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The Politics of Food in Venezuela

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Photo credit: "overview of food and nutrition security in Latin America and the Caribbean," FAO, 2017 (p. 26).

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Few countries and political processes have been subject to such scrutiny, yet so generally misunderstood, as Venezuela and the Bolivarian Revolution.¹ This is particularly true today, as the international media paints an image of absolute devastation in the country, wrought by failed policies and government mismanagement. At the same time, the three national elections of 2017 demonstrated a strong show of support for the continuation of the revolution under its current leadership. This seeming paradox, we are told, can only be attributed to government tendencies of co-optation and clientelism, along with a closing of

democratic space. Such messages are reproduced many times over, both in the media and in certain intellectual circles.²

A benefit of the intense attention paid to Venezuela is that a recurring narrative can be identified, which goes basically as follows. The central character is Hugo Chávez Frías, a strong-armed political leader who enjoyed the double advantage of personal charisma and high oil prices over the course of his presidency from 1999 through 2012. In 2013, Chávez died, and the following year global oil prices plunged. Amid the perfect storm of the loss of Chávez, the collapse in oil prices, and the government's misguided policies, Venezuela has steadily slid into a state of economic and political disintegration, with food and other necessities growing scarce, in turn sparking social unrest as people take to the streets. The government, headed by Chávez's less charismatic successor, Nicolás Maduro, is going to desperate lengths to hang onto power, becoming increasingly authoritarian in the process, while maintaining the populist rhetoric of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution.

However, this dominant narrative does not capture the complexities of what is happening in Venezuela today. There are significant holes in the account, which raise important questions: who are "the people" at the center of this analysis? What, if any, are the different impacts of present challenges on various sectors of society? How should the Venezuelan state be understood, and where and how does the role of capital figure? By focusing on the politics of food as a key area in which the country's broader politics are playing out—particularly by looking at recent shortages and food lines, as well as what have been presented as "food riots"—a multitude of issues can be better understood. Often-ignored matters of race, class, gender, and geography demand special attention.

We will begin by looking to the past to situate present trends in their proper context. By homing in on the dynamics around Venezuela's most highly consumed staple foods, we can gain insight into the current conjuncture, particularly the recent food shortages. Some of the main drivers of the shortages come from forces opposing the Bolivarian Revolution, which are increasingly gaining ground within the state. We will then discuss responses to the shortages by the government and popular forces.

Historical Continuities of Extraction

A nuanced understanding of contemporary Venezuela requires going back not to Chávez's election in 1999, but centuries earlier, to the period of colonization and the inception of interrelated patterns of extraction and social differentiation that continue today. While much has been written on "extractivism" as a key feature of Latin America's "pink tide" countries, including Venezuela, it is imperative to understand present patterns of extraction as part of a much longer historical continuity dating back to Spanish colonization from the sixteenth into the nineteenth centuries. During this period, a "tropical plantation economy based on slave labor" gave rise to a powerful agroexportation complex, through which cacao and later coffee were supplied to Europe and Mexico.³ A key feature of this complex was the two-part plantation-*conuco* system, in which the enslaved and, later, low-wage labor forces of the colonial *haciendas* depended on family and communal plots (*conucos*) for subsistence.

Venezuela was among the first countries in the region to achieve independence, but in the early nineteenth century, most social and economic structures established under colonization were little altered. These included patterns of food consumption, extending from the plantation-*conuco* system to the culinary habits that the colonial elite brought over from Europe. This dietary differentiation was intricately linked with issues of identity and domination, serving to maintain European descendants' sense of superiority over the indigenous, Afro-descendent, and *mestizo* majority. One Spanish general remarked 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."⁴ But even as they disdained indigenous foodways, European elites depended on them, as indigenous knowledge proved essential for the adaptation of European crops to tropical agroecosystems, and food from *conucos* served as a vital source of sustenance, particularly during war. The plantation economy and the hacienda system lasted for another century after independence.

In 1929, the U.S. stock market crash and the associated collapse in agricultural commodity prices, together with the rise of oil in Venezuela as an export commodity, spelled the end of the agroexportation period, as several new patterns rapidly emerged. One was a flight of capital from agriculture to the emerging petroleum industry, with oil concessions going mostly to the same wealthy families that had dominated the agroexport complex.⁵ This was accompanied by mass migration out of rural areas, through mutually reinforcing processes of proletarianization and urbanization, and a subsequent surge in urban poverty, with insufficient employment and infrastructure to absorb these new urban workers. The development of the petroleum sector thus further concentrated wealth among the elite while fostering a "surplus population" of urban poor, but also gave rise to a middle class of professional workers. In response to these changes, owners of the former agroexport complex were able to take advantage of its existing infrastructure, an influx of oil dollars, and the new purchasing power of Venezuela's emerging middle class to shift from exporting to importing food. Over time, these practices developed into a powerful agro-food import and distribution complex.⁶

Petroleum also broke the plantation-*conuco* system, rupturing existing patterns of production and consumption. To fill this void, the government in 1936 initiated an agricultural modernization program, funded by petroleum dollars and designed to replace imports of highly consumed foods in the growing urban centers. The push for modernization was part and parcel of the Green Revolution then sweeping much of the global South, part of an anticommunist Cold War strategy among the United States and allies. In Venezuela, the process was ushered in by U.S. "missionary capitalist" to Latin America and godfather to the Green Revolution, Nelson Rockefeller. As the home of Standard Oil's most profitable regional affiliate, the country held a special significance for Rockefeller, who made Venezuela his home away from home, even establishing his own *hacienda*.⁷

Venezuela's agricultural modernization program melded industrial production and white supremacy, manifested in efforts aimed at *blanqueamiento*, or "whitening." This was reflected, for instance, in the Law of Immigration and Colonization of 1936, which facilitated the entrance of white Europeans into Venezuela, intended, in the words of

agricultural minister Alberto Adriani, to help Venezuela “diversify its agriculture; develop new industries and perfect existing ones; and contribute to the improvement of its race and the elevation of its culture.”⁸ Towards these ends, the law supported the formation of aptly named *colonias agrícolas* (agricultural colonies) of European immigrants on some of the country’s most productive agricultural land, several of which still exist today.

The modernization agenda also introduced another kind of colonization in the form of Venezuela’s first chain of supermarkets, CADA, founded in 1948 and spearheaded by Rockefeller, together with the Venezuelan government. Further solidifying the connections between food consumption, identity, and social status, supermarkets allowed the emerging middle class to enjoy a taste of food elitism, literally and figuratively. This was part of a broader program of modern state-building designed to turn Venezuela into a “reliable US ally with...a solid middle-class electorate.”⁹ By many accounts, these efforts succeeded, and Venezuela by the late twentieth century was 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.”¹⁰ However, “oil never fully transformed Venezuela, but rather it created the illusion of modernity in a country where high levels of inequality persisted.”¹¹ Indeed, the predominant narratives routinely fail to mention that at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution, more than half of the population was living in poverty, with hunger levels higher than those of today.¹²

Another Side of History

A glance at recent history challenges the depiction of pre-Chávez Venezuela as a model democracy and bastion of stability in a tumultuous region. One particularly revealing episode occurred in 1989, when IMF-prescribed structural adjustment policies proved the final straw for an increasingly fed-up population, sparking the Caracazo, or “explosion of Caracas,” in which hundreds of thousands of people from the hillside barrios flooded the center of the capital in a massive popular uprising that rapidly spread across the country.¹³ The military was ordered to open fire on civilians, yielding a death toll officially in the hundreds but believed to be in the thousands—yet the social revolt unleashed by the Caracazo would not be contained.

This brings us to another side of history: every event described above occurred amid tension, and sometimes open conflict, between the elite and the “others” whom they attempted to subjugate and exploit, while never fully succeeding. As recognized by numerous historical accounts, the indigenous peoples, African descendants, and *mestizos* who make up the majority of Venezuelans have long been a defiant lot, from Afro-descendent rebellions and indigenous uprisings to more covert forms of resistance. Such resistance from below was pivotal to the fall of colonization, once independence leader Simon Bolivar understood the importance of enslaved and indigenous peoples to the struggle for independence, and continued into peasant struggles over land post-independence, and later through the struggles of *guerillas*, students, workers, and women, among other “others,” during the period of democratization. The rise of Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution can be understood as a direct continuation of the Caracazo and the

rebellions before it, through which “the popular sectors...came to assume their own political representation.”¹⁴

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—all striking parallels with the present situation. Just before and after the Caracazo, headlines such as “Prices of Sugar, Cereals, and Oils Go Up” and “Distressed Multitudes in Search of Food” abounded in the national press, while the *New York Times* reported “shortages of items like coffee, salt, flour, cooking oil and other basic products.”¹⁵ This reflected growing tensions around food access, disproportionately impacting the poor and showing that Venezuela’s “modernized” food system, based on importation, industrial agriculture, and supermarkets, as championed by Rockefeller, did not in fact serve the interests of the majority. This in turn implied the dual, if at times divergent, tasks at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution: addressing the immediate material needs of the more than half of the population living in poverty, while working to shift the historical patterns that had caused deep disparities in Venezuela’s food 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. The constitution guarantees food security for all citizens, “through the promotion of sustainable agriculture as a strategic basis for integrated rural development.”¹⁶ In response to this popular mandate, a variety of state-sponsored initiatives have been established, in tandem with citizen efforts, under the banner of “food sovereignty.” Fundamental to these have been processes of agrarian reform, which have combined land redistribution with a wide variety of rural development programs, including in education, housing, health care, and media and communications. Fishing communities have benefited from similar programs, and from the banning of industrial trawling off the Venezuelan coast.¹⁷ These rural initiatives have been complemented by a range of largely urban food access programs, reaching schools, workplaces, and households.¹⁸ Equally important to food sovereignty efforts are diverse forms of popular organization, from local communal councils and regional *comunas* to farmers’ and fishers’ councils, that have helped to broaden popular participation in the food system.¹⁹

Such programs have seen both important gains and limitations. Perhaps most notably, Venezuela surpassed the first Millennium Development Goal of cutting hunger in half by 2015, as recognized by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.²⁰ From 2008 to 2011, hunger was dramatically reduced, affecting an average of 3.1 percent of the population.²¹ Yet such advances, sponsored by oil revenues from Venezuela’s nationalized petroleum industry, came largely from a reinforcement of the agroimport complex, not from alternative systems. In addition, efforts toward agrarian reform in the countryside also received significant investment, but remained largely separate from food security programs. While some important inroads were made in connecting the two initiatives, the Chávez years saw no lasting rupture in the historic power of those who controlled the agrifood system. Thus, more food programs for the poor meant more food imports, which further consolidated the import complex, reinforced through multiple mechanisms of the state.

Among these mechanisms was the granting of dollars from oil revenues to private enterprises, at highly subsidized rates, for imports of food and other goods deemed essential. This means that over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, state funds, while going toward many social programs, have also flowed into the private food import complex, amounting to major subsidies for the most powerful companies.²² The direct and indirect beneficiaries of this system have little incentive to alter it.

Power in the Food System: The *Maíz-Harina-Arepa* Complex

These processes of accumulation and differentiation in Venezuela's agrifood system can be clearly seen in the case of the country's most widely consumed food, the *arepa*, a corn patty made from precooked corn flour. By focusing on what we call the *maíz-harina-arepa* (corn-flour-arepa) complex, we can trace the history of food politics in Venezuela.

The complex dates back to precolonial times, when corn, inextricably linked with the *conuco*, figured prominently in indigenous traditions, from cosmologies to foodways. With the colonial invasion, the Spanish grain of preference, wheat, together with corn and cassava, another Indigenous staple, helped sustain the Triangle Trade of the colonization project.²³

Patterns of production, processing, and consumption of corn remained largely unaltered for many years after independence. This changed in the 1960s with the introduction of precooked corn flour, which drove profound changes across the agrifood system. On the production end, corn cultivation moved from the *conuco* into industrial monoculture production, dependent on certified commercial seed varieties. No less dramatic were changes in the processing of corn for precooked corn flour, in which the kernel is “dehulled, degermed, precooked, dried, flaked, and milled.”²⁴ In the process, its more nutritious outer layers are removed, yielding a nutritionally poor substance lacking in vitamins and minerals that then requires fortification to meet basic dietary standards. Inevitably, most precooked corn flour was used for arepas, dramatically reducing their preparation time. The food quickly became the principal staple of Venezuela's poor working class, and within four decades, pre-cooked corn flour came to represent 88 percent of all corn consumed in the country.²⁵

Ever since the first commercialization of precooked corn flour, one brand, Harina PAN, has become synonymous with the product—to the point that its name is used interchangeably with the generic term *harina precocida*. PAN stands for Productos Alimenticios Nacionales, National Food Products, and is a homonym of *pan*, bread. Despite the humble origins portrayed in the company's marketing campaigns, its owners, the Mendoza Fleury family, come from a long lineage traceable back to the colonial elite, and have held key posts in both government and business for generations.²⁶ Today they are among the most powerful families in the country and best known as the owners of Empresas Polar, the conglomerate that supplies the most widely consumed foods and beverages in Venezuela, particularly arepas and beer. Polar, a Venezuelan subsidiary of PepsiCo, is the largest private company in the country, with products reaching global markets, and it controls an

estimated 50 to 60 percent of Venezuela's supply of precooked corn flour.²⁷ Such a degree of control is only possible through a combination of vertical integration and concentration, strategic links with the state, and well-crafted marketing in both public and private spaces, including the most intimate spaces of everyday life. On the production side, Polar's Fundación Danac, with more than 600 proprietary corn varieties, has come to control much of the genetic base of Venezuela's certified corn seeds, influencing research and seed certification.²⁸ On the distribution end, Polar is a key shareholder in the Cada supermarket chain, and in 1992 partnered with the Dutch firm SHV to launch Venezuela's largest hypermarket chain, Makro.

