Between Marxplaining and Solidarity: The Moral Logics of Venezuela's Populist Divide

Parvathi Alejandra Subbiah

Clare College

Centre for Latin American Studies

Department of Politics and International Studies

University of Cambridge

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To my most beloved mother, Eucaris (1949-2015), who made all this possible with her very own unbounded love and dedication. And my dearest grandmother, Carlota (1923-2011), who doted on me so. Two women who never failed to radiate hope, never raised a finger of complaint, in the midst of their illnesses.

The tragic element in life is therefore always due to avoidable human mistakes: perfect beings would not know it; there can be no incongruity, and therefore neither comedy nor tragedy, in a world of saints and angels.

Isaiah Berlin

We, on both sides, wrongly imagine that empathy with the "other" side brings an end to clearheaded analysis when, in truth, it's on the other side of that bridge that the most important analysis can begin.

Arlie Hochschild

Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the agreed upon word limit for the relevant Degree Committee (100,000 words), after having been granted an extension.

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Parvathi Alejandra Subbiah
Cambridge

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Parvathi A. Subbiah

Abstract

This thesis examines the 'moral logic' implicit in populist 'divides'—radical social polarisation— by looking at the case of crisis-ridden Venezuela. I examine Venezuela's divide from the 'ground-up': through the eyes of two confronted groups residing abroad: non-Venezuelan supporters of the Maduro government ('solidarity activists'), who blame the US for Venezuela's crisis; and Venezuelan migrants, who have left Venezuela at different points in the last 20 years, and blame the government.

The divide coerces understandings of democracy, race relations, 'the people,' sovereignty, human rights, even colonialism and imperialism. Both discourses hold these to be values to be protected, or conversely 'wrongs' to be shunned; conflict arises from respective discursive *constructions* that set differing hierarchies or priorities to those values. Both groups can forgo some of their less prioritised values, in the belief that having their side prevail is ultimately what is 'good' for Venezuela in the long-term: either keeping or dismantling Chavismo.

Central to the Venezuelan divide, then, are different knowledges and epistemologies of oppression, inflicted suffering, well-being and flourishing. Yet, I will argue that these opposed political positions are strikingly consonant in their logic: overwhelmingly *both* groups resort to moral arguments to express what they feel about Venezuela's dire situation, their understanding of the opposing political faction, and the legitimacy of President Maduro's governance. They express moral emotions responding to their judgements of 'the other' and blame attribution: anger, contempt, disgust (not incidentally, markers of populist discourse). Their positions, although based on a 'political' issue, were, as they describe, of deep *moral* concern—that is, about 'doing the right thing.' This meant that one of the most socially problematic consequences of these logics is that approximation with the other side, rapprochement or dialogue, is seen as immoral in itself.

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Abbreviations

AD	Acción Democrática
AI	Amnesty International
APR	Alternativa Popular Revolucionaria
AVSN	Australia Venezuela Solidarity Network
CNE	Consejo Nacional Electoral
COPEI	Partido Social Cristiano
HOV	Hands off Venezuela
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IMT	International Marxist Tendency
INE	Instituto National de Estadística
MBR-200	Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario
OAS	Organisation of American States
PCV	Partido Comunista de Venezuela
PSUV	Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela
VSC	Venezuela Solidarity Campaign
VP	Voluntad Popular
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council

Part 1

Chapter 1. Positionality in the Venezuelan conflict

Introduction

> The desire for an enemy, the desire for apartheid, for separation and enclosure, the phantasy of extermination, today all haunt the space of this enchanted zone. (Aquille Mbembe 2016, 23).

What builds these enmities, these 'enchanted zones' that Cameroonian philosopher Mbembe is referring to? What makes them unreconcilable? In the words of Jeffrey Nealon (1998, 2). "Why is it so difficult to 'situate' and respond to a set of specific others — ethically, politically, or theoretically" to the point of being unable to tolerate their presence? These are the central questions that this thesis explores, by examining the radical divide of modern-day crisis-ridden Venezuela.

Interest in divides, or issues of polarisation—and its correlate populism—has grown dramatically in recent years, especially in what relates to the pull of the far-right in the Global North. Efforts to make sense of the Trump and Brexit phenomena have invaded library shelves in the intervening years of writing this thesis, asking questions such as: does the return of the 'strongman' represent a break with our understanding of democracy? Or, is it all just a mid-life crisis, taking David Runciman's (2018) analogy? Do divides thrive in societies that are torn between "anywheres," those that can easily adapt to changing environments, and "somewheres" those that have stronger geographical ties (Goodhart 2017)? Or are they ontological, i.e. simply that which *constitute* the social world, or for Schmitt (2007 [1937]) and Laclau (2007) the political itself? And is populism then—quintessentially a divisive politics—really a fight *for* that ends up being *against* democracy?

Current-day Venezuela reflects a particularly extreme divide of global concern that sheds light on some of these questions. It is a country at the verge of civil-political and military strife—if not outright war—that has set forth the largest displacement of people in the history of the continent. It has a *de facto* president, Nicolás Maduro (successor to ex-president Hugo Chávez and part of his political movement), supported by the army, and a leader of the opposition who has declared himself president, alleging Maduro's illegitimacy, supported by 50 other countries in the West.

I examine Venezuela's irreconcilable divide from the 'ground-up' through the eyes of two polarised and international positions on the Venezuelan conflict (to my knowledge never studied): non-Venezuelan supporters of Chavsimo[1] (henceforth 'solidarity activists') who blame the US for Venezuela's crisis; and Venezuelan migrants that have left Venezuela at different points in the last 20 years, who blame the government (and Chavismo). In the analysis, I pay particular attention to the knowledges being produced/reproduced, life experiences narrated, emotional language expressed, discourse, values and beliefs addressed; in other words, I take an inductive relational approach that gives "a comparative sociology" of each political position's boundaries (Lamont 2000, 5).

[1] The political movement of former President Hugo Chávez, see chapter 2.

As a researcher, I was not necessarily interested in understanding why people make the political choices that lead to divides and radical polarisation. Rather I was curious to understand how certain political choices, or what I refer to as political 'positions' feel, not simply more appealing, but more *valid* (i.e., just, true, justifiable and legitimate). We arrive at these positions instinctually more often than not, but we cannot justify them to others in this way.

I argue that at the heart of the divide are two conflicting understandings of what counts as 'legitimate' governance. Overwhelmingly, interviewees resorted to *moral* arguments to express what they felt about Venezuela's current situation, and their understanding of the opposing political faction. They made moral judgements of *others* and attributed blame: anger, contempt, disgust were rampant. As a result, interviewees' positions, although based on a 'political' issue, were, as they describe, of deep moral concern—that is, about 'doing the right thing,' or standing 'in *solidarity*,' or being on the 'right' side.

Taking from Schwartz (1992, 3), what is at stake are the ways these two groups "*organise* their understanding of the world." As I hope to show, the divide coerces understandings of democracy, race relations, 'the people,' sovereignty, human rights, even colonialism and imperialism. Both discourses hold these to be values to be protected, or conversely 'wrongs' to be shunned; conflicts arise from their respective discursive *constructions*—constructions that set differing hierarchies or priorities to those values. Solidarity activists for example, are more willing to accept authoritarianism, if it leads to what they believe will be broader social justice; Venezuelan migrants are, for example, more willing to accept interventionism, if it leads to what they believe will be an expansion of political and civil rights. Both groups can forgo some of their less prioritised moral values in the belief that having their side prevail is ultimately what is 'good' for Venezuela in the long-term: either keeping or dismantling Chavismo.

Central to the Venezuelan divide, then, are idiosyncratic knowledges and understandings of oppression, inflicted suffering, well-being and flourishing. I will argue that even when there is substantial ideological variation within these, the two positions are strikingly consonant in two aspects: 1) their use of moral logic to build a boundary against the other; and 2) in their sense of 'powerlessness' against those they feel are in control of their lives: Chavistas, for Venezuelan migrants, and US hegemony for solidarity activists. Taking from Samet (2019), I argue they are

also similar in the way they see their side as representing the 'true will of the people' of Venezuela.

Stemming from this last point, I characterise Venezuela's political divide as 'populist.' In so doing, I follow the academic literature on Chavismo and a historic tradition of labelling Latin American politics as 'populist'—a tradition that has largely overlooked the conceptual hurdles that surround the term. I argue that Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2018) well-received understanding of populism as a moral appraisal of politics—one that opposes the 'honest' many to the 'corrupt' few—overlooks how moral appraisals operate, more specifically *why* they are particularly appealing from a sociological perspective, but furthermore, *how* they are different from moral politics altogether. These are questions that are not addressed in the literature on populism which is, with few exceptions either state-centric, institutions-oriented, or top-down, i.e., focused entirely on the leader's discourse (and by virtue of this, also centred on domestic politics).

In this sense, part of the theoretical task at hand was to contribute to the emerging sociology of emotions and morality, as well as to enrich the existing literature on populism and political legitimacy through empirical interview research—research that touches on the appeal of morality in conflictive or antagonised, but also transnational, contexts. Significantly then, the thesis argues that populism can exist *transnationally* given it is a political logic, or type of reasoning. This logic can polarise the political environment or 'public sphere' around a debate that can exist anywhere, on or offline, so long as 1) the political subject in contention is an idea of 'the people' whom each side claims to represent; and 2) its moral logic is used to engender an extremely intolerant view of 'the other.'

In this first chapter, I present the research questions and describe how I tackle these from a methodological and epistemological standpoint. I then discuss 'positionality' as my 'unit' of analysis and address how it compares to other similar concepts in the literature, ending the section with a reflexive account on my own positionality as a researcher (with respect to the Venezuelan conflict and crisis). I then explain the rationale behind the research design and how the fieldwork unfolded in practical terms. The chapter goes on to present a review on the scholarly literature published on Chavismo thus far to help differentiate the two-side approach taken here, before discussing some of the research's own limitations. I end the chapter by providing an outline and explanation of the structure of the thesis.

Research Questions

Through the course of the interviews, I have come to understand Venezuela's political divide as the site of two contested interpretations of 'legitimate' or 'just' enactment of political power, or in poststructuralist terms, antagonised discursive constructions on 'legitimate' governance. I was not asking what legitimacy is from a political theory standpoint, rather I was interested in looking at and describing the nature of opposed political 'positions'—what I take to mean in this context simply a *situated* relation to an issue that is 'political': in this case, the perceived legitimacy of Chavismo's governance.

More specifically, I purposively asked, from a sociological perspective, what knowledge, emotions, lived experiences, and discourses understood in the postmodern sense of the word, are contested in these opposed positions and what inherent contradictions result from not questioning them sufficiently.

It is from these aims that central research questions were derived:

1. What epistemologies—here what seems to count as 'valid' knowledge—contend each position's interpretation of 'legitimacy' or 'just' governance?

2. What discourses, values, emotions and what kind of lived experiences—specifically what 'wrongs' incurred—become tied to this understanding?

3. How do both positions account for 'the other'? What beliefs do they hold about 'the other' and how are the other's views described conversely as invalid, illegitimate or misguided?

4. Do the groups feel the need to justify their feelings of antipathy towards 'the other'?

5. More significantly, *what does this tell us about radicalised politics and the appeal of populism at the verge of civil conflict and antagonised social groups*?

Rationale

Qualitative methods and ethnography, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews, seemed to be most appropriate for gaining insight into participants' sense-making. In particular, they allow for a deep exploration of lived experience, underlying values, attitudes and feelings (Byrne 2018), and for these hypothesis-gathering questions.

Rationale for choice of the two groups interviewed

For practical reasons (relating to the inability to conduct fieldwork in Venezuela itself) I decided to look at two groups residing abroad. I approached two particular social groups within the two sides of the divide, as explained in the introduction:

1. pro-Chavismo activists who directly post pro-Chavismo content online and are not Venezuelan ('solidarity activists');

2. Venezuelans who have emigrated since the advent of Chavismo in 1998 and are against Chavismo ('Venezuelan migrants').

To my knowledge, there is only one unpublished dissertation written on elite Venezuelan migrants to Canada in 2016, and no studies conducted on non-Venezuelans who identify as pro-Chavistas or of Venezuela solidarity groups more broadly—although there are a couple of media articles that refer to those groups in the UK as 'Maduro apologists' (Bloodworth 2019; Bickerton 2019).

Despite their obvious differences, the groups share important characteristics that become important to the analysis:

1. Both are dislocated, or de-territorialised from the conflict. Venezuelan migrants and solidarity activists inhabit Venezuela from a distance: through past experience, trips, the news, and stories of friends and family that live there.

2. They are only indirectly affected by the policies of the Chávez and Maduro governments, given they both enjoy what we can think of as "official legal status in another state" (Koinova 2012, 100).

3. The groups are less materially affected by the day-to-day crisis (although I note that some of the Venezuelan migrants did continue to struggle economically), which meant that they can and want to spend more of their free time creating, consuming and sharing information on Venezuela. They can engage in a politics unapologetically of the 'information age.'

4. They are two groups with rivalling claims on Venezuela's international narrative.

5. They hold highly negative views of 'the (imagined) other.'

6. Their interactions do not generally happen in person. With the exception of pro-Chavismo events that are boycotted by Venezuelan migrants, most of the confrontation that does occur, lives online.

