

February Traumas: The Third Insurrectionary Moment of the Venezuelan Right

February 25, 2014

“Today the counter-revolutionary Right is reactivating itself,” according to long-time Venezuelan revolutionary Roland Denis, “taking advantage of the profound deterioration that this slow revolutionary process is suffering. Its reappearance and interlacing with ‘democratic civil society’ is a clear signal to the popular movement that we either convert this moment into a creative and reactivating crisis of the collective revolutionary will, or we bid farewell to this beautiful and traumatic history that we have built over the last 25 years.”[1]

For seasoned observers of Venezuelan politics, the events of the past week are a disheartening repetition of opposition-led resistance efforts that have yet again sought to undermine political stability in the country. This is not the first time in recent history that the opposition has resorted to “extra-parliamentary” tactics, including violence, to push their political agenda. Nor is it the first time that the mainstream media has provided generous airtime to opposition demonstrations in Caracas, repeating the sob stories of upper class Venezuelans “repressed” by the government because they cannot find toilet paper on the store shelves, or in a more laughable episode, ingredients to bake a cake.[2]

As with most situations in which there has been a violent conflict over who controls the reins of the state, it is *possible* to find fault on both sides. As a February 22nd report by the Centre for Economic Policy Research notes, “the political allegiances” of the victims of the violence so far “and their causes of death are varied.” Of the eight deaths, two of the responsible assailants might be linked to the government, including a SEBIM agent (the Venezuelan intelligence service) who was not authorized to be at the protest. The head of SEBIM was subsequently fired and there is a warrant out for arrest of the agents who fired the shots.[3]

Over the last few weeks, the functional role of the privately-owned media viewable in Venezuela, such as the Colombian television station NTN24 which also broadcasts in Colombia, and CNN en Español, based in the US, has been to promote and consolidate a matrix of opinion and interpretation around the recent events in Venezuela: “peaceful protests” have been lined up against “excessive use of force by state security apparatuses.” This frame has found its echo in virtually all of the presidential or prime ministerial statements on the recent conflicts in Venezuela issued by Western imperialist states over the last number of days.

For example, on February 21, 2014 US Secretary of State John Kerry predictably called for an end to violence “on both sides,” criticizing the Venezuelan government for imprisoning “students and a key opposition figure” as well as limiting “the freedoms of expression and assembly necessary for legitimate political debate,” such as revoking the credentials of CNN en Español reporters. [4] A closer inspection reveals, however, that the situation is less two-sided, to put it mildly, than Kerry and his spokespeople in the mainstream media would have us believe. Indeed, this February the counter-revolutionary forces have once again demonstrated blatant disregard for the basic principles of liberal democracy to which they theoretically subscribe.

One of the reasons that it is easy to defeat the opposition’s claims in Venezuela (at least in rational argument) is that their attempts to manufacture consent are largely based upon a series of half-truths, lies and misdemeanors. Unfortunately these misdeeds are continually parroted in the mainstream press as if they were true with no apparent need for fact-checking. For example, on

February 20, *The New York Times*, reported that “The only television station that regularly broadcast voices critical of the government was sold last year, and the new owners have softened its news coverage.”[5] This is an outright lie according to the Carter Centre, which reported in 2013 that private TV media has about 74 percent of the audience share for news, with the state share at just 26 percent, for “recent key newsworthy events.”[6] While withering budgets for investigative journalism might be to blame for some of this inaccuracy in reporting, it is more likely that the corporate media shares the opposition’s vision of “democracy.” In such a vision, any attempt to redistribute a mere fraction of the social wealth in a way that curtails the “freedom” to accumulate capital is a threat to social justice.

As John Kerry lambasts the Maduro government, “This is not how democracies behave,” referring to the imprisonment of some instigators of the protests. By way of context and juxtaposition, on February 12, 30 students were arrested in Venezuela in the wake of barricade building, Molotov cocktail attacks, and tire burning; 7,000 protesters were arrested during the days of Occupy in 122 cities of the United States between 2011 and 2013; and 153 students were arrested in the UK during the 2010 demonstrations against 300-percent hikes in tuition.[7] This is not even to get into what British journalist Gary Younge has called an “open season on black boys” in the United States by vigilantes, and the propensity for police officers to regularly kill unarmed black men with impunity in that country.[8]

The real problem, it seems, is that democracy is supposed to entail competitive elitism and an exchange of office between bourgeois political parties (such as the Republicans and Democrats); it is not supposed to create room for alternative projects whose aim is to reform capitalism, the foundation of liberal democracy itself, by curtailing some of the “freedoms” associated with owning private property, such as controlling the media, buying elections, orchestrating corporate welfare projects, and supporting a foreign policy that keeps the world “free” for accumulation.