Polar's involvement in the retail sector has secured important distribution channels, but its primary aim was to secure the market. Among its earliest marketing strategies was to target Venezuelan housewives, including training thousands of women to go into their neighborhoods and teach other women how to make arepas from Harina PAN. From there, Polar has employed a wide range of tactics reaching multiple segments of society, from billboards, television, and print media, to sponsorship of key cultural events, to research and publishing (through its Fundación Polar), to a prestigious award for scientists (the Premio Polar) to forms of "corporate social responsibility" that have garnered international attention.²⁹ Through these and other means, Polar has positioned Harina PAN as "the brand of birth of all Venezuelans."³⁰ Given the product's ubiquity in Venezuelan households, this claim is less outlandish than it sounds. Perhaps most telling of the sheer extent of Polar's penetration into the everyday life of Venezuelans is the common equation of its products, most of all Harina PAN, with food itself—the idea that without Polar, there is no food. This phenomenon has not been lost on the company, which retains the ability to keep its products off 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 had a complex and often tense relationship with Polar, even while forging alternatives within the *maíz-harina-arepa* complex, particularly through partnerships between state institutions and farming communities. These projects center on nationwide planning and coordination of corn production, coupled with public financing, and primarily involve cooperatives on former *latifundio* lands recovered through the agrarian reform process. Efforts at reform have also been made in the processing of corn products, though these have yet to reach a significant scale of production.

Polar thus maintains relative hegemony over corn flour production, and beyond its physical control, the company wields enormous cultural and symbolic power as the brand of preference of most Venezuelans. But if relations between Polar and the government have been fraught over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, they have nevertheless not been entirely oppositional, and deep ties still bind the two across the *maíz-harina-arepa* complex. This includes the previously mentioned provision of money for food importation at highly subsidized rates, of which Polar is among the top recipients.³¹ Today such linkages are being further solidified.

Food Lines and Fault Lines

As we have seen, the Venezuelan food system has long been shaped by the pushes and pulls of capital, society, and the state, 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 has come to the fore in recent years, particularly since 2013, with the persistence of long food lines that are by now emblematic of present-day Venezuela, images of which are endlessly reproduced by the international press. The next set of images to reach international audiences, first in 2014 and much more intensely in 2017, were of “the people” taking to the streets. The story was one of spontaneous “food riots” that over time combined with more organized “pro-democracy” protests, as part of a global surge of popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes. The riots, according to the prevailing narrative, were sparked by the lines, which were themselves the result of scarcity brought about by the drop in oil prices, combined with government mismanagement. This combination of factors has come to mark what is widely regarded as the current crisis of Venezuela’s food system, part of a broader political and economic emergency facing the nation. However, a closer look at the current situation and its defining features provides a fuller and more nuanced understanding of events.

First, it is important to look carefully at the food lines: their composition, their location, and what products are being sought. The people waiting in these lines have overwhelmingly been poor working-class women—an attack on both everyday life at the household level, as well as on the popular organization of the Bolivarian Revolution, in which women have played a key role. The lines have also largely formed outside supermarkets, where consumers wait to access certain specific items that have mostly gone missing from the shelves. These consist of the most consumed industrially processed products in the Venezuelan food basket, particularly precooked corn flour. The specific selection of these missing items—those deemed most essential to the population—tends not to make the headlines, and this points to a wider gap in media narratives. For while precooked corn flour has gone missing, corn-based porridge has remained available; milk powder disappeared from the shelves, but fresh dairy products like cheeses can still be found, and so on.

Several other important factors point to holes in the dominant scarcity narrative. First, the same items missing from shelves have continued to be found in restaurants. Second, by their own accounting, private food companies, including Polar, continued to maintain steady production levels at least through 2015.³² In a 2016 interview, in fact, a representative from Polar spoke of the recent addition of new products such as teas and gelatins to their Venezuelan lines.³³ Third, even before the government mounted a widespread response to the shortages (as described below), corn flour consumption levels among both higher- and lower-income sectors of the population remained steady from 2012 to 2015.³⁴ Thus, while the shortages have undoubtedly caused tremendous anxiety and insecurity, and while accessing certain goods has become more time-consuming and complicated, Venezuelans have indeed found ways to obtain them.³⁵ In addition to enduring the lines, another channel has been the underground economy, through which goods such as corn flour are sold at a steep markup. While individuals have turned such practices into business opportunities, private enterprises have done so as well, both by hoarding goods for speculative purposes and by smuggling them across the Colombian border. The regular

discovery of stockpiles further suggests that goods have been intentionally diverted from supermarket shelves.³⁶

There are direct parallels between present-day Venezuela and Chile in the 1970s under Salvador Allende, where the U.S. strategy, in the words of Richard Nixon, was to “make the economy scream.”³⁷ The United States employed the same methods of destabilization, including a financial blockade, and supported the right-wing counterrevolution, likewise manifested in shortages, lines, and street protests, among other forms of disruption. The depressed prices of Chile’s main source of foreign exchange, copper, parallels declining oil prices Venezuela. While the extent of U.S. involvement in Chile’s counterrevolution would not be fully understood until years later, when key documents were declassified, overt U.S. aggression toward Venezuela is already evident in the intensifying economic sanctions imposed by 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.³⁸ As one State Department representative put it:

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.³⁹

In Venezuela today, as in Chile in the 1970s, U.S. intervention relies on an ongoing counterrevolutionary effort, with elites using the revolutionary potential of the masses to frighten the middle class.⁴⁰ This brings us to another key feature of the present conjuncture: the class dynamics of the street protests, characterized as “food riots” in the dominant narrative, particularly in the latest and most intense round in 2017. While the food lines began to appear in 2013, they grew over time, and are widely considered a key factor in the transfer of control of the National Assembly from the *chavistas* to an opposition majority under the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) 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, should they vote for the MUD, which once in power would do away with the lines forever.⁴¹ Of particular note was the working-class slant of the commercial, with the demographic composition of the people in the line reflective of the majority of the population, in contrast to the party’s wealthier, whiter base. It did not take long for the MUD to return to this base, however, upon its electoral ascent, with the Second Vice President of the new National Assembly, Freddy Guevara, openly calling for “the people” (that is, MUD supporters) to take to the streets, “until the only option of the dictatorship would be to accept the less traumatic solution.”⁴²

An array of demonstrations ensued, from peaceful resistance to acts of violence. Though portrayed in the media as nationwide, the actions were largely limited to the wealthiest areas of a few cities, and ranged from street barricades and vandalism to picnics and barbecues to candlelight vigils to physical assaults to the hurling of “poopootovs” of human feces.⁴³ But among this seemingly disparate set of tactics, protesters took precise aim 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.⁴⁴ Especially hard hit was the state agrifood apparatus, as the National Institute of Nutrition was set ablaze, laboratories for the production of ecological farming inputs were vandalized, and supplies destined for government food programs were burned—including one on the order of 40 tons of food—along with vehicles associated with these programs.⁴⁵ Also among the targets, tragically, were people, specifically those seen as typical *chavistas*—i.e., poor and brown-skinned. The most visible of these was the attack on Orlando Figuera, a young Afro-Venezuelan supermarket worker, whose gruesome burning alive, as countless onlookers did nothing to intervene, was captured on video.⁴⁶ While Figuera did not survive his attack, another victim from a similar background, Carlos Ramirez, did, albeit with severe burns covering his body. Ramirez later recalled pleading for his life, shouting “Don’t kill me! I’m not *chavista*! Please don’t kill me!” as street protesters brutally beat him and set him ablaze.⁴⁷

The racial motivations of these attacks associated with violent street protests, known as *guarimbas*, are apparent, and speak to what has been described as a “class/race fusion” with “deep roots in the country’s history.”⁴⁸ The protesters are mostly the grandchildren of the middle class that emerged in the period of modernization and “whitening,” with important links to the country’s elite, forming a middle class-elite alliance known as *sifrinaje*. The international media has largely ignored these nuances, but a rare and telling exception is a 2017 article in *Bloomberg Businessweek* on nightlife among young protesters, whose gathering spots include upscale rooftop shisha bars, with one protester quoted as saying “You protest in the morning, but that doesn’t mean you stop living.”⁴⁹ While the protesters are not homogenous, those featured in the article challenge the narratives of repressed masses, while also highlighting the differentiated impacts of the protests, as some maintain their everyday lives in relative comfort, while others struggle to survive. The violent protests disproportionately affected people in the poorest sectors, who could not afford to skip work and for whom basic 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 each day to and from the wealthier areas where the *guarimbas* were concentrated. The same areas are also the sites of most supermarkets, further impeding food access for the poor and working class, already strained by shortages, lines, and attacks on government food programs.

The image promoted by the international press has been one of “the people” rising in response to a “humanitarian crisis” wrought by an “authoritarian regime.” In reality, however, the combination of peaceful resistance and blatant acts of *guarimba* violence has only served to further isolate the popular sectors from the opposition. A look behind the headlines and images shows some glaring contradictions, particularly in the description of *guarimbas* as “food riots,” given the class and racial composition of the protesters crying *hambre* (hunger), described above. Furthermore, a quick glance at social media, such as posts by Freddy Guevara and others, dispels any illusion that the protests arose spontaneously. Finally, both the targets and tactics of the *guarimbas*—including burning food instead of redistributing it (indeed, food designated for the poor), along with violent assaults on the poor and dark-skinned—put the lie to any narrative of the *guarimbas* as “food riots” of the hungry.

An event far more aptly described as a “food riot” or “food rebellion” was the Caracazo of 1989, mentioned above. At the time, reports in the *New York Times* and other outlets made few criticisms of the government of President Andrés Pérez, but did include graphic accounts of mass graves, people lined up at morgues in search of loved ones, imposition of curfews, curtailing of civil liberties and press freedom, and death estimates upwards of 600 people, with one doctor quoted as saying “no country is prepared for what we have confronted this week.”⁵⁰ Today, in contrast, while government repression is regularly denounced in the *Times* and elsewhere, a total of fourteen deaths associated with the 2017 *guarimbas* have been directly traced to government security forces, while twenty-three have been attributed to opposition violence.⁵¹ While any government-sanctioned violence merits concern, attention, and investigation, it nevertheless bears asking why the international outcry has been so much greater than during the Caracazo, and, why, as one media watchdog group has noted, “the imperfect state of democracy in Venezuela” attracts singular attention, even as many atrocities in the world today go underreported.⁵²

This brings us back to oil. Petroleum is central to the dominant narrative, which claims that the Chávez government won its popularity on the strength of high oil prices and personal charisma, while Maduro’s relative unpopularity is attributable to the plunge in prices and political ineptitude. Once again, this familiar story distorts the facts in key ways. First, as economist Luis Salas has shown, although oil prices did indeed rise for much of Chávez’s presidency, its peak at or around \$100 per barrel was an aberration that occurred in the last stage of Chávez’s presidency, between 2010 and 2012, whereas the average price per barrel over the course of his presidency was closer to \$55 per barrel.⁵³ (This happens to be right around the price at the time of writing.) Second, the shortages that have attracted such interest are in fact part of a broader trend seen over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, through both periods of high and low oil prices, and particularly at politically heightened moments such as the lead-up to elections.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the most recent shortages did not begin in 2014, when oil prices dropped, but before, in 2013, while prices were still high.

All of this complicates simplistic narratives around present conditions and events in Venezuela. But perhaps the most significant gap in such analyses, which tend to center on the government and state, is the 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, whose power extends throughout much of the agrifood system, and who have exploited the current “crisis” to further consolidate their power while simultaneously seeking to dismantle redistributive agrifood policies. These forces have launched a material assault on much of the population, disproportionately impacting the poor and working class while further provoking an already frustrated middle class. They are also attacking the legitimacy of the government, both internally and externally, particularly by discrediting Venezuela’s reputation for exemplary achievements in the fight against hunger and toward food sovereignty.

Resistance: ‘En Guerra Hay Que Comer’

As one Venezuelan food sovereignty activist commented on the present situation: “In war, one must eat.” Responses to the challenges have taken many forms, and while a full

discussion is beyond the scope of this article, we will give a broad overview. First, if everyday life is the main battleground on which present problems are playing out, it is also the frontline of resistance. When the shortages began, among the first lines of defense to be activated was a kind of parallel solidarity economy, involving the sharing and bartering of food and other essentials among neighbors as well as a reactivation of survival techniques from the past. These have 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, thanks to prior public efforts toward food sovereignty: plantains, cassava, and sweet potatoes for processed starches, fresh sugarcane for refined sugar, and so on. Perhaps most emblematic of the early days of the shortages was the substitution of freshly ground corn for processed (precooked) corn flour in the preparation of arepas, as many dusted off their grandmothers' grinders and put them to use. Simultaneously, unprecedented numbers of urban dwellers began growing what they could on windowsills, patios, and in community spaces, enlivening a nascent urban agriculture movement.