7. Both groups represent distinct ways of belonging to a nation under increased globalisation. For Venezuelan migrants, 'belonging' represents more traditional ideas of birth-citizenship and homeland. In the case of solidarity activists, 'belonging' is ideological affinity and concern for the global working-class. The groups show how traditional ways of 'doing' politics are being reconfigured in globalised contexts and defy rational and economic choice theories. More specifically, they represent diaspora politics in the case of Venezuelan migrants, and broader transnational activism in the case of solidarity activists.

8. Although I will refer to non-Venezuelan pro-Chavismo groups as 'solidarity activists', *both* groups engage in 'solidarity' understood as "a feeling of sympathy within and between groups, impelling supportive action" (L. Wilde 2013, 1). Both groups are 1) highly invested in sharing their own 'truth' about Venezuela's conflicts; 2) particularly engaged with the media narratives that circulate on the country; 3) some participate in demonstrations abroad regarding Venezuela; and 4) some—usually those living in the Global North—become involved in fundraising for specific causes related to Venezuela.

As mentioned previously, the groups display diverse political opinions *within* the two broader political positions: anti or pro Chavismo. The two groups in this research have been consolidated for the purposes of choosing the interviewees and analysing their antagonism, as I discuss in the next section. I explain how the groups maintain and negotiate multiple ideologies and conflicting opinions throughout the thesis.

Superimposed unity on two ideologically disaggregate groups

Being for or against Chavismo, as I note, reflects immense ideological variation. The aggregation of positions this thesis presents on the Chavista/non-Chavista axis, shows how most information on Venezuela is framed and communicated, in other words, it is the principal way in which the two groups, and as I discuss in chapter 2, even academics, think and produce knowledge on Venezuela. Interviewees were positioned in relation to Chavismo, but I note they also face similar challenges: Venezuelan migrants deal with migration; and solidarity activists confront online bullying or trolling. Importantly, all the participants in the study live in different countries and are unrelated to one another, they have very unique 'worldviews.' The separation on the Chavista/non-Chavista axis helped me organise the research and its findings. My aggregation of these groups should not be understood as reifying or ontological, rather as a methodological and analytical device that helped me uncover and appreciate the internal variation that arises from each interviewee's 'positionality,' as I discuss in the next section, i.e. how each of the interviewees attempts to justify and reason their position in a way unique to their idiosyncrasies and experience, which made congregating their experiences into subgroups not quite feasible.

There are, I note, very dissonant ideas about President Maduro in the Chavista faction; much like there are dissonant ideas about President Chávez in the group of Venezuelan migrants—although to a lesser extent. In effect, there were many solidarity activists who were highly critical of President Maduro's administration, yet preferred him to anyone in the opposition given their anti-imperial/anti-American stance. Similarly, Venezuelan migrants who had once supported President Chávez and were disenchanted with the Chavismo movement, were, for instance, very hesitant about US intervention given their understanding of the US' role in the

world. An important part of the analysis was tasked with uncovering this heteroglossia in Bakhtinian terms, or double voices within the larger axis. The research uncovers the (many times contradictory) ways in which these two groups held their chosen political positions—for some, against all odds.

I also add that Venezuelan migrants do not 'act' as a transnational group in the traditional sense (see chapter 3 for conceptualisations of this); they are highly dispersed. Some did collectively protest to raise awareness about Venezuela's crisis, and others collected funds to send to the country, but these Venezuelans are in the minority and live in the Global North. Their events were also highly sporadic. Most participants did not see themselves as activists: they were just trying to make ends meet in their new homes.

Solidarity activists are also quite dispersed. Although activists share some connections—especially in the anglophone solidarity world—and there is a clearer sense of a unified cause for action—each of the country-specific campaigns act separately. Each campaign organises events independently; there has not yet been a global protest, say for example, against the international media's narrative.

Importantly, there are also other (arguably rarer) groups that I could have considered but I did not, due to time limitations: Venezuelan migrants who are pro-Chávez, and non-Venezuelans who raise funds for the Venezuelan refugee crisis (many Colombians especially) and consider themselves to be against the Maduro government.

Again, I felt it was particularly challenging to 1) stay attuned to the heterogeneity of the actors and the 'multi-sitedness' of the research, which often presupposes a focus on the differences and similarities between *sites* rather than discourses; and 2) simultaneously try to gauge shared meaning and contradictions *within* each group, and even more broadly *between* the two groups. To overcome this, the analysis tries to look beyond locations to "identify the primary areas of consensus as well as contention" (Held and McGrew 2002, 3), without reducing the actors to the Chávez/anti-Chávez logics I was intending to uncover (Pleyers 2013, 112).

Positionality as 'unit' of analysis

The entry on 'Positionality' in the Encyclopaedia of Geography, defines it as:

> the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world [...]. Positions act on the knowledge a person has about things, both material and abstract. Consequently, knowledge is the product of a specific position that reflects particular places and spaces" (Sánchez 2010, 2258).

The term has often been used to refer to the ways in which a position conditions a researcher's approach and choice of questions (Qin 2016). Hammond and Wellington (2013, 118) define it as steps researchers engage in to explain how a study "might be affected by their own particular background, beliefs, and values."

The idea that social and spatial positions not only influence how one understands the world, but act on our knowledge production is of particular importance in this study. Both sides claimed 'knowing' more about Venezuela, and saw their positions as grounded in *knowledge* — in other words, that it was in some sense "objective" (rather than grounded in lived experience, values or beliefs, for instance). Central to the groups' antagonism were two conflicted epistemologies: Venezuelan migrants claimed what we can roughly describe as *a posteriori* knowledge, empirical or experience-based knowledge; non-Venezuelans claimed a kind of *a priori* knowledge, or knowledge independent from experience, arrived at through reasoning about Venezuela's geo-political and historical circumstances.

Venezuelan migrants felt strongly that their experience of living under the Maduro government provided justification enough for their political position and their involvement in the conflict. It also meant that they felt theirs was the only *valid* position in terms of what they believed to know. Solidarity activists, on the other hand, felt their arguments had to work on two levels: they had to justify their position based on what they felt was more 'unbiased' knowledge than the one presented in the media, but more subtly, they had to justify a relation to Venezuela in the first place, as they are not part of the nation in the traditional sense, and many of them had not visited either.

In a different respect, positions also "allow individuals to manage, in quite subtle and complex ways, their moral location within social interaction" (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2011, 102). This 'moral location' from where participants voiced their criticisms of 'the other,' became central as I progressed in the analysis, as already described. The term 'positionality,' then, also seems to account for the spatial and relational aspect of their moral judgement.

I use the term 'positionality' to describe the relationship that arises from situatedness and knowledge production—not only that of this research, but that of my participants as well. I use the term in an understanding that, much in the same way I am, the participants involved are *consuming, analysing, producing and contesting knowledge on Venezuela*—although, I would hope, with less methodological rigour and time on their hands(!). This is not incidentally why I chose to use the term positionality vis-à-vis political subjectivity (see below). It also seems fitting to extend the idea of positionality as its etymology readily describes the 'situaded-ness' of our varyingly placed understandings: our different epistemologies, social, intellectual and spatial locations, lived experience, values, beliefs, and how these affect our subsequent analysis of the Venezuelan crisis. The term is also fitting in relation to the importance of 'space' in the research itself: the multiple sites of the interviews, our shared distance from Venezuela, and the distance that both groups have sought from each other, and I from them.

Positionality and Bourdieu's *habitus*

'Positionality' in the sense I have tried to argue here is related to Bourdieu's '*habitus*' to the extent that it explains "action," not as a response to "triggering stimulus", but as having "at its principle" a "system of dispositions [...] product of all biographical experience" (Bourdieu 1995, 46) that generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (Bourdieu 1990). Habitus is, as Maton (2008) affirms, a fiercely debated concept in a wide range of disciplines. It implies a more pre-determined and durable location that accounts for what Bourdieu (1977, 214) defines as 'dispositions', a "*way of being, a habitual state* (especially of the body) and in particular a *predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination.*" and "expresses the *result of an organising action*."

For Maton (2008, 52) habitus "focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being." It suggests perception depends on what is 'visible to us,' in relation to our *field*. This in turn, sets particular paths that shape future understandings of ourselves and of the world (Maton 2008). Habitus can thus be understood as Bourdieu's answer to the classical structural/agency debate,

in Durkheim's terms, how 'outer' and 'inner' selves shape each other (Maton 2008, 50), also the structural/hermeneutic debate, or how we come to 'interpret' the world. More simply, it is a "socialised subjectivity" or "the social *embodied*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127, emphasis added): it accounts for—sometimes invisibilised—social regularities and the subjective meaning-making of social agents.

Bourdieu's habitus, however, has been criticised for being a theoretical "black box"—overuse and lack of prescription has meant the term has been applied to solve many conceptual, theoretical problems almost indiscriminately. Thus it has (in many cases) lost its capacity for analysis (Boudon 1998, 175). More specifically for this thesis, it has been criticised for ignoring the "moral dimensions of social judgements" (Ignatow 2009, 98). Lamont (1992, 181) in particular argues that Bourdieu "allows no autonomy to moral discourse, which he implicitly conceives as necessarily subordinated to other principles of hierarchalisation [sic]"—I discuss this more fully in chapter 4. For these reasons, although I find the concept useful to describe what is 'visible' to each position—how 'positionality,' a location, shapes the way we experience and understand 'wrongs,' and how we come to prioritise certain moral values above others—I refer throughout this work to interviewees 'positionality' in relation to the Venezuelan conflict, rather than to their habitus.

Positionality and Ideology

The definition of ideology in the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy states it is: "any wide-ranging system of beliefs, ways of thought, and categories that provide the foundation of programmes of political and social action: an ideology is a conceptual scheme *with a practical application*" (emphasis added).

It is this reference to 'practical applications,' and 'programmes of political and social actions' that make holding an ideology somewhat different from holding a 'political position' on the legitimacy of the Venezuelan government—although these can be related. Chavismo's very particular grouping, and in some way amalgamation of distinct ideologies, including but not limited to: Socialism of the XXI century, feminism, populism, internationalism, 'Bolivarianism' (a nationalistic endeavour), anti-imperialism, anti-Americanism, Marxism and Christianity, can be considered an ideology in its own right. Solidarity activists are in fact varyingly located along a broad left spectrum; some consider themselves Trotskyists, others Marxists, some

broadly left, others Internationalists (I discuss this further in chapter 3). I note that quite a few were in fact critical of President Maduro's policies.

For Venezuelan migrants, being against the current government is principally a rejection of President Maduro's claim to the presidency, but most times (though not always) also a rejection of Chávez's political movement more broadly. Importantly, anti-Chavismo does not stand for any party, or any specific leader, nor does it stand for any set of practical policies. Even support for US intervention is contested amongst the opposition, though I note it is relatively popular with Venezuelan migrants.[2]

Most approaches to ideology that look at content—policy output, ideas about power relations in society, economic preferences, etc—are considered 'spatial,' or one-dimensional approaches, as they are usually mapped along a left-right spectrum. The problem with this divide has long been criticised, principally because ideological content *per se* is not able to account for the permeability of said ideology. Although Venezuelan migrants are accused of being 'right-wing' by solidarity activists (as I discuss further in chapter 3), Venezuelans are pro-Welfare state, and even see it as constitutive of democracy for historical reasons (see Hellinger 2011). This supports the argument that the universal application of the left-right ideological spectrum, ideated in the West, is problematic in non-Western contexts. The one-dimensional spectrum is simplistic and "reifies political positions rooted principally in American politics," (I would add, Western politics) whilst encouraging its use in political contexts where Liberal-Conservative divides do not necessarily reflect "political fault lines" (Homer-Dixon et al. 2013, 340). I understand 'a political position' to be a more appropriate term to describe support or rejection of Chavismo, on the grounds of legitimacy. In this thesis, I will use the word 'ideology' to refer only to what interviewees themselves make of others' beliefs, and what they make of Chavismo, taking from Žižek's (1989) understanding (I discuss this view further in chapter 4). I do make references to the broad Left when discussing the ideals that non-Venezuelan solidarity activists—all mostly from the West—share.

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[2] I discuss this in depth in chapter 2.

Positionality and Political Identity

The concept of political identity has not often been defined in the literature. Even the definition from SAGE's Encyclopaedia of Identity is broad: simply a concept that "frames understanding of political affiliation within a spectrum of ideological categories or movements." It is also often (mistakenly) conflated with identity politics. Ruminski (2010), who wrote the entry, suggests it describes an evolving understanding of political agency and participation. Gentry instead feels it "can be best understood as an inner narrative of one's political self" (Gentry 2018, 19) but his conceptualisation is problematic in that it does not explicitly acknowledge the role of social groups and structural elements in the formation of "the inner narrative," or Erik Erikson's (1968) social-relational character of identity (see Syed and Fish 2018).

Although for Venezuelans standing for or against Chavismo is, arguably, part of a narrative of self and a political agency, applying the concept of 'political identity' to solidarity activists, who are not Venezuelan and who have broader transnational inclinations, seems less fitting—even if many of them call themselves 'Chavistas.'

Political identity is also understood as more determining of behaviour, in broad terms. Because I take that what a group understands as legitimate governance might—but might not—lead to specific political choices and behaviour, I suggest positionality to be the more appropriate concept to use in this instance.