Unfortunately, the “democratic” space of the Internet has not fared much better. As Julia Buxton documents in her excellent analysis of social media coverage of recent protests, Twitter feeds have repeatedly circulated false and misleading images of the supposed state-sponsored violence in Venezuela, including images that are in fact of Egypt or of the repression by state security forces that have been disbanded. While such false reporting on social media by average folk might be expected, what is highly problematic is that such “reports” have then been circulated in mainstream press outlets such as the *ABC* paper in Spain and the *Guardian* newspaper in the UK. As Buxton concludes, “journalists have yet to learn that authoritative reporting requires fact-based accounts, not recycled and unchecked tweets from Twitter – a mechanism that can be used to promote delusion as well as democracy.”[9]

Where were the mainstream reporters during the post-election violence in April 2013, when a dozen government supporters died at the hand of the opposition? Where were they when the Chavistas swept the municipal elections by a margin of 10 percent of the popular vote in December 2013? And where have they been every time a landowner has murdered a peasant leader?[10] While opposition supporters complain about the violations of human rights in Venezuela, the supporters of the Bolivarian process talk about the right to information, which is best produced by public and independently controlled and operated community media rather than by the employees of profit-seeking media conglomerates.

Forgotten Archives of a “Democratic” Opposition

It is tempting to imagine that there might be some truth in the pro-democracy slogans of the young people coalescing on the streets of Caracas, but the right-wing opposition in Venezuela, of which this student revolt is a part, has a less than stellar record of comporting itself within the constitutional

parameters of bourgeois liberalism.

They attempted a coup d'état in April 2002, which temporarily removed Chávez from office with the support of the US government. When that avenue closed, and Chávez returned to power with the help of massive demonstrations of public support and military forces loyal to the President, they orchestrated a lockout of the oil industry in late-2002 and early 2003, in an attempt to bleed the economy dry and foment discord among broad swathes of society. That effort soured as well. Indeed, with each lashing of the reactionary whip in these years there was an unintended deepening of self-activity, self-organization, and creativity of popular organizing from below.

The opposition logged a new electoral failure when their attempt to recall the President through a referendum in 2004 was defeated. They cried fraud, as they do in each election they lose, despite universal praise of the fairness and transparency of the Venezuelan electoral system from independent international observers. In 2005, the opposition boycotted the National Assembly elections, withdrawing themselves from the electoral game in a misguided hope that the legitimacy of the political system under Chávez would be undermined altogether.[11] Similar to a small child who has lost her temper after losing the game for the umpteenth time in a row, the opposition's boycott amounted to a tantrum in which the opposition took its ball and went home. And similar to a small child who has become frustrated with playing by the rules, it has resorted to other options when faced with continual defeat: lying, cheating, and challenging the referee.

Last April, following the death of Chávez, presidential elections saw Maduro best Henrique Capriles, the right-wing candidate for the Mesa Unida Democrática (Roundtable for Democratic Unity, MUD), albeit it by a narrow margin of less than one percent of the vote. While this result was too close for many supporters of the Bolivarian revolution who had previously gained comfort from large margins of 10 percent, it would still count as a landslide victory in a country such as Canada where the Conservative Party formed a majority government in 2009 with only 38 percent of the popular vote.

Predictably, the opposition's response to yet another electoral defeat was rage. Capriles and his supporters refused to recognize the veracity of the results and then staged violent protests causing the death of a dozen Bolivarian activists, while leaving another hundred or so injured. The violent vandals of last April also committed extensive property damage to public buildings and institutions. It is worth noting, furthermore, that unlike in the case of the recent Honduran elections - widely recognized by mainstream human rights organizations to have been fraudulent, and which further consolidated right-wing strong man Porfirio 'Pepe' Lobo's grip on that country - the US has never formally recognized the legitimacy of Maduro's presidency.[12]

Once it was evident that provocation in the streets following the April elections was failing to destabilize the regime, or to rally new social sectors to the side of the opposition, the latter regrouped and reconsidered its tactics.[13] The MUD held internal elections to establish a new mandate for its leadership. Capriles came out on top once again, beating Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado, two personalities to which we will have occasion to return in a moment. The revised agenda for the Right was to frame the December 2013 municipal elections as a plebiscite on the legitimacy of the Maduro administration.

In the municipal elections, Chavismo won decisively, regaining some of the political ground lost in the presidential elections eight months earlier. In spite of a voluntary voting regime and a historical tendency of abstention in local elections, there was a turnout of 60 percent. Chavismo won by approximately 10 percent, capturing 242 mayoralties to MUD's 75. This unanticipated outcome for the opposition signified its failure since April last year to undermine the legitimacy of the Maduro presidency.[14] MUD proved itself incapable of disputing the hegemony of Chavismo in the electoral field, even during a year in which inflation rose very sharply to 56 percent and shortages of

foodstuffs and other basic commodities began to proliferate.[15]

Surface Divisions, Integral Unities

Shortly after the results were in, Capriles, now acting as governor of the state of Miranda, changed gears and responded to the second call in the post-municipal election period by President Maduro for opposition mayors and governors to meet with him in the presidential palace and work out a plan of peace and national reconciliation. A photo of Capriles and Maduro shaking hands in the palace was circulated widely in the media, ostensibly ending the Right's strategy of openly questioning the legitimacy of the constitutional President.