In the countryside, food shortages coupled with diminished access to industrial inputs have prompted farmers to shift from commercial crop varieties to traditional staple food crops, and from agrichemicals toward agroecological practices, with certain parallels to Cuba's "special period." Rural people who had not been directly engaged in agriculture have been returning to food production, and are increasingly joined by their urban counterparts. The surge in interest in alternatives to industrially produced foods and the revaluing of the countryside have provided openings for social movements already working toward such transformations, helping forge connections between emerging grassroots responses and prior efforts toward food sovereignty under the Bolivarian Revolution. As one longtime activist and government official reflected: "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."⁵⁵ One example is the rural *comuna* in the northwestern state of El Maíz in Lara, a product of both the above-mentioned agrarian reform process and the construction of *comunas*. When the shortages struck, the members of El Maíz had already been working hard toward food sovereignty since 2009, particularly in corn and livestock production, and were able to help meet the food needs of up to 15,000 families in surrounding communities.⁵⁶ Another grassroots effort, Plan Pueblo a Pueblo (People to People Plan), has built on the preexisting organization of the *comunas* to forge direct links between rural producers and urban inhabitants. Formed in 2015, it already reaches over 60,000 urban working-class families with regular distributions of affordable fresh food. Other grassroots initiatives include the Feria Conuquera (Conuco Fair), a large monthly alternative market in Caracas featuring agroecologically produced fresh foods and artisanal versions of many of the products missing from supermarket shelves, the Mano a Mano Intercambio Agroecológico (Hand to Hand Agroecological Exchange) bridging the urban-rural divide in the Andes, and the Plan Popular de Semillas (People's Seed Plan), an offshoot of the new national Seed Law passed through a bottom-up policy-making process in 2015.⁵⁷

There has also been a host of government responses to the shortages. Among the first was a reorganization of public management to prioritize food sovereignty, including the creation of three separate ministries out of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land in early 2016: the

Ministry of Urban Agriculture (believed to be the first of its kind globally); the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture; and the Ministry of Agricultural Production. This was followed by the creation of the Great Sovereign Supply Mission, an umbrella body focused on securing national supplies of food, medicine, and other basic goods. Among the government responses to the shortages, those most intimately linked with popular organizing are the *Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción* (Local Provisioning and Production Committees), known as CLAPs. CLAPs were rapidly rolled out in 2016, initially targeting the poorest fifth of the population, and now reach well over half. Through the CLAPs, the government purchases food directly from suppliers, both private and public, and coordinates with community organizations to distribute mixed food packages to individual households. Communities are responsible for organizing themselves into CLAPs, conducting local censuses, and running regular distributions, in which the food is sold at subsidized prices in units of twelve to fifteen kilograms. Through a massive coordinated push from both above and below, CLAPs reached an estimated two million families in their first year, and today there are more than thirty thousand CLAPs throughout the country, with the aim of reaching six million families—nearly three-quarters of the population—with regular distributions by the end of 2018.⁵⁸

CLAPs have had a mixed reception among food sovereignty activists, who note their dependence on industrialized foods, half of which come through the above-mentioned food importation complex. At the same time, CLAPs have played a key role in mitigating the worst effects of the shortages, and have become important vehicles for citizen organizing around food, with 50 percent of CLAPs also directly involved in food production. Food sovereignty activists (including those of *Pueblo a Pueblo* and *El Maíz*) are thus increasingly opting to partner with the CLAPs and attempting to push them in more transformative directions, as part of a long-term vision of *agricultura cero divisas*, or “zero-dollar agriculture.”

Conclusion

The situation confronting Venezuela today is far more complex than that portrayed in the dominant narrative, and it demands more thorough analysis. Through the lens of food and a focus on questions of power related to race, class, gender, and geography, new elements emerge that are key to understanding the present conjuncture. These include (1) food as a vehicle for social differentiation over time, most fundamentally in the creation and maintenance of an elite, an elite-aligned middle class, and a class of “others”; (2) the concentration and consolidation of power in the agrifood system, maintained through elite alliances, both within and outside of the state structure, and through both overt and hidden forms of power; (3) increasing homogenization, uniformity, and controllability of the agrifood system, from production and importation to consumption, through highly racialized notions of science and modernity; (4) marketing strategies that forge intimate relationships with the public so that specific industrially processed foods pervade everyday life; (5) dependency on monopolized supply channels and on supermarkets for access to such products; (6) the disappearance of such products, constituting an attack on everyday life, particularly that of the “others,” especially women; (7) the implication of the state in the products’ disappearance, while the role of private capital remains largely hidden; (8) the

attempted consolidation of power by the elite through proposals for the restoration of the missing products (and of “order” more generally), in opposition to state programs and policies, with appeals to the working class “others”; (9) a rallying of the middle class in the name of “the people,” against the government and its alliance with the “others,” by coopting social justice imagery while committing racialized acts of violence; and, all the while, (10) 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 reflect emerging trends in Venezuela today, stemming from elite alliances long in the making. Of particular note are the invisible—or so ubiquitous as to effectively be invisible—mechanisms of control in the realm of everyday life that facilitate the exertion of dominance over the population, especially the working poor. This is particularly true of everyday practices around food. Through processes of colonization, modernization, and today, globalization, the entire structure of the modern industrial food system—i.e., offering foods appealing to the tastes of the masses (tastes conditioned over time), but in a highly controlled and controlling way—can readily be made into a tool of control and domination, as in Venezuela today. However, as we have seen, food is also being used as a means of resistance.

The dominant narrative tends to obscure not only the main drivers of the current crisis, but also the many responses coming from the grassroots. This phenomenon is linked to the common portrayal of the Venezuelan working class as passive victims rather than active agents. The same stereotypes and “othering” that led to the common perception that most Venezuelans were blindly following Chávez, with his petrodollars and charisma, are today leading international media to ignore, among other things, the unprecedented popular advances toward food sovereignty manifesting at present. Such stereotypes of the poor and poverty are so pervasive that few questions were asked when a *New York Times* article on starvation in Venezuela featured a picture of people eating one of the country’s most popular dishes, or when an article in the *Guardian* entitled “Hunger Eats Away at Venezuela’s Soul as Its People Struggle to Survive” 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”—the type of dish for which many foodies would pay dearly.⁵⁹

While these contradictions might be painfully, even laughably apparent to the average Venezuelan, such stories serve as powerful mechanisms reinforcing the dominant narrative on Venezuela and shaping international opinion. While we might expect as much from the Western mainstream media, it bears asking why the same narrative is reproduced so seemingly uncritically in intellectual and academic circles, including those of the left. Could it be that we do not always leave our own biases at the door, either?

This is where the importance of reflexivity comes in, as well as that of praxis-based partnerships among scholars and grassroots movements, to ensure that events and experiences we might not directly encounter ourselves, from our own places of power and privilege, do not become invisible, and that we question narratives that too comfortably fit our own realities. As scholars and activists, we are faced with a choice, as each day brings new forms of aggression against the government, people, and process in Venezuela by the

United States and its allies. We can wait and offer post-mortem analyses of what could have been, or we can join 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 rising 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, and for whom giving up is not an option.

Notes

1. ↪ This article is adapted from a paper presented at the first international conference of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI), held at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, March 17–18, 2018. The authors wish to thank the ERPI team, as well Fred Magdoff, William Camacaro, and the many others, particularly grassroots movements in Venezuela, who have contributed to this work.
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Photo credit: "overview of food and nutrition security in Latin America and the Caribbean," FAO, 2017 (p. 26).

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Few countries and political processes have been subject to such scrutiny, yet so generally misunderstood, as Venezuela and the Bolivarian Revolution.¹ This is particularly true today, as the international media paints an image of absolute devastation in the country, wrought by failed policies and government mismanagement. At the same time, the three national elections of 2017 demonstrated a strong show of support for the continuation of the revolution under its current leadership. This seeming paradox, we are told, can only be attributed to government tendencies of co-optation and clientelism, along with a closing of democratic space. Such messages are reproduced many times over, both in the media and in certain intellectual circles.²

A benefit of the intense attention paid to Venezuela is that a recurring narrative can be identified, which goes basically as follows. The central character is Hugo Chávez Frías, a strong-armed political leader who enjoyed the double advantage of personal charisma and high oil prices over the course of his presidency from 1999 through 2012. In 2013, Chávez died, and the following year global oil prices plunged. Amid the perfect storm of the loss of Chávez, the collapse in oil prices, and the government's misguided policies, Venezuela has steadily slid into a state of economic and political disintegration, with food and other necessities growing scarce, in turn sparking social unrest as people take to the streets. The government, headed by Chávez's less charismatic successor, Nicolás Maduro, is going to

desperate lengths to hang onto power, becoming increasingly authoritarian in the process, while maintaining the populist rhetoric of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution.

However, this dominant narrative does not capture the complexities of what is happening in Venezuela today. There are significant holes in the account, which raise important questions: who are "the people" at the center of this analysis? What, if any, are the different impacts of present challenges on various sectors of society? How should the Venezuelan state be understood, and where and how does the role of capital figure? By focusing on the politics of food as a key area in which the country's broader politics are playing out—particularly by looking at recent shortages and food lines, as well as what have been presented as "food riots"—a multitude of issues can be better understood. Often-ignored matters of race, class, gender, and geography demand special attention.

We will begin by looking to the past to situate present trends in their proper context. By homing in on the dynamics around Venezuela's most highly consumed staple foods, we can gain insight into the current conjuncture, particularly the recent food shortages. Some of the main drivers of the shortages come from forces opposing the Bolivarian Revolution, which are increasingly gaining ground within the state. We will then discuss responses to the shortages by the government and popular forces.

Historical Continuities of Extraction

A nuanced understanding of contemporary Venezuela requires going back not to Chávez's election in 1999, but centuries earlier, to the period of colonization and the inception of interrelated patterns of extraction and social differentiation that continue today. While much has been written on "extractivism" as a key feature of Latin America's "pink tide" countries, including Venezuela, it is imperative to understand present patterns of extraction as part of a much longer historical continuity dating back to Spanish colonization from the sixteenth into the nineteenth centuries. During this period, a "tropical plantation economy based on slave labor" gave rise to a powerful agroexportation complex, through which cacao and later coffee were supplied to Europe and Mexico.³ A key feature of this complex was the two-part plantation-*conuco* system, in which the enslaved and, later, low-wage labor forces of the colonial *haciendas* depended on family and communal plots (*conucos*) for subsistence.

Venezuela was among the first countries in the region to achieve independence, but in the early nineteenth century, most social and economic structures established under colonization were little altered. These included patterns of food consumption, extending from the plantation-*conuco* system to the culinary habits that the colonial elite brought over from Europe. This dietary differentiation was intricately linked with issues of identity and domination, serving to maintain European descendants' sense of superiority over the indigenous, Afro-descendent, and *mestizo* majority. One Spanish general remarked 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."⁴ But even as they disdained indigenous foodways, European elites depended on them, as indigenous knowledge proved essential for the adaptation of European crops to tropical

agroecosystems, and food from *conucos* served as a vital source of sustenance, particularly during war. The plantation economy and the hacienda system lasted for another century after independence.

In 1929, the U.S. stock market crash and the associated collapse in agricultural commodity prices, together with the rise of oil in Venezuela as an export commodity, spelled the end of the agroexportation period, as several new patterns rapidly emerged. One was a flight of capital from agriculture to the emerging petroleum industry, with oil concessions going mostly to the same wealthy families that had dominated the agroexport complex.⁵ This was accompanied by mass migration out of rural areas, through mutually reinforcing processes of proletarianization and urbanization, and a subsequent surge in urban poverty, with insufficient employment and infrastructure to absorb these new urban workers. The development of the petroleum sector thus further concentrated wealth among the elite while fostering a “surplus population” of urban poor, but also gave rise to a middle class of professional workers. In response to these changes, owners of the former agroexport complex were able to take advantage of its existing infrastructure, an influx of oil dollars, and the new purchasing power of Venezuela’s emerging middle class to shift from exporting to importing food. Over time, these practices developed into a powerful agro-food import and distribution complex.⁶

Petroleum also broke the plantation-*conuco* system, rupturing existing patterns of production and consumption. To fill this void, the government in 1936 initiated an agricultural modernization program, funded by petroleum dollars and designed to replace imports of highly consumed foods in the growing urban centers. The push for modernization was part and parcel of the Green Revolution then sweeping much of the global South, part of an anticommunist Cold War strategy among the United States and allies. In Venezuela, the process was ushered in by U.S. “missionary capitalist” to Latin America and godfather to the Green Revolution, Nelson Rockefeller. As the home of Standard Oil’s most profitable regional affiliate, the country held a special significance for Rockefeller, who made Venezuela his home away from home, even establishing his own *hacienda*.⁷

Venezuela’s agricultural modernization program melded industrial production and white supremacy, manifested in efforts aimed at *blanqueamiento*, or “whitening.” This was reflected, for instance, in the Law of Immigration and Colonization of 1936, which facilitated the entrance of white Europeans into Venezuela, intended, in the words of agricultural minister Alberto Adriani, to help Venezuela “diversify its agriculture; develop new industries and perfect existing ones; and contribute to the improvement of its race and the elevation of its culture.”⁸ Towards these ends, the law supported the formation of aptly named *colonias agrícolas* (agricultural colonies) of European immigrants on some of the country’s most productive agricultural land, several of which still exist today.