Positionality and Political Behaviour

Venezuelan migrants are highly invested in the media narratives on the country—what many understand as 'diaspora politics'—but have, in a sense, abandoned attempts at engaging with politics at a local level, and confronting the government directly. We could argue that, for Venezuelan migrants, the 'political act' is to leave, i.e. to end the government's authority over them—but their position regarding the government is not entirely responsible for their migration: economic factors and ontological security are principally at play. As I have explained above, a specific relation to legitimacy of the government, cannot purport to count as sufficient rationale for political behaviour, although it could account for some aspects of it. For these reasons, I do not attempt to make such a connection.

Positionality and Worldview

I make a distinction between positionality and the broad idea of 'worldview', or 'Weltanschauung,' defined as "a particular philosophy or view of life" by the Oxford dictionary, or as "the way an individual or group think about and interprets the world around them" according to the Open Education Sociology Dictionary. Hawkins (2010, ix) in his influential study of Chavismo and populism, uses 'worldview' to differentiate populist logic and discourse from ideology, so it seems pertinent to address the term here. Taking from Goldstein and Keohane (1993), he suggests it is a "set of fundamental assumptions about how the political world works" that includes, in his view, "not only moral norms, but also a sense of how the universe operates." These are, as he puts it, fundamental beliefs "subconsciously expressed and shaped by language" (Hawkins 2010, ix). Hawkins is interested in the role of ideas in politics and political behaviour and is particularly invested in unpacking Chávez's discourse: his assumptions and underlying beliefs about the world. Hawkins' worldview concept lacks reference to the *experiential, cultural* and *felt* elements that come to shape our 'particular view of life,' although he does take a postmodernist understanding of the determining role of discourse. In this sense 'worldview' is describing an interpretation of the world itself, rather than the process, position and elements from which our interpretation comes to be constituted. The experiential, cultural and felt elements are better accounted for in the definition of both positionality and political subjectivity.

Positionality and political subjectivity

The term subjectivity, is fraught in competing theories on the formation of the subject—how we come to experience 'reality' as individuals—both in the social sciences and in philosophy (see Foucault 1985; Butler 2005). Subjectivity loses explanatory power if it is conceived of as functioning independently of both context and sociality, hence why its use is contested, and is especially contested, in sociology.

To counter this, Rahimi (2015, 1), in a highly original study on schizophrenia and political subjectivity, describes it instead as the "[...] relationship between subjective human experience and the political paradigm in which the individual is embedded." It is constructed of "cultural fabrics woven of warps and wefts of power and meaning by the hands of politics and through

the process of history," where the subject comes "to 'be' through acts of interpretation and being interpreted" (Rahimi 2015, 8).

Krause and Schramm's (2011, 130–31) definition of political subjectivity is useful in understanding the concept's theoretical remit, but their description wants to account for more than the concept plausibly can:

> a helpful notion to describe how people relate to governance and authorities. It denotes how a single person, or a group of actors is brought into a position to stake claims, to have a voice, and to be recognisable by authorities. At the same time the term points to the political and power-ridden dimension within politics of identity and belonging, by encompassing the imaginary and emotional, as well as the judicial-political dimension of claims to belonging and citizenship, including moments of exclusion.

Samet (2019, 167), in his study on crime journalism and populism in Venezuela, also refers to political subjectivity to account for what he sees as populist radical polarisation in Venezuela. For him, "lived experience of wounds, of injury, of injustice" are "the very grounds on which political subjectivity is constructed." Although Samet avoids defining the term precisely, one could argue his concept is similar to the understanding of positionality here described, insofar as he relates lived experiences of injustice—that I note circulate very frequently in the interviews—to a political position on the Venezuelan conflict.

All three authors highlight several aspects of what they understand conforms political subjectivity. These are all significant aspects of the analysis in this research: lived experiences of injury, emotions, culture and structure. Here I take political subjectivity as that which shapes the way social actors interpret power, or in line with Bourdieu's thinking, that which is *visible* to us about political power. More specifically, political subjectivity can be seen as that which engenders understandings of authority, governance, injustice, inequality, and oppression, among others, and that which helps shape specific political 'positions' towards movements, parties, or leaders. I note these positions can be, but do not necessarily need be, defining of who we each believe we are.

The important difference I highlight between positionality and political subjectivity, is that the former addresses *knowledge production* as a result of situaded-ness. In this sense, subjectivity matters in our understanding of politics, but positionality matters in how we communicate this

understanding and frame it to others. My choice of positionality as a concept to help theorise the interviews, highlights participants' *activism* or diaspora politics, not simply the subjectivity from which they derive their opinions.

Reflexive account and positionality as a researcher

Given my emphasis on positionality, it appears imperative to acknowledge the basis of my own position, knowing I cannot extricate myself entirely from the subject matter being discussed.

I remember the first time I heard Hugo Chávez speak in 1998 on the radio, as I waited in the car for it to be 8:00 am—the appointed time for school. Even at the age of 12, I felt something overwhelming about Chávez's speech: his rhetoric was engaging, and from what I could tell at that age anyway, he spoke powerfully. I remember mentioning this to my mother as I heard him. I was rebuked immediately: "He doesn't speak well. He's a *golpista*" (a coup-monger). And for the rest of the time I lived in Venezuela, that was that.

My mother and grandmother—the two closest members of my Venezuelan family—and the rest of my extended Venezuelan family, were opposed to Chávez's mandate. They saw him as militaristic and authoritarian, and from the very beginning they expressed fears of his ties to Cuban-style governance, and the notion that he wanted children to belong to the state. (The other side of my family is from India. I 'feel' Venezuelan as I grew up there and was rarely able to afford visiting India in my childhood.)

It is from these family surroundings that, as I teenager, I 'picked up' a negative view of the so-called Bolivarian Government (the government of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro), and a particular understanding of its role in the deep crisis that Venezuela finds itself in.

As I delved into the research, I understood the impact of my family's political beliefs. We are not usually forced to reason these out for ourselves, at least not with the level of scrutiny of compelling doctoral research. My understanding of the situation as a product of mismanagement and corruption, led to a fascination with the love and loyalty many fervently continued to display towards Chávez, even amidst the gruelling crisis. I was especially fascinated by this love as it seemed to transcend the likes of hyper-inflation, food and power

shortages, and mass migration. It was clear that my understanding of the crisis differed from theirs, and I was deeply curious to understand how Chávez and Maduro followers rationalised their support. I initially believed that a strong emotional attachment to the project of the Bolivarian revolution, and Chávez himself, were a fundamental explanation of this.

As I was growing up, political polarisation was becoming increasingly pronounced, and crime and inflation were rising exponentially, to the point I did not know anyone who had not been robbed—usually at gun point. Most of those around me blamed the government for this, and I had only seen my living standards, and those of my friends and family, deteriorate rapidly. When I left on a music scholarship to the US in 2005, migrating felt, in the vernacular, like "a no-brainer," but in retrospect, the situation was nowhere near as critical as it is now.

By the time I left Venezuela (back in late 2005 on a music scholarship from Oberlin College) walking down the streets of Caracas was a dangerous affair: the odds of getting mugged were, and still are, staggering. From a young age I was excluded by my peers from playing because of my dark skin tone, so it hadn't originally felt like a blessing, but it associated me with the poorest sectors of Venezuela. I was, in fact, an unattractive 'muggee': dark skin bestowed me with relative safety in one of the most violent cities in the world. I lived in a lower middle-class area in the west of Caracas, Montalbán, surrounded by the *barrio* of La Vega.[3] My grades allowed me to attend school in the east side of the city, in one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in the country: it made it impossible for me to fit in, yet made me deeply conscious of Venezuela's rampant social divides.

It is perhaps from these personal experiences with racism and classism in the country that I was able to approximate myself to those that see Venezuela's current difficulties as embedded in the structural inequalities produced by race and class in Venezuela. It is from agreement in this issue of particular importance to me personally that I felt I was able to empathise with the political position of solidarity activists. I came to understand that what the Chávez government gave to a majority of the brown, poor and working class of Venezuela, was not material. They, and those non-Venezuelans whom I've interviewed, place the symbolic empowerment, what

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[3] In Venezuela, *barrio* refers to low-income, self-built shantytowns.

they see as the legitimacy of Chávez and Maduro—members of the afro-indigenous and working-class groups, respectively—over any potential material gain.

For those whose living standards have been reduced, and who have felt forced to leave the country, international support for Chavismo is particularly difficult to understand, or even believe. I refer to the Venezuelan middle-class who have not enjoyed the immaterial gains of Chavismo, and have, to a point, been vilified in the government's discourse. The question then remains: is a preoccupation and prioritisation of the poor in discourse enough to elicit support for the government, despite the fact that those who have suffered most from this crisis, according to most of the data we have, continue to be the poor and working class of Venezuela?

It depends on who you ask. Although it is difficult to entirely abandon my previous position, as I approached those who fervently support the government, I came to disagree with the opposition's 'Manichean' understanding of the Bolivarian Revolution, as well as disagree with the idea that US military intervention is the solution to the country's crisis. In this sense, I found myself increasing alienated from both sides, but especially from Venezuelans. It is perhaps a result of my own privilege: my pluralist identities, together with the fact that I live abroad, allow distance from the sufferings at hand.

Methods

In this section of the chapter, I describe in detail the methods and procedures that went into collating the data for this research. I describe the process of recruiting participants for the study; how, when and where the interviews took place; and how I approached some parts of the ethnography and online ethnography conducted. I also briefly discuss the difficulties involved in examining social actors that share a particular political position, but do not, in a true sense, share an ideology, belong to a social group, or even share geographical location.

Recruiting participants

A combination of 'opportunity/purposive' sampling and 'snowballing' was used to find participants for this study.

Solidarity Activists

I cold contacted both Venezuelan solidarity groups and campaigns, and individual members who post public social media content in support of the Maduro government (via Facebook messenger, Twitter messages, and email). A broader web search of "solidarity with Venezuela" (in Italian, French and Portuguese) led to additional email addresses from solidarity groups using these languages primarily.

After each interview, I asked activists to refer me to others also involved in the campaigns. This was especially useful given entry into this group of activists was remarkably challenging (see Research Limitations section below), as was finding non-Venezuelan pro-Chavismo women.

I contacted 80 'solidarity activists' in total and conducted 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews: 8 of these were face to face in London, and 24 were via zoom with activists in Canada, the US, Australia, Spain, Argentina, Brazil and France. There were 5 women (1 of them American BAME) and 1 transgender. The rest of the participants were men. Of these, 4 were British BAME, and 2 were Latin American 'white' (see Appendix B for a complete table of interviewees cited in the text).

I began contacting solidarity activists in June 2018 and held interviews from July 2018 through to March 2019.

Venezuelan migrants

I started recruiting participants for interviews with Venezuelan migrants through social contacts in Venezuela. Each contact referred me to at least one other Venezuelan they knew living abroad. I generally did not need to ask Venezuelan migrants I spoke with to refer me to others; Venezuelans generally offered this themselves. According to a survey conducted by the firm *Consultores 21* in 2019, 49 percent of people intending on migrating have at least one family member who has migrated; four out of every ten Venezuelans plan to migrate (A. Pérez 2019). This large network dramatically increased the speed at which I could conduct these interviews (from February 2019 to May 2019).

I spoke to 32 Venezuelan migrants in total: 6 face to face in London and Cambridge, 26 via zoom in Chile, Panamá, Costa Rica, Perú, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Japan, US, Canada, and Ecuador. Of these, 17 were light or dark brown Venezuelans (*morenos*), one considers himself

afro-Venezuelan and the other 14 were 'white.' I was able to recruit an equal number of women and men for this group given the ease with which Venezuelans could be contacted. Scheduling was also much easier, in great part, given that culturally Venezuelans allow for more spontaneity; they are willing, and in fact more comfortable, scheduling conversations within very short notice.

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured with open questions and took between one to three hours each. This allowed for greater flexibility and for the interviews to flow as "conversations with a purpose" (Holloway 1997, 94). The conversational nature of these interviews meant I could attend to reciprocity—a reciprocity that allowed for more spontaneous exchanges. The semi-structure of the interview guide also allowed for questions to be tailored to specific participants (depending on whether, for example, they had met Chávez or not, or travelled to Venezuela or not). It also allowed me to answer any questions interviewees had. Although I began all interviews explaining the research and asking if there was anything interviewees wanted to clarify, they were sometimes still curious about my own personal political positions; others about my life as a doctoral student living in Europe. In-depth one-to-one interviews were also useful for going through social media accounts with participants and asking them to discuss how certain confrontations with 'the other' arose online. I made sure I invited participants to contact me after the interviews, in case they wanted to change or add anything to what they had said. All interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Posts shared in the analysis have also been stripped of identifying information.

From a feminist perspective, semi-structured interviews "convey a deeper feeling for, or more emotional closeness to, the persons studied" (Jayaratne 1983, 145). This was particularly important as I was invested in learning about the beliefs and experiences of two very diverse groups, from which my own experiences are removed. I felt that it was important for me to practice climbing Hochschild's 'empathy walls' in my own personal fight against radicalisation—a deep listening that research inclined to wider population trends, cannot readily provide.

The interview guides were designed to avoid asking participants overtly why they supported or opposed the Venezuelan government directly. I had two reasons for this. First, I felt this

would force participants to contrive justifications on the spot, and on basis of what they thought would be convincing to *me*—the answers would therefore not truly reflective of what was truly meaningful to *them*, and their meaning-making. Second, it could also backfire: in a radical political environment such a direct question could be interpreted, especially by solidarity activists, as a challenge or an affront to their position, and it would block their receptivity towards me, or their willingness to engage with me openly.