Alongside Capriles, the majority of oppositional mayors and governors also attended the dialogues with the President, and agreed to participate in a new program designed to reduce crime and enhance citizen security. The move toward moderation and dialogue was unpersuasive to the hardest elements of the ultra-Right within the MUD coalition, however, and the recent manoeuvring of López and Machado is in part an expression of this tension internal to the opposition.[16]

For many on the Left of Chavismo, however, it is easy to exaggerate the divisions within the counter-revolutionary bloc, and in so doing dangerously obscure their basic unity of purpose.[17] "We are facing the classic counter-revolutionary schema," reads a recent communiqué of the revolutionary socialist current Marea Socialista (Socialist Tide, MS), which operates within the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). "It consists of applying pressure on the government to implement anti-popular measures and in so doing completely lose its social base, deepen its exhausted image in front of the Bolivarian people. As a result, they will be more open to the ousting of the government, whether that ousting is violent or soft. The government of Maduro is committing a grave error insofar as it believes that there is a 'violent' Right and another one that's 'peaceful,' with which the government can negotiate and which will respect the Constitution. As in the old combination of the 'carrot and the stick' these sectors converge among themselves around a common objective, the defeat of the Bolivarian Process." [18]

"These days, fascist violence and the potential of a coup are taking place in a very distinct situation," to the one of 2002, notes Denis in the same essay cited above. His reservations on the depth of division of purpose in the camp of the Right are of the same register as the Marea Socialista communiqué. "That fascist subjectivity planted in 2002 has always remained, diminished but consolidated. In fact, López and Capriles, as the personalities most representative of this 'citizen' movement, have never separated themselves from it, albeit starting from their individually distinct hysterical psychologies and pathologies, and the divisions between them in their original party Primero Justicia. Today they appear as the leaders of the opposition, competing between each other for its singular leadership." [19]

Leopoldo López, together with National Assembly congressperson María Corina Machado, called for the initial demonstration that kicked off the latest events on Youth Day, February 12, under the slogan "La Salida," or "exit," unambiguously signifying their intention to overthrow the democratically-elected government. "Opposition leader Leopoldo López - competing with Capriles for leadership - has portrayed the current demonstrations as something that could force Maduro from office," the American economist Mark Weisbrot reports. "It was obvious that there was, and remains, no peaceful way that this could happen." [20]

The cartography of protest in Caracas has closely mirrored the socio-geographic divisions of the capital, featuring as it does a lighter-skinned and richer east, and a darker-skinned and poorer west. Middle class barricades were erected in the east, populated by the students of elite private universities, alongside students of the main state university - historically, a cordoned off stomping

ground for kids of the rich.[21]

The west, on the other hand, was relatively free of unrest. In the days following the initial explosion of activity, the “peaceful” protests of the Right included attacks on 50 of the public buses from a new system that acts as affordable transport for the poor. The Bolivarian University, a new institutional network designed to incorporate the lower orders into the higher education system, was also besieged. And Cuban medical personnel working for the Barrio Adentro health program have been the targets of fierce physical offensives. According to numerous observers, paramilitary shock troops are operating behind the cannon fodder of right-wing students in the streets. In protests that are supposedly driven in part by the scarcity of foodstuffs and other basic commodities available to the population, rightist militants had the audacity to attack government vehicles delivering precisely such products.[22]

Capriles, meanwhile, has been reluctant to join the call for demonstrations in the streets, and indeed has piously condemned excessive violence by protesters while hoping that popular memory has faded with sufficient rapidity to leave in the past his leading role in calling out protests that led to a dozen deaths last April. With Capriles there is always one hand discretely, cautiously maintaining its measure of the pulse of insurgent conspiracy. If that pulse grows sufficiently strong, he’ll abandon the path of negotiation.

In another sign that the effects of aggressive student protests have thus far alienated moderate sections of the counter-revolutionary bloc, it seems that few political leaders on the Right of any importance – beyond López and Machado – have lent their formal backing to the violent posturing of student and paramilitary demonstrations.