The modernization agenda also introduced another kind of colonization in the form of Venezuela’s first chain of supermarkets, CADA, founded in 1948 and spearheaded by Rockefeller, together with the Venezuelan government. Further solidifying the connections between food consumption, identity, and social status, supermarkets allowed the emerging middle class to enjoy a taste of food elitism, literally and figuratively. This was part of a

broader program of modern state-building designed to turn Venezuela into a “reliable US ally with...a solid middle-class electorate.”⁹ By many accounts, these efforts succeeded, and Venezuela by the late twentieth century was 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.”¹⁰ However, “oil never fully transformed Venezuela, but rather it created the illusion of modernity in a country where high levels of inequality persisted.”¹¹ Indeed, the predominant narratives routinely fail to mention that at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution, more than half of the population was living in poverty, with hunger levels higher than those of today.¹²

Another Side of History

A glance at recent history challenges the depiction of pre-Chávez Venezuela as a model democracy and bastion of stability in a tumultuous region. One particularly revealing episode occurred in 1989, when IMF-prescribed structural adjustment policies proved the final straw for an increasingly fed-up population, sparking the Caracazo, or “explosion of Caracas,” in which hundreds of thousands of people from the hillside barrios flooded the center of the capital in a massive popular uprising that rapidly spread across the country.¹³ The military was ordered to open fire on civilians, yielding a death toll officially in the hundreds but believed to be in the thousands—yet the social revolt unleashed by the Caracazo would not be contained.

This brings us to another side of history: every event described above occurred amid tension, and sometimes open conflict, between the elite and the “others” whom they attempted to subjugate and exploit, while never fully succeeding. As recognized by numerous historical accounts, the indigenous peoples, African descendants, and *mestizos* who make up the majority of Venezuelans have long been a defiant lot, from Afro-descendent rebellions and indigenous uprisings to more covert forms of resistance. Such resistance from below was pivotal to the fall of colonization, once independence leader Simon Bolivar understood the importance of enslaved and indigenous peoples to the struggle for independence, and continued into peasant struggles over land post-independence, and later through the struggles of *guerillas*, students, workers, and women, among other “others,” during the period of democratization. The rise of Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution can be understood as a direct continuation of the Caracazo and the rebellions before it, through which “the popular sectors...came to assume their own political representation.”¹⁴

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—all striking parallels with the present situation. Just before and after the Caracazo, headlines such as “Prices of Sugar, Cereals, and Oils Go Up” and “Distressed Multitudes in Search of Food” abounded in the national press, while the *New York Times* reported “shortages of items like coffee, salt, flour, cooking oil and other basic products.”¹⁵ This reflected growing tensions around food access, disproportionately impacting the poor and showing that Venezuela’s “modernized” food

system, based on importation, industrial agriculture, and supermarkets, as championed by Rockefeller, did not in fact serve the interests of the majority. This in turn implied the dual, if at times divergent, tasks at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution: addressing the immediate material needs of the more than half of the population living in poverty, while working to shift the historical patterns that had caused deep disparities in Venezuela's food 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. The constitution guarantees food security for all citizens, "through the promotion of sustainable agriculture as a strategic basis for integrated rural development."¹⁶ In response to this popular mandate, a variety of state-sponsored initiatives have been established, in tandem with citizen efforts, under the banner of "food sovereignty." Fundamental to these have been processes of agrarian reform, which have combined land redistribution with a wide variety of rural development programs, including in education, housing, health care, and media and communications. Fishing communities have benefited from similar programs, and from the banning of industrial trawling off the Venezuelan coast.¹⁷ These rural initiatives have been complemented by a range of largely urban food access programs, reaching schools, workplaces, and households.¹⁸ Equally important to food sovereignty efforts are diverse forms of popular organization, from local communal councils and regional *comunas* to farmers' and fishers' councils, that have helped to broaden popular participation in the food system.¹⁹

Such programs have seen both important gains and limitations. Perhaps most notably, Venezuela surpassed the first Millennium Development Goal of cutting hunger in half by 2015, as recognized by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.²⁰ From 2008 to 2011, hunger was dramatically reduced, affecting an average of 3.1 percent of the population.²¹ Yet such advances, sponsored by oil revenues from Venezuela's nationalized petroleum industry, came largely from a reinforcement of the agroimport complex, not from alternative systems. In addition, efforts toward agrarian reform in the countryside also received significant investment, but remained largely separate from food security programs. While some important inroads were made in connecting the two initiatives, the Chávez years saw no lasting rupture in the historic power of those who controlled the agrifood system. Thus, more food programs for the poor meant more food imports, which further consolidated the import complex, reinforced through multiple mechanisms of the state. Among these mechanisms was the granting of dollars from oil revenues to private enterprises, at highly subsidized rates, for imports of food and other goods deemed essential. This means that over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, state funds, while going toward many social programs, have also flowed into the private food import complex, amounting to major subsidies for the most powerful companies.²² The direct and indirect beneficiaries of this system have little incentive to alter it.

Power in the Food System: The *Maíz-Harina-Arepa* Complex

These processes of accumulation and differentiation in Venezuela's agrifood system can be clearly seen in the case of the country's most widely consumed food, the *arepa*, a corn patty made from precooked corn flour. By focusing on what we call the *maíz-harina-arepa* (corn-flour-arepa) complex, we can trace the history of food politics in Venezuela.

The complex dates back to precolonial times, when corn, inextricably linked with the *conuco*, figured prominently in indigenous traditions, from cosmologies to foodways. With the colonial invasion, the Spanish grain of preference, wheat, together with corn and cassava, another Indigenous staple, helped sustain the Triangle Trade of the colonization project.²³

Patterns of production, processing, and consumption of corn remained largely unaltered for many years after independence. This changed in the 1960s with the introduction of precooked corn flour, which drove profound changes across the agrifood system. On the production end, corn cultivation moved from the *conuco* into industrial monoculture production, dependent on certified commercial seed varieties. No less dramatic were changes in the processing of corn for precooked corn flour, in which the kernel is "dehulled, degermed, precooked, dried, flaked, and milled."²⁴ In the process, its more nutritious outer layers are removed, yielding a nutritionally poor substance lacking in vitamins and minerals that then requires fortification to meet basic dietary standards. Inevitably, most precooked corn flour was used for arepas, dramatically reducing their preparation time. The food quickly became the principal staple of Venezuela's poor working class, and within four decades, pre-cooked corn flour came to represent 88 percent of all corn consumed in the country.²⁵

Ever since the first commercialization of precooked corn flour, one brand, Harina PAN, has become synonymous with the product—to the point that its name is used interchangeably with the generic term *harina precocida*. PAN stands for Productos Alimenticios Nacionales, National Food Products, and is a homonym of *pan*, bread. Despite the humble origins portrayed in the company's marketing campaigns, its owners, the Mendoza Fleury family, come from a long lineage traceable back to the colonial elite, and have held key posts in both government and business for generations.²⁶ Today they are among the most powerful families in the country and best known as the owners of Empresas Polar, the conglomerate that supplies the most widely consumed foods and beverages in Venezuela, particularly arepas and beer. Polar, a Venezuelan subsidiary of PepsiCo, is the largest private company in the country, with products reaching global markets, and it controls an estimated 50 to 60 percent of Venezuela's supply of precooked corn flour.²⁷ Such a degree of control is only possible through a combination of vertical integration and concentration, strategic links with the state, and well-crafted marketing in both public and private spaces, including the most intimate spaces of everyday life. On the production side, Polar's Fundación Danac, with more than 600 proprietary corn varieties, has come to control much of the genetic base of Venezuela's certified corn seeds, influencing research and seed certification.²⁸ On the distribution end, Polar is a key shareholder in the Cada supermarket chain, and in 1992 partnered with the Dutch firm SHV to launch Venezuela's largest hypermarket chain, Makro.

Polar's involvement in the retail sector has secured important distribution channels, but its primary aim was to secure the market. Among its earliest marketing strategies was to target Venezuelan housewives, including training thousands of women to go into their neighborhoods and teach other women how to make arepas from Harina PAN. From there, Polar has employed a wide range of tactics reaching multiple segments of society, from billboards, television, and print media, to sponsorship of key cultural events, to research and publishing (through its Fundación Polar), to a prestigious award for scientists (the Premio Polar) to forms of "corporate social responsibility" that have garnered international attention.²⁹ Through these and other means, Polar has positioned Harina PAN as "the brand of birth of all Venezuelans."³⁰ Given the product's ubiquity in Venezuelan households, this claim is less outlandish than it sounds. Perhaps most telling of the sheer extent of Polar's penetration into the everyday life of Venezuelans is the common equation of its products, most of all Harina PAN, with food itself—the idea that without Polar, there is no food. This phenomenon has not been lost on the company, which retains the ability to keep its products off 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 had a complex and often tense relationship with Polar, even while forging alternatives within the *maíz-harina-arepa* complex, particularly through partnerships between state institutions and farming communities. These projects center on nationwide planning and coordination of corn production, coupled with public financing, and primarily involve cooperatives on former *latifundio* lands recovered through the agrarian reform process. Efforts at reform have also been made in the processing of corn products, though these have yet to reach a significant scale of production.

Polar thus maintains relative hegemony over corn flour production, and beyond its physical control, the company wields enormous cultural and symbolic power as the brand of preference of most Venezuelans. But if relations between Polar and the government have been fraught over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, they have nevertheless not been entirely oppositional, and deep ties still bind the two across the *maíz-harina-arepa* complex. This includes the previously mentioned provision of money for food importation at highly subsidized rates, of which Polar is among the top recipients.³¹ Today such linkages are being further solidified.

Food Lines and Fault Lines

As we have seen, the Venezuelan food system has long been shaped by the pushes and pulls of capital, society, and the state, 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 has come to the fore in recent years, particularly since 2013, with the persistence of long food lines that are by now emblematic of present-day Venezuela, images of which are endlessly reproduced by the international press. The next set of images to reach international audiences, first in 2014 and much more intensely in 2017, were of "the people" taking to the streets. The story was one of spontaneous "food riots" that over time combined with more organized "pro-democracy" protests, as part of a global surge of

popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes. The riots, according to the prevailing narrative, were sparked by the lines, which were themselves the result of scarcity brought about by the drop in oil prices, combined with government mismanagement. This combination of factors has come to mark what is widely regarded as the current crisis of Venezuela's food system, part of a broader political and economic emergency facing the nation. However, a closer look at the current situation and its defining features provides a fuller and more nuanced understanding of events.

First, it is important to look carefully at the food lines: their composition, their location, and what products are being sought. The people waiting in these lines have overwhelmingly been poor working-class women—an attack on both everyday life at the household level, as well as on the popular organization of the Bolivarian Revolution, in which women have played a key role. The lines have also largely formed outside supermarkets, where consumers wait to access certain specific items that have mostly gone missing from the shelves. These consist of the most consumed industrially processed products in the Venezuelan food basket, particularly precooked corn flour. The specific selection of these missing items—those deemed most essential to the population—tends not to make the headlines, and this points to a wider gap in media narratives. For while precooked corn flour has gone missing, corn-based porridge has remained available; milk powder disappeared from the shelves, but fresh dairy products like cheeses can still be found, and so on.

Several other important factors point to holes in the dominant scarcity narrative. First, the same items missing from shelves have continued to be found in restaurants. Second, by their own accounting, private food companies, including Polar, continued to maintain steady production levels at least through 2015.³² In a 2016 interview, in fact, a representative from Polar spoke of the recent addition of new products such as teas and gelatins to their Venezuelan lines.³³ Third, even before the government mounted a widespread response to the shortages (as described below), corn flour consumption levels among both higher- and lower-income sectors of the population remained steady from 2012 to 2015.³⁴ Thus, while the shortages have undoubtedly caused tremendous anxiety and insecurity, and while accessing certain goods has become more time-consuming and complicated, Venezuelans have indeed found ways to obtain them.³⁵ In addition to enduring the lines, another channel has been the underground economy, through which goods such as corn flour are sold at a steep markup. While individuals have turned such practices into business opportunities, private enterprises have done so as well, both by hoarding goods for speculative purposes and by smuggling them across the Colombian border. The regular discovery of stockpiles further suggests that goods have been intentionally diverted from supermarket shelves.³⁶

There are direct parallels between present-day Venezuela and Chile in the 1970s under Salvador Allende, where the U.S. strategy, in the words of Richard Nixon, was to “make the economy scream.”³⁷ The United States employed the same methods of destabilization, including a financial blockade, and supported the right-wing counterrevolution, likewise manifested in shortages, lines, and street protests, among other forms of disruption. The depressed prices of Chile's main source of foreign exchange, copper, parallels declining oil prices Venezuela. While the extent of U.S. involvement in Chile's counterrevolution would

not be fully understood until years later, when key documents were declassified, overt U.S. aggression toward Venezuela is already evident in the intensifying economic sanctions imposed by 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.³⁸ As one State Department representative put it:

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.³⁹

In Venezuela today, as in Chile in the 1970s, U.S. intervention relies on an ongoing counterrevolutionary effort, with elites using the revolutionary potential of the masses to frighten the middle class.⁴⁰ This brings us to another key feature of the present conjuncture: the class dynamics of the street protests, characterized as “food riots” in the dominant narrative, particularly in the latest and most intense round in 2017. While the food lines began to appear in 2013, they grew over time, and are widely considered a key factor in the transfer of control of the National Assembly from the *chavistas* to an opposition majority under the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) 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, should they vote for the MUD, which once in power would do away with the lines forever.⁴¹ Of particular note was the working-class slant of the commercial, with the demographic composition of the people in the line reflective of the majority of the population, in contrast to the party's wealthier, whiter base. It did not take long for the MUD to return to this base, however, upon its electoral ascent, with the Second Vice President of the new National Assembly, Freddy Guevara, openly calling for “the people” (that is, MUD supporters) to take to the streets, “until the only option of the dictatorship would be to accept the less traumatic solution.”⁴²

An array of demonstrations ensued, from peaceful resistance to acts of violence. Though portrayed in the media as nationwide, the actions were largely limited to the wealthiest areas of a few cities, and ranged from street barricades and vandalism to picnics and barbecues to candlelight vigils to physical assaults to the hurling of “poopootovs” of human feces.⁴³ But among this seemingly disparate set of tactics, protesters took precise aim 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.⁴⁴ Especially hard hit was the state agrifood apparatus, as the National Institute of Nutrition was set ablaze, laboratories for the production of ecological farming inputs were vandalized, and supplies destined for government food programs were burned—including one on the order of 40 tons of food—along with vehicles associated with these programs.⁴⁵ Also among the targets, tragically, were people, specifically those seen as typical *chavistas*—i.e., poor and brown-skinned. The most visible of these was the attack on Orlando Figuera, a young Afro-Venezuelan supermarket worker, whose gruesome burning alive, as countless onlookers did nothing to intervene, was captured on video.⁴⁶ While Figuera did not survive his attack, another victim from a similar background, Carlos

Ramirez, did, albeit with severe burns covering his body. Ramirez later recalled pleading for his life, shouting “Don’t kill me! I’m not *chavista*! Please don’t kill me!” as street protesters brutally beat him and set him ablaze.⁴⁷

The racial motivations of these attacks associated with violent street protests, known as *guarimbas*, are apparent, and speak to what has been described as a “class/race fusion” with “deep roots in the country’s history.”⁴⁸ The protesters are mostly the grandchildren of the middle class that emerged in the period of modernization and “whitening,” with important links to the country’s elite, forming a middle class-elite alliance known as *sifrinaje*. The international media has largely ignored these nuances, but a rare and telling exception is a 2017 article in *Bloomberg Businessweek* on nightlife among young protesters, whose gathering spots include upscale rooftop shisha bars, with one protester quoted as saying “You protest in the morning, but that doesn’t mean you stop living.”⁴⁹ While the protesters are not homogenous, those featured in the article challenge the narratives of repressed masses, while also highlighting the differentiated impacts of the protests, as some maintain their everyday lives in relative comfort, while others struggle to survive. The violent protests disproportionately affected people in the poorest sectors, who could not afford to skip work and for whom basic 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 each day to and from the wealthier areas where the *guarimbas* were concentrated. The same areas are also the sites of most supermarkets, further impeding food access for the poor and working class, already strained by shortages, lines, and attacks on government food programs.

The image promoted by the international press has been one of “the people” rising in response to a “humanitarian crisis” wrought by an “authoritarian regime.” In reality, however, the combination of peaceful resistance and blatant acts of *guarimba* violence has only served to further isolate the popular sectors from the opposition. A look behind the headlines and images shows some glaring contradictions, particularly in the description of *guarimbas* as “food riots,” given the class and racial composition of the protesters crying *hambre* (hunger), described above. Furthermore, a quick glance at social media, such as posts by Freddy Guevara and others, dispels any illusion that the protests arose spontaneously. Finally, both the targets and tactics of the *guarimbas*—including burning food instead of redistributing it (indeed, food designated for the poor), along with violent assaults on the poor and dark-skinned—put the lie to any narrative of the *guarimbas* as “food riots” of the hungry.

An event far more aptly described as a “food riot” or “food rebellion” was the Caracazo of 1989, mentioned above. At the time, reports in the *New York Times* and other outlets made few criticisms of the government of President Andrés Pérez, but did include graphic accounts of mass graves, people lined up at morgues in search of loved ones, imposition of curfews, curtailing of civil liberties and press freedom, and death estimates upwards of 600 people, with one doctor quoted as saying “no country is prepared for what we have confronted this week.”⁵⁰ Today, in contrast, while government repression is regularly denounced in the *Times* and elsewhere, a total of fourteen deaths associated with the 2017 *guarimbas* have been directly traced to government security forces, while twenty-three have been attributed to opposition violence.⁵¹ While any government-sanctioned violence

merits concern, attention, and investigation, it nevertheless bears asking why the international outcry has been so much greater than during the Caracazo, and, why, as one media watchdog group has noted, “the imperfect state of democracy in Venezuela” attracts singular attention, even as many atrocities in the world today go underreported.⁵²

This brings us back to oil. Petroleum is central to the dominant narrative, which claims that the Chávez government won its popularity on the strength of high oil prices and personal charisma, while Maduro’s relative unpopularity is attributable to the plunge in prices and political ineptitude. Once again, this familiar story distorts the facts in key ways. First, as economist Luis Salas has shown, although oil prices did indeed rise for much of Chávez’s presidency, its peak at or around \$100 per barrel was an aberration that occurred in the last stage of Chávez’s presidency, between 2010 and 2012, whereas the average price per barrel over the course of his presidency was closer to \$55 per barrel.⁵³ (This happens to be right around the price at the time of writing.) Second, the shortages that have attracted such interest are in fact part of a broader trend seen over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, through both periods of high and low oil prices, and particularly at politically heightened moments such as the lead-up to elections.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the most recent shortages did not begin in 2014, when oil prices dropped, but before, in 2013, while prices were still high.

All of this complicates simplistic narratives around present conditions and events in Venezuela. But perhaps the most significant gap in such analyses, which tend to center on the government and state, is the 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, whose power extends throughout much of the agrifood system, and who have exploited the current “crisis” to further consolidate their power while simultaneously seeking to dismantle redistributive agrifood policies. These forces have launched a material assault on much of the population, disproportionately impacting the poor and working class while further provoking an already frustrated middle class. They are also attacking the legitimacy of the government, both internally and externally, particularly by discrediting Venezuela’s reputation for exemplary achievements in the fight against hunger and toward food sovereignty.

Resistance: ‘En Guerra Hay Que Comer’

As one Venezuelan food sovereignty activist commented on the present situation: “In war, one must eat.” Responses to the challenges have taken many forms, and while a full discussion is beyond the scope of this article, we will give a broad overview. First, if everyday life is the main battleground on which present problems are playing out, it is also the frontline of resistance. When the shortages began, among the first lines of defense to be activated was a kind of parallel solidarity economy, involving the sharing and bartering of food and other essentials among neighbors as well as a reactivation of survival techniques from the past. These have 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, thanks to prior public efforts toward food sovereignty: plantains, cassava, and sweet potatoes for processed starches, fresh sugarcane for refined sugar, and so on. Perhaps most emblematic of the early days of the shortages

was the substitution of freshly ground corn for processed (precooked) corn flour in the preparation of arepas, as many dusted off their grandmothers' grinders and put them to use. Simultaneously, unprecedented numbers of urban dwellers began growing what they could on windowsills, patios, and in community spaces, enlivening a nascent urban agriculture movement.

In the countryside, food shortages coupled with diminished access to industrial inputs have prompted farmers to shift from commercial crop varieties to traditional staple food crops, and from agrichemicals toward agroecological practices, with certain parallels to Cuba's "special period." Rural people who had not been directly engaged in agriculture have been returning to food production, and are increasingly joined by their urban counterparts. The surge in interest in alternatives to industrially produced foods and the revaluing of the countryside have provided openings for social movements already working toward such transformations, helping forge connections between emerging grassroots responses and prior efforts toward food sovereignty under the Bolivarian Revolution. As one longtime activist and government official reflected: "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."⁵⁵ One example is the rural *comuna* in the northwestern state of El Maíz in Lara, a product of both the above-mentioned agrarian reform process and the construction of *comunas*. When the shortages struck, the members of El Maíz had already been working hard toward food sovereignty since 2009, particularly in corn and livestock production, and were able to help meet the food needs of up to 15,000 families in surrounding communities.⁵⁶ Another grassroots effort, Plan Pueblo a Pueblo (People to People Plan), has built on the preexisting organization of the *comunas* to forge direct links between rural producers and urban inhabitants. Formed in 2015, it already reaches over 60,000 urban working-class families with regular distributions of affordable fresh food. Other grassroots initiatives include the Feria Conuquera (Conuco Fair), a large monthly alternative market in Caracas featuring agroecologically produced fresh foods and artisanal versions of many of the products missing from supermarket shelves, the Mano a Mano Intercambio Agroecológico (Hand to Hand Agroecological Exchange) bridging the urban-rural divide in the Andes, and the Plan Popular de Semillas (People's Seed Plan), an offshoot of the new national Seed Law passed through a bottom-up policy-making process in 2015.⁵⁷

There has also been a host of government responses to the shortages. Among the first was a reorganization of public management to prioritize food sovereignty, including the creation of three separate ministries out of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land in early 2016: the Ministry of Urban Agriculture (believed to be the first of its kind globally); the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture; and the Ministry of Agricultural Production. This was followed by the creation of the Great Sovereign Supply Mission, an umbrella body focused on securing national supplies of food, medicine, and other basic goods. Among the government responses to the shortages, those most intimately linked with popular organizing are the Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción (Local Provisioning and Production Committees), known as CLAPs. CLAPs were rapidly rolled out in 2016, initially targeting the poorest fifth of the population, and now reach well over half. Through the CLAPs, the government purchases food directly from suppliers, both private and public, and coordinates with community organizations to distribute mixed food packages to

individual households. Communities are responsible for organizing themselves into CLAPs, conducting local censuses, and running regular distributions, in which the food is sold at subsidized prices in units of twelve to fifteen kilograms. Through a massive coordinated push from both above and below, CLAPs reached an estimated two million families in their first year, and today there are more than thirty thousand CLAPs throughout the country, with the aim of reaching six million families—nearly three-quarters of the population—with regular distributions by the end of 2018.⁵⁸

CLAPs have had a mixed reception among food sovereignty activists, who note their dependence on industrialized foods, half of which come through the above-mentioned food importation complex. At the same time, CLAPs have played a key role in mitigating the worst effects of the shortages, and have become important vehicles for citizen organizing around food, with 50 percent of CLAPs also directly involved in food production. Food sovereignty activists (including those of Pueblo a Pueblo and El Maíz) are thus increasingly opting to partner with the CLAPs and attempting to push them in more transformative directions, as part of a long-term vision of *agricultura cero divisas*, or “zero-dollar agriculture.”

Conclusion

The situation confronting Venezuela today is far more complex than that portrayed in the dominant narrative, and it demands more thorough analysis. Through the lens of food and a focus on questions of power related to race, class, gender, and geography, new elements emerge that are key to understanding the present conjuncture. These include (1) food as a vehicle for social differentiation over time, most fundamentally in the creation and maintenance of an elite, an elite-aligned middle class, and a class of “others”; (2) the concentration and consolidation of power in the agrifood system, maintained through elite alliances, both within and outside of the state structure, and through both overt and hidden forms of power; (3) increasing homogenization, uniformity, and controllability of the agrifood system, from production and importation to consumption, through highly racialized notions of science and modernity; (4) marketing strategies that forge intimate relationships with the public so that specific industrially processed foods pervade everyday life; (5) dependency on monopolized supply channels and on supermarkets for access to such products; (6) the disappearance of such products, constituting an attack on everyday life, particularly that of the “others,” especially women; (7) the implication of the state in the products’ disappearance, while the role of private capital remains largely hidden; (8) the attempted consolidation of power by the elite through proposals for the restoration of the missing products (and of “order” more generally), in opposition to state programs and policies, with appeals to the working class “others”; (9) a rallying of the middle class in the name of “the people,” against the government and its alliance with the “others,” by coopting social justice imagery while committing racialized acts of violence; and, all the while, (10) 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 reflect emerging trends in Venezuela today, stemming from elite alliances long in the making. Of particular note are the

invisible—or so ubiquitous as to effectively be invisible—mechanisms of control in the realm of everyday life that facilitate the exertion of dominance over the population, especially the working poor. This is particularly true of everyday practices around food. Through processes of colonization, modernization, and today, globalization, the entire structure of the modern industrial food system—i.e., offering foods appealing to the tastes of the masses (tastes conditioned over time), but in a highly controlled and controlling way—can readily be made into a tool of control and domination, as in Venezuela today. However, as we have seen, food is also being used as a means of resistance.

The dominant narrative tends to obscure not only the main drivers of the current crisis, but also the many responses coming from the grassroots. This phenomenon is linked to the common portrayal of the Venezuelan working class as passive victims rather than active agents. The same stereotypes and “othering” that led to the common perception that most Venezuelans were blindly following Chávez, with his petrodollars and charisma, are today leading international media to ignore, among other things, the unprecedented popular advances toward food sovereignty manifesting at present. Such stereotypes of the poor and poverty are so pervasive that few questions were asked when a *New York Times* article on starvation in Venezuela featured a picture of people eating one of the country’s most popular dishes, or when an article in the *Guardian* entitled “Hunger Eats Away at Venezuela’s Soul as Its People Struggle to Survive” 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”—the type of dish for which many foodies would pay dearly.⁵⁹

While these contradictions might be painfully, even laughably apparent to the average Venezuelan, such stories serve as powerful mechanisms reinforcing the dominant narrative on Venezuela and shaping international opinion. While we might expect as much from the Western mainstream media, it bears asking why the same narrative is reproduced so seemingly uncritically in intellectual and academic circles, including those of the left. Could it be that we do not always leave our own biases at the door, either?