The principal difficulties that I felt these two groups faced were the obvious ones of migration—leaving family and the homeland, in the case of Venezuelan migrants; and in the case of solidarity activists, having to deal with backlash, sometimes insults and online bullying, for sharing their views on Venezuela. I felt honest conversation could emerge from empathising with these pain points.

For solidarity activists, I was particularly interested in understanding what was rewarding and inspiring about their work supporting the Venezuelan government, as this would give me clues as to what they aspire in the world, and conversely what they felt is dysfunctional about it. With Venezuelan migrants on the other hand, I was curious to know how they felt about their migration—what pulled them towards that decision. I also wanted to know how they felt about non-Venezuelans who are pro-Chávez and Maduro activists.

I note here that Venezuelan migrants especially described the interview process as "cathartic" (others as a "therapeutic") which was rewarding to me as a researcher, but also suggests interviewees had been 'holding' in some of these thoughts, or hadn't really given themselves the time or space to reflect upon some of the questions I was asking about their migration. I tried to emphasise my role—and my own economic difficulties—as a student interested in their life, to downplay any power differential that could arise from my being in the Global North, or studying to complete a doctorate.

Solidarity activists mentioned they were happy to finally be able to share their political views with someone who has a deep understanding of Venezuela and its history—something they say they did not get to do very often. I did feel they were trying to teach me things about Venezuela—although not condescendingly. I felt had not put them in a position of subordination.

In-person interviews were recorded using both my phone and my computer. Zoom interviews were recorded on the platform itself, but I used my phone to record the audio of the interviews as back up. I manually transcribed all 64 interviews verbatim, in both languages: I included significant pauses, self-corrections, emphasis, filler words, and emotional expressions such as sighs, laughter, or scoffs, also participants 'self-censoring' of bad words (when they were about to say a bad word and stopped themselves or made a beeping noise). The level of immersion that is achieved with such a laborious process, results in higher level of familiarity with data from an earlier stage (Minichiello et al. 1995). It also makes remembering where 'memorable' quotes, or particularly interesting stories came from, easier. I only translated the specific quotes presented in the empirical chapters from Spanish to English.

Approaching the interviews and rapport

I was highly cautious of the way I approached solidarity activists. I was keen to stress to them that I felt the work they were doing was important, and that I was interested in the difficulties involved in conducting 'Venezuela solidarity work,' given how the media reports on the crisis, and the subsequent backlash their support of the government engenders, especially online.

This helped convey the idea that the interview was not meant to challenge their political position on the country—something I felt I needed to underline, given that as I said, these activists all too often get hostility and aggression. I emphasised I was interested in understanding what *inspired* them to get involved, and more importantly what was *rewarding* about their involvement in solidarity work. The use of these two positive words was also key in expressing my sympathy towards their work. In my recruitment messages, I detailed all the questions I was going to ask and highlighted the importance of maintaining their anonymity. 19 of the 32 interviews were the result of cold calling. Snowballing was indeed useful for the remaining interviews in that interviewees were able to 'give in a good word' for me: in this case, confirm to other activists that I was not out there to attack them for their views.

Approaching Venezuelans on the other hand was genuinely easier. The familiarity that came from speaking to members of the culture I was raised in—in Spanish—was instantly apparent. I reflect on the speed and the facility with which I was able to contact, organise, and schedule interviews with Venezuelan migrants: it took less than half the time that interviews with solidarity activists took. Participants, both male and female, 'identified' with me on the account of my upbringing as another Venezuelan 'who had left.' As I mentioned, Venezuelans are

culturally more spontaneous with their time, which meant interviewees needed little scheduling time— some were even willing to talk to me the same day they were contacted. It is important to highlight that they also very easily assumed I shared their political position, simply because I am university educated and living in the Global North (and despite the fact I am brown).

Ethnographic approximation

Solidarity Campaign events

I attended several public meetings organised by the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC) starting in June 2018, up until April 2020, as a member of the public. All of these were hosted at trade union offices in central London. It was at these meetings that I approached one of the leaders of the campaign, its secretary, to see if he would be willing to speak to me one-on-one. Given he is Latin-American, I approached him in Spanish and told him I would love to speak to him about his important work with VSC. This person, very bluntly, responded: "I know who you are. I'm not interested in speaking to you and could care less about what you do." He then turned his back on me. It is still unclear what he meant when he said he knew who I was. I can only speculate that he assumed—from hearing my Venezuelan accent, and from knowing that I live outside Venezuela—that I was opposed to the government. As it stands, it is impossible to know. A faculty member at Cambridge (close to the campaign) emailed this person several times as well, to see if the organisation would consent to speak to me, without success. The story shows the existing degree of resistance towards talking with someone suspected of being on the opposite side—or even someone trying to hold middle ground.

Attending these public meetings was an important opportunity to hear members of VSC discuss issues important to them, albeit in their own terms. I took field notes of these events and recorded the public talks. After attending a couple of meetings, I offered to volunteer for one of their larger events held in December 2018 (organised in conjunction with other solidarity networks, including the Cuba solidarity and Nicaragua solidarity campaigns) selling tickets and food. Although my request for interview emails had been ignored, VSC were keen to have me as a volunteer, when I wrote to offer help in October 2018. At the event, I felt I would be able to interact further with those committed enough to volunteering, given I had only been a passive spectator at the other public events. However, my conversations ended up (mostly)

relegated to issues around coordinating and running the event, distributing food, handling cash, etc.

The Hands-Off Venezuela Campaign (HOV) was less active in terms of organising public events—it was more active, for example, producing online blog content. I did attend one event in Cambridge in early 2019, co-organised with Cambridge University's Marxist society, an event aimed at discussing opposition leader Juan Guaidó's self-proclamation (see chapter 2). After the meeting, I was able to approach the student leaders, and secure an interview with one of them.

Venezuelan community events

The Venezuelan community in Cambridge is also quite vibrant, and I attended many of the meetings and events organised by them throughout 2017, 2018 and 2019. I was able to attend both organisational meetings (through the help of the leader of the group, one of the interviewees) as well as public events. These became a chance to see Venezuelan migrants discuss projects that were important to them: documentary and film screenings on the Venezuelan crisis, their annual Christmas party, Zumba classes and other events aimed at raising funds for medicines to be sent to Venezuela.

I also attended the small protest they organised to raise awareness about the crisis outside Market Square in Cambridge. Although they were not boycotted, pro-Maduro activists approached them and told them their claims and slogans "parroted the fabrications of the media," as one participant later explained to me. Participating was important to get a sense of the extent of the Venezuelan community's political activity (at least in Cambridge)—their 'diaspora politics'—and how they responded to encountering resistance in person (which is albeit rare, as mentioned).

Social Media, Blogs and the Press

Social media was an important part of the way both groups engaged with information on Venezuela, so I supplement the interviews with posts from participant's public social media content (discussed with them in the interviews). I also collected data from both pro- and anti-Chavismo media, and the two principal solidarity blogs, to exemplify and expand on arguments participants reference.

Epistemology and Analysis

The analysis of the interview data was not driven by any pre-determined theoretical perspective: it was an inductive approach, although it was initially informed by theories on emotions, populism and race.

The project very loosely follows a feminist epistemology in that it "value[s] reflexivity and emotion as a source of insight as well as an essential part of research," it also "provides a challenge to the norm of 'objectivity' that assumes knowledge can be collected in a pure, uncontaminated way" (Letherby 2003, 73). However, the question is not feminist, in the purest sense, and for extraneous reasons I was not able to interview an equal number of female and male solidarity activists (see Research Limitations below) which restricts what the research can say about gender. I do, however, discuss how female Venezuelan migrants, when compared to their male counterparts, were less willing to directly attack solidarity activists and emphasised a need to be tolerant—even when they ultimately weren't—in chapter 8 (see page 218).

I used open codes on the interviews that I later developed into broader categories, and finally themes for each group following Rivas (2018). From there, I constructed mind-maps that connected themes and categories prevalent in each group, which helped me broadly 'visualise' the data. I then proceeded to identify the key arguments in approval or rejection of Chavismo.

In my analysis, I was curious to understand how subjects ultimately evolve their interpretations and ideas about the political world, not just the one they inhabit, but the one they *aspire* to inhabit. I noted that participants often referred to specific events in their lives that they felt had been responsible for kindling their political positions; for example, having been to war, the death of a loved one. In this sense, the analysis prioritises what Samet (2019, 167) terms "the subject of wrongs": how participants articulate individual grievances and imagine collective ones—a process that shapes their understanding of moral political power, and what each *felt* was legitimate or illegitimate about the Venezuelan government. Notions of what comes to be understood as 'just' are shaped by these experiences—especially what is felt to be, conversely, 'unjust.' Part of the analysis is therefore 'interpretative phenomenological' in that it takes lived experience to be an important departure point from which participants formulate meaning—meanings that are "unique [and] both personal and situated" (Griffin and May 2018, 519). Being sensitive to how participants narrate their experiences was useful to

counter the prevailing assumptions each group makes of 'the other'—especially that 'the other' was somehow uncaring, and willing to enact harm (a common theme in the interviews, as I discuss in chapter 8).

I was also especially attentive to any references made to emotions—especially anger, hope and disillusionment or frustration: these emotions seemed particularly revealing of what interviewees believe the world, and their life, *ought* to be like, and are therefore reflective of their moral compass.

Although I define the participants' positions as 'political,' for them the Venezuelan issue was decidedly more. It seemed that simply holding a 'political' position on Venezuela was not meaningful enough, in terms of the effects either this position—or Chavismo itself— had had on their lives. Both solidarity activists and Venezuelan migrants seemed to be making moral judgements with regards to the legitimacy of the government, and on the fairness of the government's use of political power. In other words, they seemed to understand 'legitimate' governance as equivalent to 'moral' governance, and this seemed to make their resulting political position feel more 'valid.' As I continued the analysis, I began to problematise this logic in detail as it speaks to the appeal of populist and moral politics in general: that moral claims cannot be as easily relativised as political ones.

I was also attentive to the language that participants used to describe why a position, for or against Chavismo, felt more valid than the other. Sperber and Mercier's (2017, 14) "interactionist" paradigm, taking an evolutionary biology perspective, suggests convincingly that 'reason'—a complex biological adaptation—is "a cognitive mechanism aimed at justifying oneself and convincing others," as evolved social creatures. They explain how 'reason,' unlike what we expect it to be, is deeply flawed, biased and lazy: we instinctively engage with it to convince others and ourselves, *not* to arrive at a 'real' understanding of phenomena (at least not generally, in their view). Justification necessitates a particular language that can be understood by others—it is pointless otherwise. I note that Michael Billig's (1991) work on the argumentative and persuasive nature of talk as it informs reasoning, a work that takes from Foucault's ideas of 'technologies' as particular 'truth games' (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2011) is a precursor to Sperber and Mercier's (2017) idea. Both helped me reason through the discursive mechanisms participants used to *justify* their position.

In my view, the justifications implied by Sperber and Mercier's (2017) model are ultimately what postmodernists understand as discursive *constructions*. It was only once I began looking for association and variation amongst the groups, rather than within the participants of each group, that I began to notice how both invoke the same broad social concepts, i.e. 'discourses'—around democracy, race, 'the people', human rights—to justify their political positions, but expressed entirely conflicting 'discursive *constructions*.' For instance, the state of human rights in Venezuela was an issue for both groups, but each group highlighted or prioritised a specific group of rights to justify their position (see chapter 9). The empirical chapters build an analysis on how these very opposed discursive constructions are framed and justified around the same wider ideas, that are considered *moral*, and therefore universal, and how in a bid to justify one side of the issue, i.e. in being parochial, they end up being contradictory.

Computational Analysis

Lastly, I add that I also conducted computational textual analysis (digital methods) on all the texts published on Hands off Venezuela's website (see Appendix C) as of June 2019. I used two programming languages: Python, to scrape the data off the websites, and R for the actual computational analysis. I used two machine learning algorithms: RAKE for keyword extraction from the R package 'udpipe'; and LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) for arriving at topics from the R package 'topicmodels'. I also conducted 'sentiment analysis,' using an algorithm in the 'tidytext' R package, that relates words used in the texts with 8 specific emotions (joy, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, surprise, trust, and anticipation), the NRC Lexicon. In applying this specific algorithm, I discovered that it was biased against the left (see Appendix C).

Chavismo in the literature

Hugo Chávez's ongoing popularity, a popularity that has arguably driven the historical process Venezuela has undergone since the early 1990's, is perhaps one of the most fascinating social and political phenomena of Latin America's recent history. The 'pink-tide,' or turn to the left at the start of this century, began with Chávez's election in 1998, and was followed by the

electoral successes of Luis Lula da Silva, Néstor Kirchner, Tabaré Vásquez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa in the 2000s.

'Explaining' Chavismo has no doubt been an obsession of recent scholarship on Venezuela. 'State-centric' analyses, that dominate the literature, see Chávez's success as the "breakdown of democracy" or the demise of the traditional political parties in their inability to articulate "interests, representation and governance" (Molina and Perez Babot 2004, 103). Theories of class fissures emphasise 'economic voting' under previous policy failure (Canache 2004; Kulisheck and Canache 1998; Kornblith 1998; McCoy and Myers 2004). Political economy approaches put Venezuela's unstable petro-state, 'the Dutch disease,' Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI), and Venezuela's 1980's debt crisis at the forefront of the structural issues that propelled the movement (e.g. Roberts 2003). Others suggest that Venezuelans were drawn towards Chávez's new 'participatory' democracy and constitution as their *deepened* democratic values—forged after 40 years of, albeit corrupt, political stability—had made the existing clientelism untenable (e.g., Smilde 2011).