One salient expression of this reality is the active twitter account of Ramón Muchacho, the conservative and fervently anti-Chavista mayor of Chacao, a wealthy eastern district of Caracas. This is what he had to say after a night of student protests in that municipality left the Bank of Venezuela and Provincial Bank damaged, alongside a judicial building, the offices of the Ministry of Transportation, and a local station of Metro Caracas: : “We can see a terrible lack of leadership and direction. Only anarchy. Is this what we want? Will there be some limit to the violence and vandalism? Is what is occurring justified? Is someone going to assume responsibility?”[23]

Portrait of an Unrepentant Coup Plotter

López, in state custody since February 17, and facing an array of charges related to sedition, is the most visible face of this third insurrectionary moment of the Venezuelan Right – the first being April 2002 and the second being the oil lockout of 2002-2003.[24] He hardly emerged out of nowhere. López was the mayor of wealthy Chacao before Muchacho. After finishing prep school in the United States, he studied at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in the 1990s, where he made contact with US establishment figures such as David Petraeus, ex-chief of the Central Intelligence Agency and confidant of Barack Obama in all matters connected to national security.

After the stint at Harvard, López returned to Venezuela, where he established relations with the Caracas offices of the International Republican Institute, an entity of the US Republican Party – the institute lent López strategic and financial support. Beginning in 2002, the Republican Party, then in office under George W. Bush, flew López to Washington on multiple occasions to meet with functionaries of the Bush administration. That same year, López led the opposition march on the Miraflores Presidential Palace in the capital, which resulted in dozens of deaths and precipitated the short-lived coup and kidnapping of then-President Chávez. López is also a longstanding associate of ex-Colombian President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), with whom he met on numerous occasions over the last decade. Uribe was well known for his hard-line against the Chávez regime, which

corresponded with his domestic war of terror against large sections of the civilian population in Colombia under the banner of “democratic security.”[25]

Social Forces on the Right

Back in 2002-2003, the counter-revolutionary bloc consisted mainly of the US embassy in Caracas, the highest echelons of management of the state-oil company PDVSA, the business confederation Fedecámaras, the Central de Trabajadores de Venezuela (Venezuelan Workers Central, CTV), the domestic hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and a variety of other oligarchic and conservative cross-sections of political society. This ugly melange was prettified through the lens of private media empires, both national and international, transforming the coup attempt into a struggle of democracy against tyranny. [26]

Beginning in roughly 2008, the right-wing of the perennially divided student movement was sought out as a new vanguard through which to advance the opposition agenda. The counter-revolution had not enjoyed significant successes in linking organically to any other social subject that might otherwise have flag-shipped their enterprise. The large landowners and big business sectors that constitute their leadership are incapable of forging a national, unifying movement with the incorporation of wider social layers. The presence of the oppositional Right within the formal working class is minimal, as is its influence among the popular sectors more generally, at least for now. It is thus understandable, within its own logic, why the Right has sought out the students as a field of struggle.[27]

In 2008, the US-based Cato Institute awarded the \$US 500,000 Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty to student leader Yon Goicoechea for his role in mobilizing protests against the government’s suspension of private broadcaster RCTV’s licence. Subsequently, a considerable chunk of the US\$ 45 million in annual funding from US institutions to the Venezuelan opposition was directed toward “youth outreach” programs.

As an outcome of such financial backing and logistical training in media campaigns the right-wing Juventud Activa Venezuela Unida (United Venezuelan Active Youth, JAVU) became an increasingly active organization. In 2010, for example, JAVU led protests against ostensible state censorship of private broadcasters, as well as struggles framed as defending the “autonomy” of universities from state intrusion. Inside the heat of the internal divisions of the Right today, the students have openly aligned with the López-Machado faction, transforming themselves into the cannon fodder serving the ultra-Right. [28] “Students as the new social subject of the counter-revolutionary Right is something distinct from 2002,” Denis observes. “They are favoured for their capacity to engage in permanent activism, above all students who do not work and who do not have any social responsibilities.”[29]

If the students are the visible brigades tearing up the cityscapes, a complex configuration of national and transnational networks forms the counter-revolutionary bloc of the present. Fedecámaras remains active, as do the major players in private media, national and international. Political parties, NGOs, and churches are all articulated under the umbrella of MUD. In terms of parties, this fragile unity contains Acción Democrática (Democratic Action, AD); Primero Justicia (First Justice, PJ); COPEI, Causa Radical (Radical Cause, CR); Voluntad Popular (Popular Will, VP); Proyecto Venezuela (Project Venezuela, PV), and a series of other smaller entities of the Right.

Among the multimillionaires backing the opposition is Pedro Carmona, often considered the father of *golpismo* (coupism) in Venezuela. Carmona was briefly declared President by coup supporters in the midst of their abortive attempt to oust Chávez in 2002. Exiled in Colombia at the moment, he is said to maintain a network of complicity in Venezuela. Jorge Roig is one of the businessmen of Carmona’s

politicized network in Caracas, and Eligio Cedeño is a key contact in Miami. Both Roig and Cedeño are openly promoting economic boycott, shortage of goods, and hoarding at the moment. They are also alleged to have financed various *golpista* civil society groups, such as the NGO Humano y Libre (Human and Free).