This is where the importance of reflexivity comes in, as well as that of praxis-based partnerships among scholars and grassroots movements, to ensure that events and experiences we might not directly encounter ourselves, from our own places of power and privilege, do not become invisible, and that we question narratives that too comfortably fit our own realities. As scholars and activists, we are faced with a choice, as each day brings new forms of aggression against the government, people, and process in Venezuela by the United States and its allies. We can wait and offer post-mortem analyses of what could have been, or we can join 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 rising 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, and for whom giving up is not an option.

Notes

1. ↪ This article is adapted from a paper presented at the first international conference of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI), held at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, March 17–18, 2018. The authors wish to thank the ERPI team, as well Fred Magdoff, William Camacaro, and the many others, particularly grassroots movements in Venezuela, who have contributed to this work.
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ew of the Month

The Politics of Food in Venezuela

by Ana Felicien, Christina Schiavoni and Licia
Romero

(Jun 01, 2018)

Topics: Agriculture , Ecology , Movements

Places: Americas , Venezuela

Overview of food and nutrition security in
Latin America and the Caribbean

Photo credit: "overview of food and nutrition security in Latin America and the Caribbean,"
FAO, 2017 (p. 26).

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Few countries and political processes have been subject to such scrutiny, yet so generally misunderstood, as Venezuela and the Bolivarian Revolution.¹ This is particularly true today, as the international media paints an image of absolute devastation in the country, wrought by failed policies and government mismanagement. At the same time, the three national elections of 2017 demonstrated a strong show of support for the continuation of the revolution under its current leadership. This seeming paradox, we are told, can only be attributed to government tendencies of co-optation and clientelism, along with a closing of democratic space. Such messages are reproduced many times over, both in the media and in certain intellectual circles.²

A benefit of the intense attention paid to Venezuela is that a recurring narrative can be identified, which goes basically as follows. The central character is Hugo Chávez Frías, a strong-armed political leader who enjoyed the double advantage of personal charisma and high oil prices over the course of his presidency from 1999 through 2012. In 2013, Chávez died, and the following year global oil prices plunged. Amid the perfect storm of the loss of Chávez, the collapse in oil prices, and the government's misguided policies, Venezuela has steadily slid into a state of economic and political disintegration, with food and other necessities growing scarce, in turn sparking social unrest as people take to the streets. The government, headed by Chávez's less charismatic successor, Nicolás Maduro, is going to

desperate lengths to hang onto power, becoming increasingly authoritarian in the process, while maintaining the populist rhetoric of Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution.

However, this dominant narrative does not capture the complexities of what is happening in Venezuela today. There are significant holes in the account, which raise important questions: who are "the people" at the center of this analysis? What, if any, are the different impacts of present challenges on various sectors of society? How should the Venezuelan state be understood, and where and how does the role of capital figure? By focusing on the politics of food as a key area in which the country's broader politics are playing out—particularly by looking at recent shortages and food lines, as well as what have been presented as "food riots"—a multitude of issues can be better understood. Often-ignored matters of race, class, gender, and geography demand special attention.

We will begin by looking to the past to situate present trends in their proper context. By homing in on the dynamics around Venezuela's most highly consumed staple foods, we can gain insight into the current conjuncture, particularly the recent food shortages. Some of the main drivers of the shortages come from forces opposing the Bolivarian Revolution, which are increasingly gaining ground within the state. We will then discuss responses to the shortages by the government and popular forces.

Historical Continuities of Extraction

A nuanced understanding of contemporary Venezuela requires going back not to Chávez's election in 1999, but centuries earlier, to the period of colonization and the inception of interrelated patterns of extraction and social differentiation that continue today. While much has been written on "extractivism" as a key feature of Latin America's "pink tide" countries, including Venezuela, it is imperative to understand present patterns of extraction as part of a much longer historical continuity dating back to Spanish colonization from the sixteenth into the nineteenth centuries. During this period, a "tropical plantation economy based on slave labor" gave rise to a powerful agroexportation complex, through which cacao and later coffee were supplied to Europe and Mexico.³ A key feature of this complex was the two-part plantation-*conuco* system, in which the enslaved and, later, low-wage labor forces of the colonial *haciendas* depended on family and communal plots (*conucos*) for subsistence.

Venezuela was among the first countries in the region to achieve independence, but in the early nineteenth century, most social and economic structures established under colonization were little altered. These included patterns of food consumption, extending from the plantation-*conuco* system to the culinary habits that the colonial elite brought over from Europe. This dietary differentiation was intricately linked with issues of identity and domination, serving to maintain European descendants' sense of superiority over the indigenous, Afro-descendent, and *mestizo* majority. One Spanish general remarked 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."⁴ But even as they disdained indigenous foodways, European elites depended on them, as indigenous knowledge proved essential for the adaptation of European crops to tropical

agroecosystems, and food from *conucos* served as a vital source of sustenance, particularly during war. The plantation economy and the hacienda system lasted for another century after independence.

In 1929, the U.S. stock market crash and the associated collapse in agricultural commodity prices, together with the rise of oil in Venezuela as an export commodity, spelled the end of the agroexportation period, as several new patterns rapidly emerged. One was a flight of capital from agriculture to the emerging petroleum industry, with oil concessions going mostly to the same wealthy families that had dominated the agroexport complex.⁵ This was accompanied by mass migration out of rural areas, through mutually reinforcing processes of proletarianization and urbanization, and a subsequent surge in urban poverty, with insufficient employment and infrastructure to absorb these new urban workers. The development of the petroleum sector thus further concentrated wealth among the elite while fostering a “surplus population” of urban poor, but also gave rise to a middle class of professional workers. In response to these changes, owners of the former agroexport complex were able to take advantage of its existing infrastructure, an influx of oil dollars, and the new purchasing power of Venezuela’s emerging middle class to shift from exporting to importing food. Over time, these practices developed into a powerful agro-food import and distribution complex.⁶

Petroleum also broke the plantation-*conuco* system, rupturing existing patterns of production and consumption. To fill this void, the government in 1936 initiated an agricultural modernization program, funded by petroleum dollars and designed to replace imports of highly consumed foods in the growing urban centers. The push for modernization was part and parcel of the Green Revolution then sweeping much of the global South, part of an anticommunist Cold War strategy among the United States and allies. In Venezuela, the process was ushered in by U.S. “missionary capitalist” to Latin America and godfather to the Green Revolution, Nelson Rockefeller. As the home of Standard Oil’s most profitable regional affiliate, the country held a special significance for Rockefeller, who made Venezuela his home away from home, even establishing his own *hacienda*.⁷

Venezuela’s agricultural modernization program melded industrial production and white supremacy, manifested in efforts aimed at *blanqueamiento*, or “whitening.” This was reflected, for instance, in the Law of Immigration and Colonization of 1936, which facilitated the entrance of white Europeans into Venezuela, intended, in the words of agricultural minister Alberto Adriani, to help Venezuela “diversify its agriculture; develop new industries and perfect existing ones; and contribute to the improvement of its race and the elevation of its culture.”⁸ Towards these ends, the law supported the formation of aptly named *colonias agrícolas* (agricultural colonies) of European immigrants on some of the country’s most productive agricultural land, several of which still exist today.

The modernization agenda also introduced another kind of colonization in the form of Venezuela’s first chain of supermarkets, CADA, founded in 1948 and spearheaded by Rockefeller, together with the Venezuelan government. Further solidifying the connections between food consumption, identity, and social status, supermarkets allowed the emerging middle class to enjoy a taste of food elitism, literally and figuratively. This was part of a

broad program of modern state-building designed to turn Venezuela into a “reliable US ally with...a solid middle-class electorate.”⁹ By many accounts, these efforts succeeded, and Venezuela by the late twentieth century was 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.”¹⁰ However, “oil never fully transformed Venezuela, but rather it created the illusion of modernity in a country where high levels of inequality persisted.”¹¹ Indeed, the predominant narratives routinely fail to mention that at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution, more than half of the population was living in poverty, with hunger levels higher than those of today.¹²

Another Side of History

A glance at recent history challenges the depiction of pre-Chávez Venezuela as a model democracy and bastion of stability in a tumultuous region. One particularly revealing episode occurred in 1989, when IMF-prescribed structural adjustment policies proved the final straw for an increasingly fed-up population, sparking the Caracazo, or “explosion of Caracas,” in which hundreds of thousands of people from the hillside barrios flooded the center of the capital in a massive popular uprising that rapidly spread across the country.¹³ The military was ordered to open fire on civilians, yielding a death toll officially in the hundreds but believed to be in the thousands—yet the social revolt unleashed by the Caracazo would not be contained.

This brings us to another side of history: every event described above occurred amid tension, and sometimes open conflict, between the elite and the “others” whom they attempted to subjugate and exploit, while never fully succeeding. As recognized by numerous historical accounts, the indigenous peoples, African descendants, and *mestizos* who make up the majority of Venezuelans have long been a defiant lot, from Afro-descendent rebellions and indigenous uprisings to more covert forms of resistance. Such resistance from below was pivotal to the fall of colonization, once independence leader Simon Bolivar understood the importance of enslaved and indigenous peoples to the struggle for independence, and continued into peasant struggles over land post-independence, and later through the struggles of *guerillas*, students, workers, and women, among other “others,” during the period of democratization. The rise of Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution can be understood as a direct continuation of the Caracazo and the rebellions before it, through which “the popular sectors...came to assume their own political representation.”¹⁴

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—all striking parallels with the present situation. Just before and after the Caracazo, headlines such as “Prices of Sugar, Cereals, and Oils Go Up” and “Distressed Multitudes in Search of Food” abounded in the national press, while the *New York Times* reported “shortages of items like coffee, salt, flour, cooking oil and other basic products.”¹⁵ This reflected growing tensions around food access, disproportionately impacting the poor and showing that Venezuela’s “modernized” food

system, based on importation, industrial agriculture, and supermarkets, as championed by Rockefeller, did not in fact serve the interests of the majority. This in turn implied the dual, if at times divergent, tasks at the start of the Bolivarian Revolution: addressing the immediate material needs of the more than half of the population living in poverty, while working to shift the historical patterns that had caused deep disparities in Venezuela's food 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. The constitution guarantees food security for all citizens, "through the promotion of sustainable agriculture as a strategic basis for integrated rural development."¹⁶ In response to this popular mandate, a variety of state-sponsored initiatives have been established, in tandem with citizen efforts, under the banner of "food sovereignty." Fundamental to these have been processes of agrarian reform, which have combined land redistribution with a wide variety of rural development programs, including in education, housing, health care, and media and communications. Fishing communities have benefited from similar programs, and from the banning of industrial trawling off the Venezuelan coast.¹⁷ These rural initiatives have been complemented by a range of largely urban food access programs, reaching schools, workplaces, and households.¹⁸ Equally important to food sovereignty efforts are diverse forms of popular organization, from local communal councils and regional *comunas* to farmers' and fishers' councils, that have helped to broaden popular participation in the food system.¹⁹

Such programs have seen both important gains and limitations. Perhaps most notably, Venezuela surpassed the first Millennium Development Goal of cutting hunger in half by 2015, as recognized by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.²⁰ From 2008 to 2011, hunger was dramatically reduced, affecting an average of 3.1 percent of the population.²¹ Yet such advances, sponsored by oil revenues from Venezuela's nationalized petroleum industry, came largely from a reinforcement of the agroimport complex, not from alternative systems. In addition, efforts toward agrarian reform in the countryside also received significant investment, but remained largely separate from food security programs. While some important inroads were made in connecting the two initiatives, the Chávez years saw no lasting rupture in the historic power of those who controlled the agrifood system. Thus, more food programs for the poor meant more food imports, which further consolidated the import complex, reinforced through multiple mechanisms of the state. Among these mechanisms was the granting of dollars from oil revenues to private enterprises, at highly subsidized rates, for imports of food and other goods deemed essential. This means that over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, state funds, while going toward many social programs, have also flowed into the private food import complex, amounting to major subsidies for the most powerful companies.²² The direct and indirect beneficiaries of this system have little incentive to alter it.

Power in the Food System: The *Maíz-Harina-Arepa* Complex

These processes of accumulation and differentiation in Venezuela's agrifood system can be clearly seen in the case of the country's most widely consumed food, the *arepa*, a corn patty made from precooked corn flour. By focusing on what we call the *maíz-harina-arepa* (corn-flour-arepa) complex, we can trace the history of food politics in Venezuela.