Scholars with a sustained interest in the *enduring* popularity of Chávez, focus on how Chávez built his relationship to the 'masses': Weyland (2003, 844) discusses Chávez's 'messianic' charisma, moulded from Venezuelans' "psychological need to believe in salvation"; Ellner (2008, 92–93) highlights the "sense of empowerment" Chávez awarded those traditionally marginalised through his popular social programmes; Emerson (2011, 106), instead, shows how Bolivarian identity "codified [...] frustrations, ideas, symbols, beliefs and demands." I note that comparatively few scholars point to Chávez's afro and indigenous background as appealing — in fact only a handful of scholars focus on the issue of race and Chavismo more broadly (Herrera 2005; Ishibashi 2007; Gottberg 2011). I have found only one doctoral dissertation (M. Wilde 2013) that argues for Chavismo's moral appeal at an ethnographic level.

Some analyses of Chávez's government try to fit it into the democracy-authoritarianism frame, or the 'hybrid regime' spectrum (Corrales and Penfold 2011), but most political science accounts take Chavismo to be quintessentially 'populist,' (notably Levine 2002; Hawkins 2016, 2010; Block 2016; Arenas 2005; Laclau 2005, 2007; Paramio 2006; Roberts 2012, 2003; de la Torre 2010, 2015, among others).

Most of these studies have been disengaged from the experiences of groups supportive of Chavismo—the 'demand' side of populism—and perhaps more importantly "their

contribution to the legitimacy and popularity of the government" (Buxton 2011, xi; Velasco 2011). These accounts tend to be reductive in the way they assume 'masses' to be 'easily manipulated', or politically barren, or "charisma-hungry" (Weyland 2003, 843); this, in Fernandes' (2010, 7) words, simply so they "fit the ideological parameters of the position being argued." Fernandes (2010, 6). argues, similarly that the working class has often been "mythologized or demonised" in the literature. Valencia (2015) in fact shows that historically scholars have understood little of the political sensibilities and agency of the poor in Venezuela—i.e. as a political constituency in its own right, alongside workers and students, who are often perceived as better organised.[4]

Instead, ethnographic accounts looking at barrio and communal activism in Venezuela, have sought to get at the 'meaning-making' of Chavista activists in the urban landscapes of Caracas, and have been more successful at understanding support for Chávez (notably Fernandes 2010; Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Valencia 2015; Strønen 2017; M. Wilde 2013; Samet 2019; Blackmore, Jarman, and Plaza 2019). These authors underline the importance of recognising popular movements "as legitimate political participants in state formation" (Valencia 2015, 36).

These authors counter-argue the myth that "the urban poor never successfully organised politically" (McCoy 2004, 270; Roberts 2003), and the idea that support for Chavismo is a relationship of dependency on the state (Fernandes 2010). As these ethnographic accounts note, many *colectivos* (neighbourhood activist groups) had been actively organising against drug trafficking and other issues for at least 25 years; they precede the revolutionary governments, reclaim their autonomy from them, and were often in tension with Chávez himself (Ciccariello-Maher 2013).

Fernandes (2010, 5) notes that although left-wing and progressive supporters of the Chávez government abroad have provided a useful counterpoint to state-centric perspectives," these

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4 I see a difficulty in defining 'who' the poor are. Defining who 'the people' are presents a similar problem. In political discourse, 'empty signifiers', as Laclau (2005) calls them, thrive in their indistinctness, so studies congregating 'the poor' can fail to account for the distinct interests of different marginalised groups (single mothers, indigenous peoples, afro-descendants, farmers in rural areas).

groups (which 10 years later include interviewees in this study) are not so attentive to the obstacles barrio-based actors face in their interactions with the government, and seem interested exclusively in groups formed under Chavismo.

Problematising studies on Chávez and Chavismo

The problem with a lot of the literature on the popularity of Chavismo—aside from the fact it has almost exclusively focused on Chávez's discourse—is that Chávez is no more, and Venezuela has seen a dramatic poverty increase as the deep socio-economic crisis has devolved—a crisis decidedly more pronounced than the one that saw Chávez emerge in the first place. Although levels of frustration with the current administration run high, this has not translated necessarily into disapproval of Chávez, whose movement Maduro represents: Chávez enjoyed 50 percent of popular support at least as of February 2017, when the question was last asked (E. Martínez 2018)—although this can have changed today. More apposite to this research, Chávez and Maduro also enjoy the support and backing of the international extreme-left groups interviewed here—a support that to my knowledge has never been engaged with or studied.

Questions on Chavismo 'after Chávez' remain, but academic interest on Venezuela has dwindled considerably since Chávez's death in 2013. The academic community is also divided on their assessment of the Bolivarian Revolution—a divide that, much like for interviewees, reflects 'positionality' (not always disclosed), political values, and disciplinary and epistemological commitments.

To note an example of this polarisation in the literature, some accounts even 'choose' facts with precision: for example, by showing governmental figures of their own approval ratings (rather than that of national pollsters); or reaching conclusions about the government's intentions based on statistical models that explain less than 6 percent of the variance. I note my account does not pretend to stem from any purported objectivity: rather, lived experience has led me to a profound dislike for the radicalised nature of Venezuela's political divide.

The academic polarisation mirrors a second contention that arises in the assessment of Chavismo: top-down or bottom-up? Accounts more favourable to the political movement, highlight the agency of community networks, and popular bases that sustain, create, but also

contest Chavismo's legitimacy (e.g. Ciccariello-Maher 2013). Accounts more critical towards the movement, highlight its autocratic tendencies, its concentration of power in the executive, the politicised distribution of funds, an uneven electoral field, loyalists in the courts, and a top-down approach to policy-making and identity formation in the image of Chávez. Chavismo, as one can imagine, is more than just horizontal or vertical. As Fernandes (2010, 5) argues, this dichotomy denies the interdependencies that "both constrain and make possible each other's field of action."

A third problem that arises in the study of Chavismo is that opposition groups have not garnered scholarly ethnographic attention, to my knowledge, perhaps due to their rather diffuse and less attractive political activism: simply a rejection of Chavismo without a concerted front. This has led to the pervasive stereotype, or caricaturised understanding of the opposition as white-middle and upper class. Very different sectors of the population participate in the opposition (and in Chavismo) as discussed previously. Consequently, there has been: 1) an invisibilisation of marginalised sectors of the population (notably indigenous groups) that are disenfranchised from the government by opposing it; and 2) a simplification of the dissatisfaction of the opposition as a loss of class privilege. Levels of insecurity, loss of aspirations and concerns regarding political, civil and human rights—today even food security—have never really been considered.

This study cannot purport to shed light on the groups on the ground in Venezuela, but it does nonetheless tend to an unexplored facet of the Venezuelan divide from this 'demand', or 'horizontal' side: a set of transnational actors that subscribe to Chavismo, and Venezuelan migrants that have felt alienated from it. Its central concern is not Chavismo or the opposition in themselves, rather how the contested positions relate to one and other, how they are experienced, justified, and perpetuated.

Chavismo and Populism

Chávez has been characterised very prominently as a populist leader by academics and journalists alike. He is often understood as a 'return' to the strongman, or earlier 'classical' Latin American populists, such as Perón in Argentina. Chávez was also often characterised as a populist on the basis of his charismatic personality, and by the fact that his discourse was

exuberantly anti-establishment and nationalistic—although, as I discuss in chapter 4, this is not, at least exclusively, how I understand populism here.

I turn now to the most prominent authors that have written on populism in the Venezuelan context: Hawkins (2010); Laclau (2005, 2007); Cannon (2008); Block (2016) and Samet (2019).

Perhaps the most cited work on Chavismo and populism is Hawkins' (2010) comparative study. It uses a form of qualitative textual analysis to rate several political leaders on a 'populist scale', from 0-2, by identifying several elements of their discourse—most significantly a Manichean (i.e. moralising) outlook that sees a "cosmic struggle between Good and Evil." Chávez's score on this scale is 1.9/2 — higher than any of the 25 leaders examined, which makes Chávez a consummate example of populism, according to Hawkins' calculations.[5]

For Samet (2019), Hawkin's (2010) (and also Weyland's 2001) emphasis on leadership, obscures the social discontent that underlies populism. Analyses that look at the catalysts of populism in Latin America began in the 1960s and 70s (see chapter 4) with Gino Germani and most notably Ernesto Laclau. For Laclau (2005, 60)—who stresses the open 'potential' of populism as a basis for democracy, Chávez is the maximum exponent of what he calls 'populist rupture:' a displacement of the political elite to enact what (at the time) Laclau believed was true social change.

Cannon (2008), taking from Laclau, suggests race plays a role in the 'conspiring elite' versus 'pueblo' antagonism that underwrites Chavez's discourse, one that also makes him a legitimate representative of that people. This as I note subsequently, is a particularly appealing aspect of Chavismo that solidarity activists interviewed in this research refer to often, as I discuss in chapter 6.

[5]An important point to note on these results is that another classic Latin American populist Juan Perón, for example, only scored 1.5. Although Hawkins (2010) does not draw attention to this, Chavez's score could be biased due to the fact that Hawkins' definition was conceived around Chávez's discourse. Purposefully or not, it makes Chávez a consummate example of populism.

Block (2016) instead explains Chávez's 'messianic' identity and his singular connection to his followers by approaching Chávez's unique 'populist' communicative style. Taking from Adorno, she places Chávez's discourse under what she terms the logic of *mimetisation* by framing it around his populist use of cultural symbols (2016, 243). For Block (2016, 7) the paradox of how Venezuela's "grim socioeconomic landscape" has been unable to fully tarnish Chávez's popularity:

> suggests that issues of a subjective, symbolic or irrational nature often associated with cultural symbols and human emotions might have played a crucial role in Chávez's hegemonic success.

This seems like a reasonable assumption and was indeed my own initial thesis: Chávez's discursive references to cultural symbols, particularly those associated with Venezuela's indigenous and afro populations, were genuinely novel in Venezuelan politics, as I argue in this chapter. Yet, in thinking about solidarity activists that support Chávez and Maduro, two things struck. First, even if we assume that the interviewees arrive at support for Chávez largely through subconscious means (which I would argue is different from assuming these processes are 'irrational'), interviewees always felt the need to justify, i.e. give reasons for, their political position. These justifications were expressed through moral emotions of admiration and contempt for the injustices against, and historic disenfranchisement of, the brown poor; they were not 'irrational.' Second, both supporters and detractors had strong criticisms of those that vow to 'represent' them—both leaders of Chavismo and leaders of the opposition—something that, again, suggests support was reasoned.

Samet (2019, 17) also criticises this understanding of the urgency of populism as 'irrational,' stressing instead its origins in the grievances (real and imagined) of social groups and actors. Samet's (2019) book—an ethnographic account on crime journalism in Caracas that reconstructs the ways in which Venezuelan investigative journalists articulate the "collective fiction" of 'the people'—is concerned with the populist logics of the media. He contests the notion that only Chávez's discourse and Chavismo are 'populist' given that for him populism underlies the logic that frames *all* popular collective grievances.

Lacking in this literature, is therefore, a more sociological exploration of the link between believing in *and* rejecting the legitimacy of Maduro's government—the feelings, knowledge, lived experience, value-systems, and grievances, that sustain both political positions.

Research Limitations

Gender

Because I was limited to cold-contacting activists, I found increasingly that female activists were rare and difficult to get hold of (as were activists in the LGBTQI+ community): there were less of them to be found. The idea of activism and masculinity has been addressed by some scholars (see Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* 2014). More specifically, Haapamaki (2005) looks at the links between masculinity and the British left in the narratives surrounding the Spanish Civil War. He suggests that the impending violence of the revolutions of the radical left might more often appeal to notions of masculinity. Of course, more research in this area is warranted, but the interviews do point at this relationship, at least in terms of numbers.

There were several instances (8 in total) where solidarity activists had agreed to an interview, and expressed interest in participating in the research, but for extraneous circumstances stopped responding to my messages. The reasons for this are unclear to me—it is possible that it was simply an issue of time for them. This was especially unfortunate as 3 of those were female activists.

As I mentioned earlier, I did manage to get an equal number of Venezuelan migrant women and men and do discuss some of the important differences I see in their responses and attitudes towards 'the other' in chapter 8.

Language

Another limitation of my search for activists was language: I was limited to searching for pro-Maduro content in English, Spanish, and was able to do some limited searches in Portuguese, French and Italian (although arguably most of the published interest in Venezuela is found in these five languages). This in fact speaks to the idea of *where* 'solidarity activism' takes place: generally, where people are afforded the luxury of participating and debating cosmopolitan issues (see chapter 3).

Fieldwork and crisis

Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC) is by far one of the largest Venezuela solidarity groups: not being able to speak to its secretary represented quite a setback. However, as I have mentioned, I was able to interview members that did not belong to the group's organising team. The setback pushed me to explore more 'transnational' aspects of solidarity, as I progressively got involved with groups outside of the UK.