In the international sphere, US institutions such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) have forged intimate ties with the right-wing opposition, providing logistical and financial support at every turn. The full extent of their involvement is unlikely to be known for several years, but through Wikileaks we know already a considerable amount.

NGOs proliferate domestically in the shadows of other actors. Among them is the Centro de Divulgación del Conocimiento Económico para la Libertad (Centre for the Popularization of Economic Knowledge for Freedom, CEDICE). CEDICE generates sustained critique of the economic policy of the government and openly supports boycott campaigns. Among its most important financial backers is the US-based Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE).[30] It is a widespread belief within Chavismo, and with good historical precedent, that the whole range of domestic actors on the Right are in regular communication with the Pentagon, CIA, and State Department in terms of determining the range of tactics to be deployed over the next period.

The Regular Misery of Capital

If that's the manufactured landscape of the Right, the latest impulse to return to extra-parliamentary insurrection is taking place within a real set of contradictions and crises internal to Chavismo. The eruption coincides with heightened expressions of structural weaknesses in the economic development strategy of the government. Underlying problems have come much more boldly to the fore since we wrote our recent article on the afterlives of Chávez in Venezuela last summer - not least of these are the issues of inflation and shortages.[31]

Discontent among layers of the Chavista grassroots is real, with a second move to devalue the currency very recently being introduced in capitulation to demands from the Capriles "soft-Right" contingent.[32] High inflation is destroying workers' real salaries and makes virtually meaningless the recently decreed 10 percent increase in salaries. The social base of Bolivarianism has long been calling for an iron fist in dealings with the bourgeoisie, but the Maduro government has restricted itself to ad hoc and ineffective controls, laws, sanctions, and a series of other measures that do not cohere into an economic strategy.[33]

Government accusations that the capitalist class is waging "economic warfare," while substantiated,[34] tend to downplay the absolutely routine problems created by capitalist activity in the normal process of capital accumulation in Venezuela. Manuel Sutherland, one of the boldest Marxist economists writing on the Venezuelan process at present is worth quoting at length on this topic:

"The government continues to believe in the fantasy of a patriotic bourgeoisie that will renounce the extraordinary profits it can capture through illegal imports and currency speculation. Unfortunately, the government cannot imagine a country in which capitalists don't appropriate 70 percent of the private sector GDP and massively exploit the workforce.... In sum, chavismo dreams of a reasonable and loving capitalist who obviously does not exist. With him it wants to negotiate, even though the normal action of these capitalists, that is to say the process of the accumulation of capital, is the cause of the country's misery." [35]

It is very difficult to sustain the process even in its current state, never mind deepening and extending any long transition toward socialism, given the weight that private capital still enjoys in

the economy. According to Sutherland, Venezuela experienced capital flight during the period of fixed exchange rates of around \$US 150 billion, the equivalent to approximately 43 percent of GDP in 2010. This looting of capital is part of what is driving the devaluation of the local currency and strengthening speculation in the parallel black market in dollars (in which dollars are sold for 15 times the official exchange rate).

The black market rate is the rate used by commercial vendors to set their prices, with the exception of the few products subject to regulation. So escalating prices, even setting aside the issue of hoarding, would still be a major issue requiring resolution. Those commercial actors who legally obtain dollars through official channels in order ostensibly to purchase imports of goods from abroad have no incentive to actually use the dollars obtained to this end; rather they have every incentive to divert those dollars illegally onto the black market in order to make extraordinary profits. This causes further scarcity of goods, increases in prices, and a fall in the quality of goods and services - i.e. it is less a conspiracy of capital through economic warfare, than its regular behaviour given incentive structures that is at the root of the present economic crisis.[36]

According to the communiqué of Marea Socialista -a group which has repeatedly declared its decisive commitment to defending the Maduro administration against any and all rightist conspiracies- the principal error of the government consists in its vacillation in economic policy since April 2013. The intervening period has witnessed the introduction of certain measures that can only be read as adaptations to demands from the Right. With the announcement the latest devaluation of the currency introduced earlier this month (called "SICAD 2"), which is similar to the system introduced in 2010 under Chávez, the government aims to free up an even more substantial part of the oil rent, the result of which will be even higher inflation. All of this, Marea Socialists warns, will deepen the crisis of scarcity. This announcement of a new Permuta dollar, embedded within the SICAD 2 arrangements, will achieve nothing but the deepening of social discontent and disorientation among the Chavista social base.[37]