The complex dates back to precolonial times, when corn, inextricably linked with the *conuco*, figured prominently in indigenous traditions, from cosmologies to foodways. With the colonial invasion, the Spanish grain of preference, wheat, together with corn and cassava, another Indigenous staple, helped sustain the Triangle Trade of the colonization project.²³

Patterns of production, processing, and consumption of corn remained largely unaltered for many years after independence. This changed in the 1960s with the introduction of precooked corn flour, which drove profound changes across the agrifood system. On the production end, corn cultivation moved from the *conuco* into industrial monoculture production, dependent on certified commercial seed varieties. No less dramatic were changes in the processing of corn for precooked corn flour, in which the kernel is "dehulled, degermed, precooked, dried, flaked, and milled."²⁴ In the process, its more nutritious outer layers are removed, yielding a nutritionally poor substance lacking in vitamins and minerals that then requires fortification to meet basic dietary standards. Inevitably, most precooked corn flour was used for arepas, dramatically reducing their preparation time. The food quickly became the principal staple of Venezuela's poor working class, and within four decades, pre-cooked corn flour came to represent 88 percent of all corn consumed in the country.²⁵

Ever since the first commercialization of precooked corn flour, one brand, Harina PAN, has become synonymous with the product—to the point that its name is used interchangeably with the generic term *harina precocida*. PAN stands for Productos Alimenticios Nacionales, National Food Products, and is a homonym of *pan*, bread. Despite the humble origins portrayed in the company's marketing campaigns, its owners, the Mendoza Fleury family, come from a long lineage traceable back to the colonial elite, and have held key posts in both government and business for generations.²⁶ Today they are among the most powerful families in the country and best known as the owners of Empresas Polar, the conglomerate that supplies the most widely consumed foods and beverages in Venezuela, particularly arepas and beer. Polar, a Venezuelan subsidiary of PepsiCo, is the largest private company in the country, with products reaching global markets, and it controls an estimated 50 to 60 percent of Venezuela's supply of precooked corn flour.²⁷ Such a degree of control is only possible through a combination of vertical integration and concentration, strategic links with the state, and well-crafted marketing in both public and private spaces, including the most intimate spaces of everyday life. On the production side, Polar's Fundación Danac, with more than 600 proprietary corn varieties, has come to control much of the genetic base of Venezuela's certified corn seeds, influencing research and seed certification.²⁸ On the distribution end, Polar is a key shareholder in the Cada supermarket chain, and in 1992 partnered with the Dutch firm SHV to launch Venezuela's largest hypermarket chain, Makro.

Polar's involvement in the retail sector has secured important distribution channels, but its primary aim was to secure the market. Among its earliest marketing strategies was to target Venezuelan housewives, including training thousands of women to go into their neighborhoods and teach other women how to make arepas from Harina PAN. From there, Polar has employed a wide range of tactics reaching multiple segments of society, from billboards, television, and print media, to sponsorship of key cultural events, to research and publishing (through its Fundación Polar), to a prestigious award for scientists (the Premio Polar) to forms of "corporate social responsibility" that have garnered international attention.²⁹ Through these and other means, Polar has positioned Harina PAN as "the brand of birth of all Venezuelans."³⁰ Given the product's ubiquity in Venezuelan households, this claim is less outlandish than it sounds. Perhaps most telling of the sheer extent of Polar's penetration into the everyday life of Venezuelans is the common equation of its products, most of all Harina PAN, with food itself—the idea that without Polar, there is no food. This phenomenon has not been lost on the company, which retains the ability to keep its products off 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 had a complex and often tense relationship with Polar, even while forging alternatives within the *maíz-harina-arepa* complex, particularly through partnerships between state institutions and farming communities. These projects center on nationwide planning and coordination of corn production, coupled with public financing, and primarily involve cooperatives on former *latifundio* lands recovered through the agrarian reform process. Efforts at reform have also been made in the processing of corn products, though these have yet to reach a significant scale of production.

Polar thus maintains relative hegemony over corn flour production, and beyond its physical control, the company wields enormous cultural and symbolic power as the brand of preference of most Venezuelans. But if relations between Polar and the government have been fraught over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, they have nevertheless not been entirely oppositional, and deep ties still bind the two across the *maíz-harina-arepa* complex. This includes the previously mentioned provision of money for food importation at highly subsidized rates, of which Polar is among the top recipients.³¹ Today such linkages are being further solidified.

Food Lines and Fault Lines

As we have seen, the Venezuelan food system has long been shaped by the pushes and pulls of capital, society, and the state, 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 has come to the fore in recent years, particularly since 2013, with the persistence of long food lines that are by now emblematic of present-day Venezuela, images of which are endlessly reproduced by the international press. The next set of images to reach international audiences, first in 2014 and much more intensely in 2017, were of "the people" taking to the streets. The story was one of spontaneous "food riots" that over time combined with more organized "pro-democracy" protests, as part of a global surge of

popular uprisings against authoritarian regimes. The riots, according to the prevailing narrative, were sparked by the lines, which were themselves the result of scarcity brought about by the drop in oil prices, combined with government mismanagement. This combination of factors has come to mark what is widely regarded as the current crisis of Venezuela's food system, part of a broader political and economic emergency facing the nation. However, a closer look at the current situation and its defining features provides a fuller and more nuanced understanding of events.

First, it is important to look carefully at the food lines: their composition, their location, and what products are being sought. The people waiting in these lines have overwhelmingly been poor working-class women—an attack on both everyday life at the household level, as well as on the popular organization of the Bolivarian Revolution, in which women have played a key role. The lines have also largely formed outside supermarkets, where consumers wait to access certain specific items that have mostly gone missing from the shelves. These consist of the most consumed industrially processed products in the Venezuelan food basket, particularly precooked corn flour. The specific selection of these missing items—those deemed most essential to the population—tends not to make the headlines, and this points to a wider gap in media narratives. For while precooked corn flour has gone missing, corn-based porridge has remained available; milk powder disappeared from the shelves, but fresh dairy products like cheeses can still be found, and so on.

Several other important factors point to holes in the dominant scarcity narrative. First, the same items missing from shelves have continued to be found in restaurants. Second, by their own accounting, private food companies, including Polar, continued to maintain steady production levels at least through 2015.³² In a 2016 interview, in fact, a representative from Polar spoke of the recent addition of new products such as teas and gelatins to their Venezuelan lines.³³ Third, even before the government mounted a widespread response to the shortages (as described below), corn flour consumption levels among both higher- and lower-income sectors of the population remained steady from 2012 to 2015.³⁴ Thus, while the shortages have undoubtedly caused tremendous anxiety and insecurity, and while accessing certain goods has become more time-consuming and complicated, Venezuelans have indeed found ways to obtain them.³⁵ In addition to enduring the lines, another channel has been the underground economy, through which goods such as corn flour are sold at a steep markup. While individuals have turned such practices into business opportunities, private enterprises have done so as well, both by hoarding goods for speculative purposes and by smuggling them across the Colombian border. The regular discovery of stockpiles further suggests that goods have been intentionally diverted from supermarket shelves.³⁶

There are direct parallels between present-day Venezuela and Chile in the 1970s under Salvador Allende, where the U.S. strategy, in the words of Richard Nixon, was to “make the economy scream.”³⁷ The United States employed the same methods of destabilization, including a financial blockade, and supported the right-wing counterrevolution, likewise manifested in shortages, lines, and street protests, among other forms of disruption. The depressed prices of Chile's main source of foreign exchange, copper, parallels declining oil prices Venezuela. While the extent of U.S. involvement in Chile's counterrevolution would

not be fully understood until years later, when key documents were declassified, overt U.S. aggression toward Venezuela is already evident in the intensifying economic sanctions imposed by 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.³⁸ As one State Department representative put it:

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.³⁹

In Venezuela today, as in Chile in the 1970s, U.S. intervention relies on an ongoing counterrevolutionary effort, with elites using the revolutionary potential of the masses to frighten the middle class.⁴⁰ This brings us to another key feature of the present conjuncture: the class dynamics of the street protests, characterized as “food riots” in the dominant narrative, particularly in the latest and most intense round in 2017. While the food lines began to appear in 2013, they grew over time, and are widely considered a key factor in the transfer of control of the National Assembly from the *chavistas* to an opposition majority under the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) 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, should they vote for the MUD, which once in power would do away with the lines forever.⁴¹ Of particular note was the working-class slant of the commercial, with the demographic composition of the people in the line reflective of the majority of the population, in contrast to the party's wealthier, whiter base. It did not take long for the MUD to return to this base, however, upon its electoral ascent, with the Second Vice President of the new National Assembly, Freddy Guevara, openly calling for “the people” (that is, MUD supporters) to take to the streets, “until the only option of the dictatorship would be to accept the less traumatic solution.”⁴²

An array of demonstrations ensued, from peaceful resistance to acts of violence. Though portrayed in the media as nationwide, the actions were largely limited to the wealthiest areas of a few cities, and ranged from street barricades and vandalism to picnics and barbecues to candlelight vigils to physical assaults to the hurling of “poopootovs” of human feces.⁴³ But among this seemingly disparate set of tactics, protesters took precise aim 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.⁴⁴ Especially hard hit was the state agrifood apparatus, as the National Institute of Nutrition was set ablaze, laboratories for the production of ecological farming inputs were vandalized, and supplies destined for government food programs were burned—including one on the order of 40 tons of food—along with vehicles associated with these programs.⁴⁵ Also among the targets, tragically, were people, specifically those seen as typical *chavistas*—i.e., poor and brown-skinned. The most visible of these was the attack on Orlando Figuera, a young Afro-Venezuelan supermarket worker, whose gruesome burning alive, as countless onlookers did nothing to intervene, was captured on video.⁴⁶ While Figuera did not survive his attack, another victim from a similar background, Carlos

Ramirez, did, albeit with severe burns covering his body. Ramirez later recalled pleading for his life, shouting “Don’t kill me! I’m not *chavista*! Please don’t kill me!” as street protesters brutally beat him and set him ablaze.⁴⁷

The racial motivations of these attacks associated with violent street protests, known as *guarimbas*, are apparent, and speak to what has been described as a “class/race fusion” with “deep roots in the country’s history.”⁴⁸ The protesters are mostly the grandchildren of the middle class that emerged in the period of modernization and “whitening,” with important links to the country’s elite, forming a middle class-elite alliance known as *sifrinaje*. The international media has largely ignored these nuances, but a rare and telling exception is a 2017 article in *Bloomberg Businessweek* on nightlife among young protesters, whose gathering spots include upscale rooftop shisha bars, with one protester quoted as saying “You protest in the morning, but that doesn’t mean you stop living.”⁴⁹ While the protesters are not homogenous, those featured in the article challenge the narratives of repressed masses, while also highlighting the differentiated impacts of the protests, as some maintain their everyday lives in relative comfort, while others struggle to survive. The violent protests disproportionately affected people in the poorest sectors, who could not afford to skip work and for whom basic 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 each day to and from the wealthier areas where the *guarimbas* were concentrated. The same areas are also the sites of most supermarkets, further impeding food access for the poor and working class, already strained by shortages, lines, and attacks on government food programs.

The image promoted by the international press has been one of “the people” rising in response to a “humanitarian crisis” wrought by an “authoritarian regime.” In reality, however, the combination of peaceful resistance and blatant acts of *guarimba* violence has only served to further isolate the popular sectors from the opposition. A look behind the headlines and images shows some glaring contradictions, particularly in the description of *guarimbas* as “food riots,” given the class and racial composition of the protesters crying *hambre* (hunger), described above. Furthermore, a quick glance at social media, such as posts by Freddy Guevara and others, dispels any illusion that the protests arose spontaneously. Finally, both the targets and tactics of the *guarimbas*—including burning food instead of redistributing it (indeed, food designated for the poor), along with violent assaults on the poor and dark-skinned—put the lie to any narrative of the *guarimbas* as “food riots” of the hungry.

An event far more aptly described as a “food riot” or “food rebellion” was the Caracazo of 1989, mentioned above. At the time, reports in the *New York Times* and other outlets made few criticisms of the government of President Andrés Pérez, but did include graphic accounts of mass graves, people lined up at morgues in search of loved ones, imposition of curfews, curtailing of civil liberties and press freedom, and death estimates upwards of 600 people, with one doctor quoted as saying “no country is prepared for what we have confronted this week.”⁵⁰ Today, in contrast, while government repression is regularly denounced in the *Times* and elsewhere, a total of fourteen deaths associated with the 2017 *guarimbas* have been directly traced to government security forces, while twenty-three have been attributed to opposition violence.⁵¹ While any government-sanctioned violence

merits concern, attention, and investigation, it nevertheless bears asking why the international outcry has been so much greater than during the Caracazo, and, why, as one media watchdog group has noted, “the imperfect state of democracy in Venezuela” attracts singular attention, even as many atrocities in the world today go underreported.⁵²

This brings us back to oil. Petroleum is central to the dominant narrative, which claims that the Chávez government won its popularity on the strength of high oil prices and personal charisma, while Maduro’s relative unpopularity is attributable to the plunge in prices and political ineptitude. Once again, this familiar story distorts the facts in key ways. First, as economist Luis Salas has shown, although oil prices did indeed rise for much of Chávez’s presidency, its peak at or around \$100 per barrel was an aberration that occurred in the last stage of Chávez’s presidency, between 2010 and 2012, whereas the average price per barrel over the course of his presidency was closer to \$55 per barrel.⁵³ (This happens to be right around the price at the time of writing.) Second, the shortages that have attracted such interest are in fact part of a broader trend seen over the course of the Bolivarian Revolution, through both periods of high and low oil prices, and particularly at politically heightened moments such as the lead-up to elections.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the most recent shortages did not begin in 2014, when oil prices dropped, but before, in 2013, while prices were still high.