The rapid development of events in Venezuela—given the economic and social crisis and the timescale of the interviews—made keeping up to date with events on the ground (and subsequently writing about them) quite challenging. The semi-structured nature of the interviews was ideal, though, as it allowed for a discussion around events that were being broadcasted in the news. This was especially true for the first four months of 2019: Juan Guaidó had just declared himself president and called for humanitarian aid to be allowed in through the Colombian border (Richard Branson then organised a large all-day concert in Cúcuta on the 22 of February). The events provoked a strong resurgence in solidarity activity—activity that had been largely dormant since the violent protests of 2017. The activists I spoke to in these four months were clearly more engaged with the cause than the few I spoke to in the months before.

Thesis Outline

The next three chapters of the thesis (Part I) contextualise the academic and historical milieu for this research.

In the next chapter, I trace some of the events that led to the creation of Venezuela's so-called 'petro-state' while marking the significance of this model for Venezuelans, their broader political culture, and how it led to the rise of Hugo Chávez's political movement. I then reference data available on the current crisis to help navigate the extreme positions of the divide, for and against Chavismo, focusing on the topics most mentioned by interviewees: the role of race in the political conflict (discussed in chapter 6), the exorbitant levels of crime and violence (discussed in chapter 8) Chávez's social missions (discussed in chapter 9), and lastly the levels of state corruption (also in chapter 9).

Chapter 3 looks at broader 'transnational solidarity,' and attempts to give context to the group of non-Venezuelan interviewees who consider themselves activists for the Bolivarian Revolution. I delve into an account of the movements that have historically predated 'Venezuela solidarity' activism, importantly those in support of Chile's Allende, Cuba's Castro and Nicaragua's Ortega. I then briefly describe how the different Venezuela solidarity groups themselves define their political activities and goals, before examining the moral and political concept of solidarity itself, in theoretical terms.

In chapter 4, I attempt to trace a theoretical nexus between my proposed understanding of populism and populist logic (taking from several authors), and existing theories of political legitimacy, morality and moral logic in groups, and theories on moral emotions. Here I highlight the relevance of some of the findings to populism theory, *transnational* populism, and to the sociology of morality and emotions more broadly.

Through the empirical chapters 5-9 (Part II) I attempt to describe the 'deontology' of populist logic: that is, how taking a political position on Venezuela is a moral imperative to defend what is 'right' and 'good.' Chapter 5 looks at contested understandings of democracy, seen by both as the most legitimate and moral way to exercise political power. Chapter 6 looks at the framing of the Venezuelan conflict in racial terms, by solidarity activists, as a way to justify the legitimacy and morality of Chávez's and Maduro's government, using what I have termed historical-racial moral logic. Chapter 7 looks at the two distinct practices of signification in conceptualising 'the people,' where both sides claim to be 'the majority.' Chapter 8 looks at the circulating moral emotions on both sides, both negative (mostly in regards to feelings of perceived injustices); and positive, in regards to their admiration and hope for the eventual triumph of 'good' in their eyes. Chapter 9 explores the more specific moral justifications and arguments, including those surrounding human rights, put forth by both sides.

I conclude by summarising some of the main ideas and arguments presented in the thesis, discussing its broader theoretical contributions, and fleshing out a short discussion on the challenges these populist moral divides ultimately place on democracy. I lastly present ideas for future research areas, and some final thoughts on the Venezuelan conflict's impasse

Chapter 2. Venezuela's petro-state and democracy

The government of Nicolás Maduro has held on despite severe food and medicine shortages, power outages, some of the highest homicide rates in the world, the highest hyper-inflation in the world, an astounding economic contraction of over 70 percent since 2013, and a leader of the opposition, Juan Guaidó, recognised as president by over 50 countries in the West.

The crisis has become a serious liability for Venezuela's neighbours in Latin America. Venezuelans are the second-largest displacement in the world, after Syria. And yet, it is not overtly at war—although some of the participants in this study very much argue it is. The United Nations predicted that by the end of 2019, 5.3 million Venezuelans would have migrated to other countries (16-18 per cent of its population). This chaotic descent—in a country with the largest oil reserves on the planet—will no doubt fall into history books as one of the great conundrums, and tragedies, of the twenty-first century.

In the first sections of the chapter, I trace the historical backdrop of Venezuela's current crisis, tightly knit to Venezuela's unhappy marriage to oil production. To situate the figurative 'birth' of the divide, I provide a short history of Venezuela's contemporary past and look at some of the structural conditions that helped Hugo Chávez ascend to power in 1998. The historic context, centred on the influence of oil in state formation, helps grasp Venezuela's political culture: more explicitly, how the Venezuelans I interviewed see development, democracy and the state, even their own unquestioned racial '*mestizo*' identity—all themes I examine in Part II. In proving this context, I emphasise how Venezuelan politics cannot readily be placed on the left-right spectrum: a detail solidarity activists from the Global North miss. I also note ho w most of the accounts interested in Chavismo neglect the influence mid-twentieth century political discourse on oil-wealth redistribution had on Venezuelans' understanding of *democracy*, an understanding not readily associated with the *left* more specifically. I make a point of underlining that this mid-century discourse is, not surprisingly, an understanding from which Chávez's own ideas emerge (see Coronil 1997, 2008).

The section also tries to engage with pro and anti-Chávez discourse as it emanates from the media and the country's political actors and parties, so as to help place the opinions of interviewees. The private media especially, in its determination to oust the standing governments, has acted as a political party during the Chávez and Maduro eras, and was more favourable and trustworthy to the Venezuelan migrants I interviewed than opposition leaders themselves, even if, as I show, a good part of their discourse is shared.

I note that the social and political issues that surround the conflict amount to dissertations unto themselves, so I focus the second section of the chapter on exploring the data available on the issues those most mentioned by interviewees: the economic crisis and political conflict in 2017, the role of race in the conflict, Chávez's missions, the levels of state corruption, and lastly the levels of crime and violence in the Chávez era.

Lastly, I felt it was important to review the existing scholarly literature on Chavismo to help place this research in a broader academic context. This helps identify how the research addresses knowledge gaps and how my approach—looking at both sides of the divide—purports to be different.

Caudillismo and the pre-eminence of the military

Simón Bolívar, liberator of several South American nations, seemed disheartened when he writes in his *Manifiesto de Cartagena* that Venezuelans were, at the time, incapable of exercising their liberties. In his own words, they "lack the political virtues that characterise the true republican" (Pérez Vila 1983). Bolívar's 19th century 'positivist' credence—that in broad terms saw '*mestizo*' (mixed race) and rural populations as the root cause of Latin America's low industrial development (Lacruz 2006)— lives on in the way Venezuelan migrants' imagine *el pueblo* and their country's progress (see chapter 7).

The 19th century, teemed with political strife, saw little opportunity to develop political institutions, agriculture, or industry. The military, symbol of independence, became the focal point of political and social power, displacing the landed aristocracy. The patterns that framed the power structures of Venezuela in the 19th and 20th centuries—those connecting the army, regional bosses and caudillos—are still at work today (Karl 1997; Yarrington 2003), most

evidently in the critical role the military plays in bolstering and sustaining Maduro's presidency.

For most of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, positivism justified the 'need' for strong authoritarian leadership in Venezuela—today often associated with right-wing populism; then, the personalistic rule of force known as '*caudillismo*.' In an analogous way, Venezuelan migrants, unable to fathom a democratic exit to the crisis, believe force from the US or the Venezuelan military, is the only way forward (see chapter 9).

Juan Vicente Gómez, military general and de facto ruler of Venezuela from 1908 until 1935, oversaw a bloody dictatorship and the genesis of Venezuela's dysfunctional 'petro-state,' after the discovery of oil in 1914. The subsequent precipitous displacement of agriculture as a main source of revenue had enduring negative effects on Venezuela's political institutions. Given Venezuela lacked the capacity to develop an oil industry, Gómez allowed foreign companies to take over production—the only nation in Latin America to do so. It is argued, ironically, that foreign oil companies were pivotal in edifying the Venezuelan state: they preferred to deal with one central authority (Coronil 1997; Karl 1997; Tinker Salas 2009). Gómez, in turn, garnered greater control as the executive and amassed significant wealth in his dealings with foreign companies.

When Gómez dies in December 1935, social unrest and mass looting ensued. Spear-headed by a group of students, protestors made demands for a new democratic state that would distribute the oil rents held by a small faction attached to the figure of Gómez. Understanding the pitfalls of a repressive regime, and as a response to public discontent, Gomez's successor, Eleazar López Contreras ushered democratising reforms in all areas of public policy, including an incipient welfare state (Caballero 1998; Márquez 1997). Participation in the debate on the nation's oil wealth and its redistribution, has since been the only *legitimate* way to exercise and claim democratic state power (Daguerre 2011, 836; Coronil 1997), a central part of Venezuela's political culture.

The Oil of Venezuelans

In 1936, Rómulo Betancourt—founder of *Acción Democrática* (AD) the party that would dominate Venezuelan politics up until the impeachment of Carlos Andrés Perez in 1993—decried that for "Venezuela to be for Venezuelans" the subsoil needed to be retaken from foreign hands (Betancourt 1983, 300). AD and Betancourt, who built their most important constituencies from grass-root efforts in rural areas, vowed that only democracy, as executor of Venezuela's wealth, could ensure these populations would benefit from the 'modernising effects' of the oil industry. It was not, however, until a new oil law passed in 1943 that foreign companies began sharing half their profit with the state. By 1945 and once in power, Betancourt (an ex-communist militant exiled during the Gómez dictatorship) oversaw new state-owned enterprises flourish—which became an important way to show that "the nation's wealth would be used for the benefit of all" (Coronil 1997, 100). Betancourt's call to reclaim Venezuela's 'subsoil' from the elite and US imperialism would forever mark Venezuelan political discourse—his presidency having been described as Venezuela's first experience with populism.

The notion that the state should finance itself, at least in part, by citizen's taxes was never considered, as Karl (1997) notes. The institutionalisation of the rentier taxation dismantled Venezuela's income tax base, and de-incentivised domestic productive capacity—a problem Venezuela has yet to overcome. Although most scholars looking at Chavismo overlook this short-lived democracy (1945-1948), Hugo Chávez appealed to a strikingly similar discourse that took moral force from the ideas of redistribution, democratic inclusion, and anti-imperialism of this period.

General Pérez Jiménez's coup on Betancourt's nascent democracy installed a new military dictatorship in 1948. Pérez Jiménez, well remembered for prioritising public infrastructure, reversed some of the social advances gained. Although Venezuela's per capita in 1950 was the 4th highest in the world, the agricultural sector continued in decline, producing a significant increase in urban migration. With cities unable to accommodate the influx, a displaced population settled in the outskirts—visibly in the mountains of the capital, today the *barrios* (shanty-towns) of Caracas (Velasco 2011; Canache 2006), future President Chávez's political strong-holds.

Once Pérez Jiménez was overthrown in 1958, the leading political parties COPEI (the Christian democrats), URD (centre-left *Unión Republicana Democrática*), and AD, agreed to preserve democracy by signing what is known as the *Pacto de Punto Fijo*. Its legitimacy stood on a guarantee of economic stability and societal development sustained by the country's oil wealth (Smilde 2011, 3).

The parties did considerable grass-roots work to organise the lower classes and provide favours for votes (Ray 1969; Hellinger 2011); the state itself became "entrepreneur, employer and provider of social welfare" (Daguerre 2011, 835) as petroleum rents were able to turn organised interests into "subsidised clientele" (Karl 1997, 101). Venezuela also adopted a Keynesian/social investment model aimed at a pattern of inward growth, in the understanding that Venezuela would eventually de-couple from western economies. Venezuela's increasing stream of petrodollars in the economy, however, was and continues to be a result of rent rather than real productive activity (Lacruz and González 2007).

The strength of an insurgent and armed left in the 1960s, further compelled the state to prove that it could enact profound social transformations, whilst effectively redistributing Venezuela's oil wealth, sans calls to expropriation (Márquez 1992, 112). Popular support for the radical-left faded in these years, but the Communist Party of Venezuela, notably excluded from the *Punto Fijo* pact—and more importantly its affiliated guerrillas—had a lasting influence on community organising in the popular sectors (Velasco 2011; Valencia 2015), and on the radical left's understanding of the pact as 'class dictatorship' (Smilde 2011).

I note that Venezuela's relative economic and political success at this time—its large oil reserves, two-party system exchange of the presidency, high miscegenation (despite persistent racism), and the absence of extreme nationalism—all buttressed the misleading but widespread idea that Venezuela was an 'exceptional democracy' (Ellner and Tinker Salas 2006).

Carlos Andrés Pérez and La Venezuela Saudí

Although Carlos Andrés Pérez, first elected to office in 1974, never called himself a socialist (a term that would have surely hindered his relationship with Venezuela's biggest oil buyer, the

US), his government spent more than all other Venezuelan governments *combined*, and was devoted to, according to his inaugural speech, "improving the working and living conditions of the working-class" (C. A. Pérez 1974, 125; Tarver 2004). Pérez oversaw the dramatic oil boom of the 1970s. He nationalised the oil and petroleum industry, and heavily invested Venezuela's (elevenfold) revenue increase in state-owned industrial projects, including in the production of aluminium and hydroelectricity. In fact, during '*la Venezuela Saudí*' as this decade is known, workers enjoyed the highest wages in Latin America and received subsidies in food, health, education, and transport (McCaughan 2010). Pérez, with an anti-imperialist bent prescient of Chávez's, re-established diplomatic relations with Cuba, played a role in the transfer of the Panama Canal to the Panamanians, and founded SELA (the Latin American Economic System—a precursor to Chávez's ALBA) to offset the influence of Organisation of American States (OAS), which he felt was US-controlled.

