappeared with the stroke of a pen from the north, condemned to non-existence, and excluded from a concept of civil society that was not theirs to begin with. To dismiss as “dependent” on the state those who struggled for decades against the state as they struggled against capitalism, earning their political independence often at the expense of imprisonment, torture, and even death, is a misrepresentation at best and an insult at worst. And here is the irony: it is also an *internalization*, disguised as critique, of the worst caricatures of populism and clientelism, in which poor people are defined as simply too dumb to know any better. (Ciccariello-Maher 2013b, author’s own emphasis)

As related to struggles around emancipatory rural-urban politics in Venezuela today, and our role as critical scholars and as activists, this brings us to the ultimate ‘half and half,’ or the ultimate crossroads facing food sovereignty efforts, and broader emancipatory efforts, here. Each day as we write, new forms of aggression against the government, people and process here emerge, the most recent being the EU joining the US in a new round of economic sanctions, amidst an intensifying financial blockade. These have *direct negative implications for food sovereignty activism*. At the same time, each day is also bringing promising new updates in food sovereignty efforts from within our networks - from new partnerships to new innovations forged out of necessity - to such an extent that one can hardly keep up with the rapidly unfolding advancements on the ground (or with the many developments at the national level, for that matter, such as a new Law of Workers’ Productive Councils, passed as we write, that is another tool in the food sovereignty arsenal). For academics concerned about emancipatory politics, this presents us with a choice. We can wait and do post-mortem analyses of all that could have been, or we can join efforts *now* with Venezuelan grassroots movements, not uncritically - as constructive critique is needed more now than ever - but unequivocal in our solidarity with their struggles. We can make pronouncements about the ‘end of the cycle’ of the rise of the Left in Latin America or we can stand with those who see no place for themselves ‘at the end of the cycle’ - those for whom - and by whom - history is still being written, with no sign of an end to their struggles in sight, but for whom giving up is not an option. Facing this crossroads, as scholars and activists, it bears asking ourselves: *which side are we on?*

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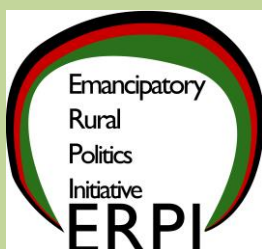
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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