All of this complicates simplistic narratives around present conditions and events in Venezuela. But perhaps the most significant gap in such analyses, which tend to center on the government and state, is the 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, whose power extends throughout much of the agrifood system, and who have exploited the current “crisis” to further consolidate their power while simultaneously seeking to dismantle redistributive agrifood policies. These forces have launched a material assault on much of the population, disproportionately impacting the poor and working class while further provoking an already frustrated middle class. They are also attacking the legitimacy of the government, both internally and externally, particularly by discrediting Venezuela’s reputation for exemplary achievements in the fight against hunger and toward food sovereignty.

Resistance: ‘En Guerra Hay Que Comer’

As one Venezuelan food sovereignty activist commented on the present situation: “In war, one must eat.” Responses to the challenges have taken many forms, and while a full discussion is beyond the scope of this article, we will give a broad overview. First, if everyday life is the main battleground on which present problems are playing out, it is also the frontline of resistance. When the shortages began, among the first lines of defense to be activated was a kind of parallel solidarity economy, involving the sharing and bartering of food and other essentials among neighbors as well as a reactivation of survival techniques from the past. These have 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, thanks to prior public efforts toward food sovereignty: plantains, cassava, and sweet potatoes for processed starches, fresh sugarcane for refined sugar, and so on. Perhaps most emblematic of the early days of the shortages

was the substitution of freshly ground corn for processed (precooked) corn flour in the preparation of arepas, as many dusted off their grandmothers' grinders and put them to use. Simultaneously, unprecedented numbers of urban dwellers began growing what they could on windowsills, patios, and in community spaces, enlivening a nascent urban agriculture movement.

In the countryside, food shortages coupled with diminished access to industrial inputs have prompted farmers to shift from commercial crop varieties to traditional staple food crops, and from agrichemicals toward agroecological practices, with certain parallels to Cuba's "special period." Rural people who had not been directly engaged in agriculture have been returning to food production, and are increasingly joined by their urban counterparts. The surge in interest in alternatives to industrially produced foods and the revaluing of the countryside have provided openings for social movements already working toward such transformations, helping forge connections between emerging grassroots responses and prior efforts toward food sovereignty under the Bolivarian Revolution. As one longtime activist and government official reflected: "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."⁵⁵ One example is the rural *comuna* in the northwestern state of El Maíz in Lara, a product of both the above-mentioned agrarian reform process and the construction of *comunas*. When the shortages struck, the members of El Maíz had already been working hard toward food sovereignty since 2009, particularly in corn and livestock production, and were able to help meet the food needs of up to 15,000 families in surrounding communities.⁵⁶ Another grassroots effort, Plan Pueblo a Pueblo (People to People Plan), has built on the preexisting organization of the *comunas* to forge direct links between rural producers and urban inhabitants. Formed in 2015, it already reaches over 60,000 urban working-class families with regular distributions of affordable fresh food. Other grassroots initiatives include the Feria Conuquera (Conuco Fair), a large monthly alternative market in Caracas featuring agroecologically produced fresh foods and artisanal versions of many of the products missing from supermarket shelves, the Mano a Mano Intercambio Agroecológico (Hand to Hand Agroecological Exchange) bridging the urban-rural divide in the Andes, and the Plan Popular de Semillas (People's Seed Plan), an offshoot of the new national Seed Law passed through a bottom-up policy-making process in 2015.⁵⁷

There has also been a host of government responses to the shortages. Among the first was a reorganization of public management to prioritize food sovereignty, including the creation of three separate ministries out of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land in early 2016: the Ministry of Urban Agriculture (believed to be the first of its kind globally); the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquaculture; and the Ministry of Agricultural Production. This was followed by the creation of the Great Sovereign Supply Mission, an umbrella body focused on securing national supplies of food, medicine, and other basic goods. Among the government responses to the shortages, those most intimately linked with popular organizing are the Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción (Local Provisioning and Production Committees), known as CLAPs. CLAPs were rapidly rolled out in 2016, initially targeting the poorest fifth of the population, and now reach well over half. Through the CLAPs, the government purchases food directly from suppliers, both private and public, and coordinates with community organizations to distribute mixed food packages to

individual households. Communities are responsible for organizing themselves into CLAPs, conducting local censuses, and running regular distributions, in which the food is sold at subsidized prices in units of twelve to fifteen kilograms. Through a massive coordinated push from both above and below, CLAPs reached an estimated two million families in their first year, and today there are more than thirty thousand CLAPs throughout the country, with the aim of reaching six million families—nearly three-quarters of the population—with regular distributions by the end of 2018.⁵⁸

CLAPs have had a mixed reception among food sovereignty activists, who note their dependence on industrialized foods, half of which come through the above-mentioned food importation complex. At the same time, CLAPs have played a key role in mitigating the worst effects of the shortages, and have become important vehicles for citizen organizing around food, with 50 percent of CLAPs also directly involved in food production. Food sovereignty activists (including those of Pueblo a Pueblo and El Maíz) are thus increasingly opting to partner with the CLAPs and attempting to push them in more transformative directions, as part of a long-term vision of *agricultura cero divisas*, or “zero-dollar agriculture.”

Conclusion

The situation confronting Venezuela today is far more complex than that portrayed in the dominant narrative, and it demands more thorough analysis. Through the lens of food and a focus on questions of power related to race, class, gender, and geography, new elements emerge that are key to understanding the present conjuncture. These include (1) food as a vehicle for social differentiation over time, most fundamentally in the creation and maintenance of an elite, an elite-aligned middle class, and a class of “others”; (2) the concentration and consolidation of power in the agrifood system, maintained through elite alliances, both within and outside of the state structure, and through both overt and hidden forms of power; (3) increasing homogenization, uniformity, and controllability of the agrifood system, from production and importation to consumption, through highly racialized notions of science and modernity; (4) marketing strategies that forge intimate relationships with the public so that specific industrially processed foods pervade everyday life; (5) dependency on monopolized supply channels and on supermarkets for access to such products; (6) the disappearance of such products, constituting an attack on everyday life, particularly that of the “others,” especially women; (7) the implication of the state in the products’ disappearance, while the role of private capital remains largely hidden; (8) the attempted consolidation of power by the elite through proposals for the restoration of the missing products (and of “order” more generally), in opposition to state programs and policies, with appeals to the working class “others”; (9) a rallying of the middle class in the name of “the people,” against the government and its alliance with the “others,” by coopting social justice imagery while committing racialized acts of violence; and, all the while, (10) 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 reflect emerging trends in Venezuela today, stemming from elite alliances long in the making. Of particular note are the

invisible—or so ubiquitous as to effectively be invisible—mechanisms of control in the realm of everyday life that facilitate the exertion of dominance over the population, especially the working poor. This is particularly true of everyday practices around food. Through processes of colonization, modernization, and today, globalization, the entire structure of the modern industrial food system—i.e., offering foods appealing to the tastes of the masses (tastes conditioned over time), but in a highly controlled and controlling way—can readily be made into a tool of control and domination, as in Venezuela today. However, as we have seen, food is also being used as a means of resistance.

The dominant narrative tends to obscure not only the main drivers of the current crisis, but also the many responses coming from the grassroots. This phenomenon is linked to the common portrayal of the Venezuelan working class as passive victims rather than active agents. The same stereotypes and “othering” that led to the common perception that most Venezuelans were blindly following Chávez, with his petrodollars and charisma, are today leading international media to ignore, among other things, the unprecedented popular advances toward food sovereignty manifesting at present. Such stereotypes of the poor and poverty are so pervasive that few questions were asked when a *New York Times* article on starvation in Venezuela featured a picture of people eating one of the country’s most popular dishes, or when an article in the *Guardian* entitled “Hunger Eats Away at Venezuela’s Soul as Its People Struggle to Survive” 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”—the type of dish for which many foodies would pay dearly.⁵⁹

While these contradictions might be painfully, even laughably apparent to the average Venezuelan, such stories serve as powerful mechanisms reinforcing the dominant narrative on Venezuela and shaping international opinion. While we might expect as much from the Western mainstream media, it bears asking why the same narrative is reproduced so seemingly uncritically in intellectual and academic circles, including those of the left. Could it be that we do not always leave our own biases at the door, either?

This is where the importance of reflexivity comes in, as well as that of praxis-based partnerships among scholars and grassroots movements, to ensure that events and experiences we might not directly encounter ourselves, from our own places of power and privilege, do not become invisible, and that we question narratives that too comfortably fit our own realities. As scholars and activists, we are faced with a choice, as each day brings new forms of aggression against the government, people, and process in Venezuela by the United States and its allies. We can wait and offer post-mortem analyses of what could have been, or we can join 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 rising 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, and for whom giving up is not an option.

Notes

1. ↪ This article is adapted from a paper presented at the first international conference of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI), held at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, March 17–18, 2018. The authors wish to thank the ERPI team, as well Fred Magdoff, William Camacaro, and the many others, particularly grassroots movements in Venezuela, who have contributed to this work.
2. ↪ For an example of the limited range of debate on Venezuela in academic circles, see “Debates: On Venezuela” in the fall 2017 issue of *LASA Forum*.
3. ↪ George Reid Andrews, “Spanish American Independence: A Structural Analysis,” *Latin American Perspectives* 12, no. 1 (1985): 105–32.
4. ↪ Gonzalo M. Quintero Saravia, *Soldado de Tierra y Mar: Pablo Morillo, el Pacificador* (Madrid: Editorial EDAF, 2017).
5. ↪ Brian Stuart McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gómez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela, 1908–1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
6. ↪ Josefina Rios de Hernandez and Nelson Prato, *Las Transformaciones de la Agricultura Venezolana: De la Agroexportación a la Agroindustria* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Tropykos, 1990).
7. ↪ Darlene Rivas, *Missionary Capitalist: Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
8. ↪ Froilán Ramos Rodríguez, “La Inmigración en la Administración de Pérez Jiménez (1952–1958),” *CONHISREMI: Revista Universitaria Arbitrada de Investigación y Diálogo Académico* 6, no. 3 (2010): 29–43.
9. ↪ Shane Hamilton, “From Bodega to Supermercado: Nelson A. Rockefeller’s Agro-Industrial Counterrevolution in Venezuela, 1947–1969,” paper presented at Yale Agrarian Studies Workshop, November 4, 2011.
10. ↪ John Lee Anderson, “Accelerating Revolution,” *New Yorker*, December 11, 2017.
11. ↪ Miguel Tinker Salas, “Life in a Venezuelan Oil Camp,” *ReVista* 15, no. 1 (2015): 46–50.
12. ↪ According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), an average of 4.9 million people in Venezuela were undernourished each year from 1998 to 2000 (representing a fifth of the 2000 population of 24.5 million), and an average of 4.1 million from 2014–16, at the height of the shortages (13 percent of a total population of 31.5 million in 2016). “[El Estado de la Inseguridad Alimentaria en el Mundo 2002](#),” FAO, 2017, <http://fao.org>; [2017 Panorama de la Seguridad Alimentaria y Nutricional en América Latina y el Caribe](#) (Santiago: FAO and OPS, 2017).
13. ↪ See Miguel Angel Nuñez Nuñez, *El Reto al Hambre* (Merida: Universidad de Los Andes, 1990); Margarita López Maya, “The Venezuelan ‘Caracazo’ of 1989: Popular Protest and Institutional Weakness,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35, no. 1 (2003): 117–37; Charles Hardy, *Cowboy in Caracas: A North American’s Memoir of Venezuela’s Democratic Revolution* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 2007); and George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

14. [↪](#) Mario Sanoja Obediente and Iraida Vargas Arenas, *Razones para una Revolución* (Caracas: Fundación Editorial el Perro y la Rana, 2017).
15. [↪](#) Oscar Battaglini, *El 27 F para Siempre en la Memoria de Nuestro Pueblo* (Caracas: Defensoría de Pueblo, 2011); [“Dozens of Venezuelans Killed in Riots over Price Increases,”](#) *New York Times*, March 1, 1989.
16. [↪](#) [Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela](#), available at <https://venezuelanalysis.com/constitution>.
17. [↪](#) Chandrika Sharma, “Securing Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Small-Scale and Artisanal Fisherworkers and Fishing Communities,” *MAST* 10, no. 2 (2011): 41–61; Christina Schiavoni and William Camacaro, [“The Venezuelan Effort to Build a New Food and Agriculture System,”](#) *Monthly Review* 61, no. 3 (2009): 129–41.
18. [↪](#) Maria Mercedes Alayón López, “Evaluación de las Políticas Alimentarias y Nutricionales en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela Periodo 1980–2012” (master’s thesis, Universidad Simón Bolívar, 2016).
19. [↪](#) Ben McKay, Ryan Nehring, and Marygold Walsh-Dilley, “The ‘State’ of Food Sovereignty in Latin America: Political Projects and Alternative Pathways in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, no. 6 (2014): 1175–200; Christina M. Schiavoni, “The Contested Terrain of Food Sovereignty Construction: Toward a Historical, Relational and Interactive Approach,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 1–32.
20. [↪](#) [“38 Countries Meet Anti-Hunger Target for 2015,”](#) FAO, June 12, 2013; FAO, “Venezuela and FAO Create SANA, a New Cooperation Programme to Eliminate Hunger,” FAO, April 16, 2015.
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