The 1980s drop in oil prices triggered—what was until now—Venezuela's worst economic crisis. It had been in the making as production breakdowns, public enterprise inefficiency, marked corruption, capital flight and overvalued currencies plagued most oil producing nations during the boom. Poverty jumped from 46 to 62 percent in 1989 alone, once the state abandoned several of its welfare provisions (McCaughan 2010).

Venezuelans re-elected Pérez in the hope he would somehow restore the progress and splendour of the 1970s, but they were soon to be disappointed.[1] A mere two weeks after his inauguration in 1989, Pérez privatised state-owned companies and introduced a series of deep macroeconomic adjustments aimed at increasing savings and attracting foreign investment, in the hope of diversifying the economy from oil. Although Pérez had rallied against the IMF during his campaign, calling it "the bomb that only kills people" (McCaughan 2010), his plan had been negotiated with the organisation to receive critically needed loans (Mujica 2002; Karl 1997). These new policies were in line with a neoliberal critique of the *dirigiste* state that was

[1] People had referred to him as 'Locoven', the combination *loco* (crazy) and 'ven' the suffix used to designate state-owned companies. CAP then became 'Venloco', translated as "come, crazy one" when he ran again in 1988 (Coronil 1997: 372).

revolutionising development economics in the 1990s (Mohan et al. 2000); but, in the words of Coronil (1997, 378) they meant turning from:

> the parochial oil-protected national market toward the competitive global market [and] dismantling the complex network of protections—state employment, loans, subsidies, tariffs, price controls, and wage regulation that had constituted the populist model of development for more than half a century.

Although Coronil's understanding of populism differs from the one I explore in this thesis, turning away from this development model, as he describes, aggravated inequalities to untenable levels—levels that led to the undeniable appeal of Hugo Chávez's discourse.

El Caracazo and the rise of Hugo Chávez

A couple of weeks after the measures were announced, the price of petrol—heavily subsidised—was increased (McCaughan 2010). Riots broke out in Caracas the next day, on the 27th of February, and by nightfall the protests had escalated to collective looting of supermarkets and grocers *en masse*. Spurred by a decade of discontent with the economic decline of the country and the corruption-laden main parties (AD and COPEI), the protests were the largest and most repressed in Latin America at the time, and the first against neoliberal austerity in the world (Coronil and Skurski 1991; Walton 1989; López Maya 2003; Samet 2019). The army, tasked with restoring order, shot hundreds of civilians, most of them in working class districts. Unofficial figures estimate between 1000 to 3000 casualties—mass graves having later been found in one of Caracas' public cemeteries, secretly buried by the authorities (Coronil and Skurski 1991). The riots, known as '*El Caracazo*' (Caracas-smash), evinced the profound social exclusion "perpetuated by white-elite ruling classes" and began the progressive de-legitimisation of the *Punto Fijo* state (Valencia 2015, 44).

Sublieutenant Hugo Chávez had, in 1983, created a secret cell within the army named 'The Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200' (MBR-200)—one of many dissident clandestine military organisations active at the time (Hawkins 2010). Deeply influenced by his brother (who had been involved with the guerrilla Left in the 1960s) the MBR-200 hoped to dismantle inequality and overturn the corrupt elite that had been hoarding Venezuela's wealth. The

"moral and political chaos," underpinning the Caracazo, in Chávez's own words (*Aló Presidente* No. 269 2007), galvanised Chávez's conspiratorial activities. The riots spiked the disillusionment of many among the ranks who understood the government had acted brutally against the interest of the poorest sectors. Indeed, they made many officers amicable to Chávez's ideas. I note, solidarity activists often recalled the riots were the ideological genesis of Chávez's project.

On February 4th 1992, Chávez attempted to overthrow the man that handed him his sword of command in 1975: Pérez himself. His movement marched inside the presidential palace but was forced to surrender 10 hours later, once it was clear the plan had failed to spark a general uprising (Hawkins 2010; *El Nacional* 4 February 2018). The coup largely determined what many Venezuelan migrants, and a few solidarity activists, initially thought of Chávez: that he was a man of the military, prone to violence, with a strong authoritarian bent.

Chávez accepted blame for the failure but confidently told the nation that change *would* come: they had failed 'for now' (*por ahora*). It was a short allocution that catapulted him onto the national consciousness. After he and his co-conspirators were pardoned and released from prison, Chávez began to work on a grass-root civilian movement that called for a constituent assembly (Zago 1992). The movement built the political party that allowed him to run for the presidency in 1998, as interest in his 'democratic revolution' flourished.

At that point, Venezuelans—highly sceptical of the two traditional parties and eager to rid themselves of what they felt was a plague of corrupt, inept and clientelistic politicians—felt only a true outsider could enact profound change (Aguiar 2009; Hawkins 2010). The political elite in Venezuela had traditionally been white, so Chávez's afro-indigenous appearance was, no doubt, an indelible mark of an appealing political 'outsiderness.' Chávez, I note, did not initially command the polls, but once his opponents accepted the endorsement of the discredited older parties (AD and COPEI), they failed to prove they were not aligned with those parties' history of corruption and 'old politics.'

It is ironic that what was lauded as the 'exceptional' or 'model democracy' in Latin America subsided to an infatuation with the leader of a military coup. Part of this paradox is explained by engaging in a more nuanced analysis of the genuine appeal of Chávez's movement, from a racial, cultural and moral perspective—an appeal that crossed borders, as we see from the fervour the solidarity activists interviewed here express.

Chavismo in power

Although President Chávez dismissed the *Punto Fijo* era as a series of 'oligarchic regimes,' and promised to 'fry the heads' of its leaders, it was actually Venezuela's "first extended experience with electoral democracy and constitutional alternation in government" (Hellinger 2011, 28)—and what appeared to be a subordinate military. In 1950, Venezuela was half illiterate and rural—by 1990, it was 90 percent literate and urban. Venezuela was able to maintain unparalleled political stability at a time when Chile, Brazil and Argentina succumbed to dictatorships. It is no doubt the reason that Venezuelan migrants born in the fifties and sixties, reminisce so often about this era. Its achievements had a lasting impact on the political culture of Venezuela and Venezuelans' conceptions of democracy, that include most importantly, (at least according to a study conducted by Hellinger 2011, 42–43), that "the state guarantee education and health for everyone," and that "all the sectors [be] included and enjoy the same rights." Venezuelans see the welfare state as achievements of democracy rather than as achievements of the left—one of the main reasons the Western left-right political spectrum is inadequate. There was, in fact, very little degree of differentiation between the parties of the *Punto Fijo* democracy in ideological terms as Smilde (2011) and Ellner (2003) argue.

Chávez also promised to "place human welfare at the heart of [his] Bolivarian Revolution" (Daguerre 2011, 386). But Chávez's project was predominantly characterised by an opposition to the corruption and bureaucracy of *Punto Fijismo*: it in fact lacked clear propositions (Lacruz 2006; Wilpert 2003) save the drafting of a new constitution aimed at moving beyond "mere representative democratic mechanisms" (Kutiyski and Krouwel 2014, 71). Critics argue that these ideas on participatory democracy were symptomatic of a Marxist distrust of representative democracy. Yet it is also true they stem from a uniquely 'Bolivarian'/Romantic understanding of legitimacy that many solidarity activists interviewed here share: that the will of the collective stands above the individual—a process that eventually overcomes the need for representation (Hawkins 2010; Smilde 2011).

The new constitution, approved by public referendum, institutionalised participatory practices—such as those of community councils already in place—and gave them a role in the local decision-making process. It enshrined the rights of indigenous peoples, although controversially not of afro-descendants or mestizos more broadly, unlike what well-known solidarity activists such as John Pilger believe (see chapter 6). The new constitution was highly

novel in its conception of popular sovereignty and allowed for referenda and direct recall of public officials. In its push to deepen new democratic institutions, it enjoyed broad national consensus. Scholars are, nonetheless, divided on their assessment of its benefits: it was criticised for its failure to protect decentralisation, for eliminating the Senate, and for concentrating power in the executive (Hawkins 2010).

The constitution also took precedence over socio-economic concerns, and no truly innovative social policies were put in place in these early years (Buxton 2003; Chacín 2003). In fact, most solidarity activists were not aware of what was going on in Venezuela at this point. This emphasis on constitutionality cost Chávez his popularity: beginning 2001, approval ratings declined from over 80 percent at the start of his presidency to under 38 by early 2002. Unemployment stood at levels unseen since the 'Caracazo,' and poverty rose from 31 percent in 2001 to 41 percent in 2002—all facts solidarity activists seem unaware of. Former co-conspirators and close political advisers defected from his movement,[2] business allies withdrew their support, and the press (a press that had largely supported Chávez when he was elected) began to call out what they felt were the failures of 'yet another' corrupt project that was increasingly accumulating powers in the executive.[3]

It is clear Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution amassed large popular appeal, but it also created a powerful backlash from those displaced from political power, one hard to quell when oil prices—and relatedly Chávez's popularity—were low in 2001-2004 (Farnsworth 2021). As Samet (2019, 5) puts it: "jobs were won and lost, friendships made and broken, institutions funded and dismantled, based on where a person was judged to stand vis-à-vis the divide between 'Chavistas' and 'the opposition.'" It left an almost impenetrable schism in Venezuelan society that lives on.

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[2] This includes Francisco Arias Cardenas, one of his principal partners in the 1992, and communist Luis Miquilena, his principal political adviser.

[3] The new National Assembly granted Chávez an enabling law that allowed him to pass 49 controversial laws (including Venezuela's new programme of preferential oil for Cuba) by decree, which also caused major backlash

Increasing Polarisation

Protests and strikes during these early years— including a coup that deposed the president for over 36 hours, a two-month national oil lockdown, and a hard-fought recall referendum on Chávez's presidency in 2004—pushed Chávez to radicalise and re-baptise his political project as 'Socialism of the XXI Century' in 2006.

After the coup, Chávez's rhetoric flared pronouncedly against purported 'enemies of the nation,' including journalists more broadly, the old traditional political class, the 40 years of *Punto Fijo* democracy, NGO's working on human rights, and the US. After the lockdown, Chávez fired half of the state oil company and replaced it with loyalists (Bulmer-Thomas 2013; Smilde 2011). Doing so allowed him to pursue his poverty reduction 'missions,' targeted social policies that I discuss in a later section. It is in this period, and through his anti-American rhetoric, that he gains notoriety with the international left. This is, no doubt, when solidarity activists interviewed for this research become interested in his mandate (see chapter 3). Importantly, their understanding of the *Punto Fijo* era of Venezuelan history just described stems from Chávez's discourse around it at the time: 'racist', 'corrupt', 'US-backed', 'treasonous', 'anti-Venezuelan', as I discuss in chapter 6.

Chávez understood he would need to produce his own mediatic narrative if he was to control public opinion on his revolution. Thus, one of the administration's objectives became "communicational hegemony": the state media apparatus grew exponentially at this time, acquiring six national television stations, three national radio networks, an international news television station (*TeleSUR*) and three Caracas-based newspapers (Samet 2019, 27). The apparatus had successful international projection: solidarity activists very openly explained how they were principally waging a war against the international media, and they often quoted

information they had read in pro-Chávez outlets, most notably *venezuelanalysis.com* and *TeleSUR* (for whom some of the interviewees worked for).[4]

For Smilde (2011, 10), writing in 2011, the acrimony that characterised this period of his presidency can be further understood by looking at the political actors involved. For him, the opposition coalition consists of those that "have (or at least had) a solid place in formal society." Smilde is referring to the powerful sectors that have always opposed Chavismo and continue to do so: commerce, industry, the Catholic Church. The reality is part of the opposition also included the reformed left, some of the revolutionary left, students, academia, and organised white-collar labour (López Maya and Lander 2005). Smilde's failure to mention these sectors proves symptomatic of a pro-Chávez stereotyped view of the opposition, a view that lives on in the interviews with solidarity activists (Hetland 2017).

The private press that initially helped elect Chávez by denouncing the corrupt practices of the *Punto Fijo* era, also turned against him in 2001, and in many ways, *became* the opposition. Samet (2019) argues that the country's major newspapers and television channels (*El Nacional*, *El Universal*, RCTV, Globovisión) functioned as a political party in the way their programming drove public opinion and denounced the government's failures. Venezuelan migrants had little positive to say about opposition leaders or parties, as I discuss in chapter 8. This is partly explained by the long-standing disenchantment with the political class that both Chavistas and anti-Chavistas in Venezuela share,[5] but also by the fact that the opposition had (and has) its strongest base in the press. I discuss some of the similarities and differences between their discourse and those of the political parties in a later section of this chapter.

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4 *Venezuelanalysis.com* is registered as an NGO in the State of New York, whose objective is "to provide counter the corporate media propaganda of the Bolivarian Revolution by giving a voice to leftist and grassroots movements in Venezuela," according to its website.

5 In fact, less than 35% of the population agreed that "without political parties than can be no democracy" according to Latinobarómetro (1995-2013). I note however, that support for political parties did grow considerably throughout the 2000s and fell back to around 60% in 2012.

As for Chávez's initial constituency: it was made up primarily of those "living at the margins of formal citizenship," who, according to Smilde (2011, 9) and Roberts (2003), had never been strongly ideological. Their support was based on a perception of the government's performance and the extent to which, at least discursively, it prioritised their demands and concerns. Chávez's coalition also included a new emerging political elite, now the *boliburgueses.*[6] There were also loyal state employees, and members of the growing social movements supported by the government, including communal councils (barrio assemblies) and the *colectivos* who had helped form them—some, historically aligned with the radical-left and the guerrilla insurrections of the 1960s (Valencia 2015).