An appropriate redirection of economic policy, from the defensive to the offensive, according to Marea Socialista, would include the immediate escalation of anti-capitalist measures, such as: the establishment of a state monopoly under social control of all external commerce, and the assurance that the state be the only importer of essential goods for Venezuelan people; national centralization under social control of all dollars available in the country, whether they are dollars that enter through the oil trade, or those that are deposited in foreign accounts; massive intervention and state and social control over the entirety of the private banking system that presently operates in the country, in order both to finance economic planning and to simultaneously centralize control of all funds presently managed by the public banking system; the urgent recovery of state production of basic subsistence products to respond to the authentic shortage crisis; expropriation under workers' and popular control of the largest corporations involved in the biggest operations of hoarding, speculation, and contraband; a call for the peoples and governments of Latin America to lend support and solidarity through the supply of basic goods and medicines to confront the problems of the immediate moment and of the transition to the implementation of such measures.[38]

Bureaucratic Sclerosis

In our recent article in *New Politics*, we tried to establish some of the basic analytical and empirical foundations for understanding a creeping bureaucratic sclerosis within the various organizations constituting the popular movement.[39] It is perhaps more evident than ever that a rigorous Marxist theorization of bureaucracy is required in order to understand some of the structural obstacles standing in the way of the advancement of the Bolivarian process in an anti-capitalist direction.

In a recent open letter from Caracas, Mike González, author of a just-released biography of Chávez,

calls our attention to a “new bureaucratic class who are themselves the speculators and owners of this new and failing economy... they are to be seen delivering fierce speeches against corruption and wearing the obligatory red shirt and cap of chavismo. But literally billions of dollars have ‘disappeared’ in recent years, the extraordinary wealth accumulated by leading Chavistas, are the clearest sign that it is their interests that have prevailed, while the institutions of popular power have largely withered on the vine.... The right has hoped to trade on that disillusionment.”[40] To speak of withering on a vine is perhaps to exaggerate, but otherwise this is perceptive analysis. González singles out for treatment the growing military presence within the government, grouped around Diasdado Cabello, and the head of the oil company PDVSA and Vice President of the Economy, Rafael Rodríguez, but notes that there are others.

According to Roland Denis, there are real divisions within the capitalist class that are partially being expressed through the visible tensions in the current leadership struggle for hegemony in the right-wing opposition. There is, according to Denis, a national section of the bourgeoisie that has enjoyed a “paradise of profits over the last number of years, operating beneath a model of bureaucratic-corporatism and the state capitalism promoted through the economic development plan of the government.” In this analysis, the rent captured through corruption and clientelist networks has generated profits for this national section of the bourgeoisie, just as it has for the internal bureaucratic layer of Chavismo identified in passing by González. As a result, the national section, represented politically by Capriles within the latest dispute on the Right, has not immediately lent its potential force (business strikes, open sabotage of the economy, internal coups, etc.) to the assault on power being orchestrated by López and Machado. Instead, the national section is interested in relative stability, and a regime transition which would not put into jeopardy the current paradise of profits.[41]

The process of bureaucratization, according to Denis, is also responsible for the loss of an original vitality on the part of the grassroots organizations of Bolivarian process that have been transformed, to an ever deepening degree, into mere clients of the state - made to respond to the incentive structures of a state-capitalist model of development in an oil-rich country, and too often mobilized in the interests of the bureaucrats of that structure rather than being the self-determining subjects of a revolutionary potential which at one time seemed more clearly present on the horizon: “the rentist, parasitic model of state capitalism... delivers a politics of control, concentration of power and the substitution of social control with technocratic and bureaucratic functionaries.... This is a model which if it is not called fundamentally into question, with measures to transform it radically in the short term, will lead to the continuation of out of control shortages and inflation....”[42]

Buying “Peace” within the Structural Violence of Capitalism

A strategy of national reconciliation is destined to lead in time to full capitalist restoration and the reversal of the social gains achieved since Chávez assumed office in 1999. The “pacificism” of the Maduro government offers, for Denis, “a ‘peace’ that does not produce, does not create challenges and new levels of mobilization, but simply calls for support for the victimized figure of Nicolás and his government, sending off clear signals of weakness and the absence of an epic sense that every revolution must have.”[43]

Likewise, for Carlos Carcione, an incisive commentator on the socialist Left of Chavismo:

“A governmental campaign of calling for ‘peace,’ at a minimum untimely and bound to be frustrated. The maintenance of a doomed plan to search for an interlocutor in the bourgeoisie to establish a process of conciliation, rather than searching for democratic participation of the people who live from their labour, leading toward immediate anticapitalist measures. These are the salient symptoms of the times that over the coming weeks or months will decide, with a heavy emphasis on

the weight of actions taken in the streets, the immediate future of what the world knows as the Bolivarian Process.”[44]

Some Chavista supporters, lacking such a critique of the bureaucratization of the process to date, offer an overly complacent view on the possibilities of resolving the present conflict. They point to the fact that, unlike in 2002, the Bolivarian forces are now much more consolidated. They control the oil rent which is obtained through the state oil company PDVSA. They control the armed forces and access to international reserves. And they have a much more prominent presence in the field of production and arena of the media.[45] On its own, this is more a recipe for the consolidation of a bureaucratic state capitalism than a project of emancipatory socialism.

A recent communiqué from the Corriente Revolucionario Bolívar y Zamora – Poder Popular Socialista (The Bolívar and Zamora Revolutionary Current – Socialist Popular Power) resonates more profoundly with the best impulses of the poor in their own struggles for liberation within the Bolivarian process of the last 15 years. The winds of reaction in Venezuela in 2002 and 2003 unintentionally instigated the richest phase of self-organization and activity of the oppressed and exploited that we have witnessed thus far in the course of the Bolivarian process. The question is whether the Left of chavismo can win in the present conjuncture; can it put to rest all illusions fostered by the most conservative sections, and bureaucratized layers of the ruling party in any technocratic, negotiated “peace” with the “democratic” sections of the bourgeoisie. If the Chavista Left can manage this, it’s not impossible that transformative renewal and vitalization of the process generally would be the result. It’s on the table. It matters not just that this third insurrectionary moment of the counter-revolutionary Right is defeated, but *how* it is defeated, and that it is *actually* defeated.

The Bolívar and Zamora Revolutionary Current calls for the “ever greater opening of spaces to the people and not to assume that the people are merely a reserve bequeathed by the comandante [Chávez] that is available to be convoked in moments of risk or electoral conjunctures. It is necessary to free popular protagonism, its incipient power, popular power, the communal councils and communes, the collectives and social fronts, all of the enormous and marvelous diversity that if unleashed in full will be capable of storming heaven. Our biggest strength is the resonance of our ideas in the fertile soil of the grassroots – in political, cultural, ethnic, sexual, popular diversity. There we will find enormous concentrated energies. It’s with these people that the struggle will be won in the street, but also in the struggle of ideas, of values, of ethics and of aesthetics, as they push to fully realize their concrete, revolutionary, fulfillment.”

The project of counter-revolution nourishes itself on the diminution of revolutionary capacities, the bureaucratization of the once dynamic forces from below within the Bolivarian process. The project of defeating the counter-revolution therefore becomes one of re-establishing, through popular dialogue and grassroots assembly, the revolutionary initiative, to agree “on defensive actions, communication, the takeover of institutions, and the means of production – all of which will no doubt take us to a higher level of confrontation, where it becomes a matter of raising unconditional demands rather than negotiation, much less submission.”[46]

Concretely, this might mean, among other things, putting an end to the impunity of the Right – not just enforcing the full letter of the law against Leopoldo López, but calling for the detention of Capriles and all those responsible for the government supporters assassinated in April 2013 following the presidential elections. It might mean the incorporation of the grassroots into the highest levels of decision-making power in the government – that is, the inclusion of the social and political organizations of the Bolivarian people, their rank-and-file unions, and their communes and councils, as well as the endowment of these bodies with authentic power. It might mean the encouragement and support for the independent struggles of the exploited who are currently

fighting for improvement in their salaries and for the defence of their jobs, as in the case of the auto workers, or for their collective contracts, as in the case of electrical workers – that is, the government must encourage, not criminalize, the legitimate, autonomous struggle of working people living from their labour even as it encounters the forces of counter-revolution, indeed to better its chances in this encounter.[47]

Such a redirection would also likely require the renovation of leadership circles and the bringing to justice of those in the highest offices of the state – judicial, legislative, and military – who have used their posts for enriching themselves, resulting in the consolidation of a bureaucratic layer within the regime. One place to start might be the renovation of the cabinet, beginning with the Ministry of the Economy. What of the reactivation of the commission for the transformation of the state, abandoned since 2003? It is also obvious to many that if a socialist transition out of the present crisis is desired, it will be necessary to establish a system of democratic planning, from below to above, from municipalities up to regions, with an immediate emphasis on restoring productive capacity, meeting the basic consumption needs of the population, and moving toward the socialization of the country's economy.[48]

“The gravity of the current crisis,” Carcione observes, “can be resolved in the manner in which we triumphed over the April coup [of 2002] and the oil sabotage [2002-2003], decisively unleashing the constituent power, the Bolivarian people. The search for conciliation with supposedly ‘democratic’ sectors within the pro-imperialist domestic Right will lose us the whole Process. It’s a historic moment for this project of emancipation. The hour of truth has arrived.”

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[2] Belen Fernandez, “Towards Another Coup in Venezuela?” *Al Jazeera*, February 19, 2014. Available online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/02/towards-another-coup-venezuela-201421952658348169.html>. Accessed February 25, 2014.

[3] Jake Johnson, “Venezuela: Who Are They and How Did They Die?” *CEPR*, February 23, 2014. Available online: http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/the-americas-blog/venezuela-who-are-they-and-how-did-they-die?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+TheAmericasBlog+%28The+Americas+Blog%29&utm_content=FaceBook. Accessed February 25, 2014.

[4] John Kerry, “Situation in Venezuela,” U.S. Department of State, February 21, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/221919.htm>. Accessed February 25, 2014.

[5] William Neuman, “Protests Swell in Venezuela as Places to Rally Disappear,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2014. Available online at: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/21/world/americas/protests-swell-in-venezuela-as-places-to-rally-disappear.html?_r=1. Accessed February 25, 2014.

[6] Cited by Mark Weisbrot, "Does Venezuelan Television Provide Coverage That Opposes the Government?" Centre for Economic and Policy Research, February 24, 2014. Available online at: <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/10400>. Accessed February 25, 2014.

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[9] Julia Buxton, "Venezuela: The Real Significance of the Student Protests."

[10] Jeb Sprague and Joe Emersberger, "Impunity for Venezuela's big landowners," ALAI, December 20, 2011. Available online at: <http://alainet.org/active/51700>. Accessed on February 25, 2014.

[11] For a recent commentary on the Right's record, see Mark Weisbrot, "US Support for Regime Change in Venezuela is a Mistake," *Guardian*, February 18, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/18/venezuela-protests-us-support-regime-change-mistake>. Accessed on February 21, 2014.

[12] Atilio Borón, "La amenaza fascista," *Rebelión*, February 19, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=181044&titular=la-amenaza-fascista->. Accessed on February 21, 2014.

[13] See the illuminating discussion of these matters by Gregory Wilpert on *The Real News Network*, February 22, 2014. Available online at: http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=11517. Accessed on February 23, 2014.

[14] Pedro Santander, "Diálogo o golpismo: Lo que está en juego en Venezuela," *Rebelión*, February 19, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=181024&titular=di%E1logo-o-golpismo->. Accessed on February 23, 2014.

[15] See Andrés Schipani, "Venezuela: Amid Unrest, Another Forex Mechanism," *Financial Times*, February 20, 2014. Available online at: <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2014/02/20/venezuela-amid-unrest-another-foreign-exchange-mechanism/#axzz2u4V0vinF>. Accessed on February 21, 2014. The figure of 56 percent inflation cited in this article is also the standard figure reported in sources close to the government.

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[17] Nicmer N. Evans, "Oposición dividida pero no desunida y 'la salida'," *Rebelión*, February 6, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=180472&titular=oposici%F3n-dividida-pero-no-desunida-y-%93la-salida%94->. Accessed on February 21, 2014.

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[19] Denis, "Desactivar el fascismo."

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[21] Although it is also true that the student movement has always been divided, and its left-wing has had at different historical moments a presence within the elite state universities as well.

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[24] Andrés Schipani, "Opposition Leader Detained in Venezuela," *Financial Times*, February 18, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6afe551e-98d2-11e3-a32f-00144feab7de.html#axzz2u4WW7HU4>. Accessed on February 21, 2014.

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[26] Luciano Wexell Severo, "Golpe de Estado suave," *Rebelión*, February 21, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=181112>. Accessed on February 21, 2014.

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[33] Manuel Sutherland, "Siete apuntes sobre las protestas en Venezuela," *Aporrea*, February 17, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/a182254.html>. Accessed on February 22, 2014.

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[36] Manuel Sutherland, "Siete apuntes sobre las protestas en Venezuela."

[37] Marea Socialista, "Rectificar y avanzar hacia la revolución económica."

[38] Marea Socialista, "Rectificar y avanzar hacia la revolución económica."

[39] Spronk and Webber, "From Sabaneta to Miraflores."

[40] González, "Is Venezuela Burning?" See also, Mike González, *Hugo Chávez: Socialist for the Twenty-First Century*, London: Pluto, 2014.

[41] Denis, "Desactivar el fascismo."

[42] Denis, "Desactivar el fascismo."

[43] Denis, "Desactivar el fascismo."

[44] Carlos Carcione, "El Proceso Bolivariano en la hora de verdad," *Rebelión*, February 20, 2014. Available online at: <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=181061&titular=el-proceso-bolivariano-en-la-hora-de-la-verdad->. Accessed on February 21, 2014.

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[46] Denis, "Desactivar el fascismo."

[47] Marea Socialista, "Rectificar y avanzar hacia la revolución económica."

[48] This paragraph draws on proposals that conclude Denis's extraordinary essay cited throughout this work.