Many of these *colectivos* are community or neighbourhood organisations that help implement some of the government's social programmes in poorer neighbourhoods. *Colectivos* are often mentioned by solidarity activists as being part of the successful grassroot work of the Bolivarian Revolution they greatly admire, in line with what the pro-Chavista press writes, and in line with some of the work they have seen on the ground in Venezuela. Some *colectivos*, though, are armed and there is evidence to suggest they have committed extrajudicial killings and attacked anti-government protestors (Amnesty International 2019). According to some *colectivos* themselves, their ranks have been infiltrated by state intelligence agents masquerading as *colectivos* to attack and intimidate opposition protests (Fuentes 2020). Although the entire livelihood of many of the members of these groups is tied to the viability of the Bolivarian project (Smilde 2011), the communal and *colectivo* support for, and work with, Chavismo is not straightforward. Part of the Maduro state apparatus "is hostile to communal power"—this is especially true of local elected officials who are weary of grassroots activists that they feel might "threaten their legitimacy" (Ciccariello-Maher 2016, n.p.). Certain popular sectors *do* identify as being a part of the state but maintain "strategic ambiguity," that is, a sense of autonomy "to be able to put pressure on the state when necessary" (Fernandes 2010, 28). This detail is often missed by solidarity activists who assume that the government stands wholly alongside *colectivos*, in other words, that their interests are aligned. The government's legitimacy is based on this alignment and the extent to which it represents groups such as the

[6] Today Chavistas accuse these elites of being highly corrupt, see chapter 7.

colectivos, who are part of the 'true people', as I discuss in chapter 7. Fernandes' closer look at this relationship, shows this is not necessarily the case.

Venezuela's political crisis starting 2017

The continued existence of Chavismo without Chávez is testimony to Chávez's legacy on the political institutions of Venezuela, and to the cultural, racial and ideological appeal of his movement. By appointing Nicolás Maduro himself, Chávez avoided possible frictions from within the different sectors of Chavismo, but his popularity was not easily replaceable. Once he died in 2013, support for Chavismo decreased dramatically. As of February 2020, polls showed 78.1 percent would vote for Guaidó, and 21.9 percent would vote for Maduro, according to *Datanálisis* pollster (Yapur and Vasquez 2020).[7] As of 2021, the same pollster found that only 11.4% would vote for Guaidó, 12% would vote for Maduro, and 45.6% would vote for an independent candidate (*Datanálisis* 2021).

The supposed election is not likely to happen anytime soon, as the last elections were held in May 2018. Moreover, the opposition to President Nicolas Maduro argues that the National Electoral Council (CNE) and the electoral processes in Venezuela are rigged. The opposition alleges four of the CNE's five members are stooges of the government—Luis Emilio Rondón is in fact the only member who has been critical of the government (*BBC News* May 21 2018). The EU, OAS, the Carter Centre, widely recognised as one of the most important electoral monitors in the world, the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), among many other international organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have denounced the government of President Maduro both in terms of Human Rights violations against opposition to the government and electoral tampering in the past two elections (2017 and 2018). The High

[7] Problematically, Chavistas are weary of the main polling agencies in the country: *Datanálisis* and *Consultores 21*, as they believe the firms stand with the opposition. The agencies have never backed from showing positive numbers for the Maduro and Chávez presidencies. Most academics looking at Venezuela rely on (or have requested) polls from these two agencies. Supporters cite instead the electoral results of the 2018 election, where Maduro won to attest to his legitimacy, as I discuss in chapter 5.

Commissioner for Human Rights of the UN at the time, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, stated that "Venezuela was not able to guarantee the minimum conditions required for a free and credible election" in 2018 (Buitrago 2018). Even the company that made the electronic voting machines that are used in Venezuela, *Smartmatic*, the same company that has been conducting elections from 2004 to 2015, denounced that "without any doubt" there had been major manipulation of their system in 2017 (*BBC World*, August 2 2017; *The Guardian*, August 3 2017).

The last time the main factions of the opposition openly participated in an electoral contest was in 2015 for the National Assembly elections. The opposition won a landslide majority—proof to many that the electoral system, even despite the CNE, was functional then. As a countermeasure, Maduro called for the election of a new 'National Constituent Assembly' in 2017, originally tasked with the drafting of a new constitution—although this was against the old constitution's demand for a referendum before any rewriting could take place. The Constituent Assembly effectively dismantled the powers of the old opposition-led Assembly by taking over its ability to pass laws, remove functionaries and manage budgets, allegedly because the original assembly had sworn in legislators whose elections were not valid. The National Constituent Assembly election in 2017 was boycotted by the opposition and sparked some of the deadliest protests the country has ever witnessed. Several people associated with Chavismo were burned and lynched, among them afro-Venezuelan Orlando Figuera whose story I discuss in chapter 6. The election and especially the government's repression of the protests, where 165 people died, were highly criticised by the EU, the OAS, and many other international organisations—although it is true there were violent faction from within the opposition as well. The institution of the Constituent Assembly was seen as an auto-coup and unfaltering evidence of the breakdown of democracy in Venezuela (UNCHR 2019) by the international community and Venezuelan migrant interviewees.[8]

The opposition has not participated in elections since 2015, but certain opposition politicians have subverted the unofficial mandate and participated anyway—Henri Falcon in the last

[8] Although for at least one of the interviewees, a Venezuelan living in London who had been a strong supporter of Chávez when he was alive, the Constituent Assembly resulted in end of the *guarimbas*, part of the violent opposition demonstrations in Caracas.

presidential election of 2018 stands out as a case in point. The 'when' and 'when not' to participate has been haphazard and divisive; the resulting ambivalence has cost the opposition its credibility. Falcon's participation revealed a bitterly divided faction incapable of coordinating efforts against President Maduro. Moreover, it granted a sense of legitimacy to the presidential election, even if Falcon later refused to accept the results.

In January 2019, alleging that the 2018 elections were fraudulent, Juan Guaidó who had just been elected President of the defunct National Assembly, declared himself interim President of Venezuela, spiralling an unprecedented constitutional crisis. He was quickly recognised by the United States, the United Kingdom, members of the EU, and more than 50 other countries, who hoped he could garner enough political clout to dismantle the Maduro Presidency and call for new elections. Those who support Maduro's government, including solidarity activists in this study, see the move as a blatant coup instigated by the United States, who has not accepted the will of the Venezuelan people. To worsen matters, on the 28th of March 2019, the Comptroller General announced that he had found inconsistencies with Guaidó's spending, and that he would be banned from participating in elections for 15 years. The government had already banned several other prominent opposition leaders, among them former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles in 2017 and Leopoldo López in 2014.

The opposition has not been without scandal: nine members of the old assembly were found to be involved in a corruption scheme that aided the government (see chapter 8). There have also been several violent attempts to remove Maduro, most embarrassingly in early May 2020 when a couple of paid "mercenaries" (two of them ex US war veterans) arrived by sea set to topple the president (*BBC News* May 7 2020). The whole affair was nicknamed 'the bay of piglets,' for *The Guardian* a "farcical failure" that has seriously discredited genuine opposition to an unpopular government.

The role of political parties inside and outside Venezuela

Opposition to Chavismo has largely failed to coalesce successfully. Much like Venezuelan migrants, opposition parties all agree that the country does not enjoy democracy. Yet the

extent to which the leaders wish to eradicate Chavismo and participate in elections are two, among many, contentious issues they grapple with. Interviewees are similarly divided on the degree of forgiveness they are willing to grant Chavismo—arguably this is the crux of the opposition's inability to consolidate effectively. The issues relate to an important point I try to make in this research: to what extent are factions able to accept and tolerate 'the other' in these populist antagonistic settings?

Many of the most well-known opposition parties, those that won seats in 2015, were also banned from participating in elections by the new Constituent Assembly. This includes the old-timer AD, but arguably two of the most well-known opposition centrist parties, *Primero Justicia* and *Voluntad Popular*, as well as a host of other parties in the left: *Bandera Roja, Causa R, Alianza Bravo Pueblo* among others. *Bandera Roja*'s story is particularly noteworthy as it was a communist party involved in the guerrilla insurgencies of the 1960s, one that was opposed to Hugo Chávez's candidature from the outset, given Chávez's original revisionist/reformist character (a critique some of the solidarity activists interviewed here also carry). What is clear is that opposition parties have little in common except the desire to oust Maduro.

As of recent, the opposition's goals have been what they call the "restitution of democracy" and "overcoming the mafia," as stated by an alliance of political movements *Soy Venezuela*, founded by three prominent (more radical) opposition leaders: Maria Corinna Machado, Antonio Ledezma and Diego Arria. These three politicians have also led the discourse on military intervention—an intervention that was appealing to many Venezuelan migrants in 2019. María Corina Machado very openly called for international military action, citing the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, commonly known as the Rio Pact. The pact allows states to intervene militarily if another state is deemed a threat to another OAS state or the region, yet Machado had a hard time convincing international jurists that its application in Venezuela's case was viable, let alone justified. I note most interviewees spoke of *US* intervention instead, taking perhaps from Donald Trump who, according to reports in 2018, "repeatedly raised the possibility of invading Venezuela" (*The Guardian*, July 5 2018).

Other parts of the opposition are more willing to negotiate politically with the regime and are hopeful, but less confident in the military's will to defect, given its ties to Maduro. Harvard-educated Leopoldo López, perhaps the most famous opposition leader, imprisoned after being accused of spurring a wave of deadly protests 2014, insists Maduro's deposition must be

peaceful—although according to him he "cannot discard [domestic] military intervention" (*EFE* May 3 2019). Henry Falcón, Henrique Capriles (also former presidential candidate of Primero Justicia in 2013) and Claudio Fermín (a politician from the *Punto Fijo* era) and more recently, Juan Guaidó, the man who contests the presidency with Maduro (a virtual unknown till 2019) are also in this league. In an interview with TIME magazine, Guaidó stated:

> The mafia structure they have built in Venezuela is crumbling. We're seeing the collapse of the dominant class. Now is the time to offer the military and other government officials the guarantee of amnesty [...] Today in Venezuela you can't walk down the street, because it's not safe. [...] You can't buy food because you can't afford it or there isn't enough in the shops. But we have to find a way to restore normality. That means we have to find one way or another to forgive (Nugent 2019, n.p.)

Guaidó hints at two important themes that appear in the interviews with Venezuelan migrants. First, he associates the word 'mafia' with the government—this association is widespread within the opposition, as I just mentioned, and I explore this further on in this chapter as well as in chapter 9 in discussing the moral distance Venezuelans seek from the government. Second, Guaidó calls for 'restoring normality.' I turn to this important theme in chapter 8: interviewees feel 'forced' to emigrate because, they allege, Venezuela 'was not normal.'

The Chavista block is similarly far from monolithic. It comprises competing agendas, diverse ideologies and even incompatible economic preferences. Importantly, much like there are with solidarity activists, strong ideological differences exist in terms of support for workers' control, confronting versus accommodating capital, extending and restraining popular power, maintaining unity, and dealing with corruption within the state. In fact, some academics argue that the PSUV encompasses sectors in the centre-*right*, within the generals and other members of the military (see Hetland 2017). Yet it has enjoyed the towering almost religious figure of Chávez to unite it—unlike the opposition.

Hetland (2017) notes Chávez consciously set-up his initial MVR-200—the organisation that won him the elections in 1998—as a political *movement*, not party. Chávez's antipathy towards political parties however, slowly quelled once he realised the need to organise his political base, especially those in the popular sectors who defended him spontaneously and helped him return to power after the coup. The MVR was tied to elections thus had weak links to civil society. It also largely failed to confront corruption (Ellner 2008: 127). Moreover, Chávez's idea

of forming the PSUV in 2007 stemmed from a need to clarify and unify his ideological position, having just declared himself a socialist of the XXI century.[9] I note some of the parties that supported Chávez in the past (*Patria Para Todos*, the Communist Party and *Por la Democracia Social*) declined to join, thereby claiming independence from PSUV's purported ideological hegemony. Regardless, the PSUV became Venezuela's largest political party, and it has enjoyed broad electoral dominance since.

Perhaps the most vocal Chavista politician, at an international level, given his level of English and his degree from Cambridge, is current foreign minister Jorge Arreaza. Arreaza is in fact often invited to speak at Venezuela Solidarity Campaign events. In a tweet published in July 2021, he writes in response to Dominic Raab's call for elections in Venezuela:

> Mr @DominicRaab, you continue supporting violent and terrorist plans. Isn't the negative impact generated on the Venezuelan health system as a consequence of the robbery by your government of 2 billion dollars in #Venezuelan gold in the middle of the pandemic, enough for you?

Associating the opposition to terrorism and violence is a standard play in the Chavista handbook—as is calling the government a 'mafia state' in the handbook of the opposition. I note that solidarity activists rarely mentioned Venezuelan politicians—save of course for Chávez and Maduro.[10] The principal difference between the discourse of solidarity activists and the PSUV in Venezuela, is that, unlike the PSUV and its politicians, solidarity activists are free to openly criticise Maduro's policies, and many of them do. The question stands, can you be an anti-Maduro Chavista in Venezuela?

The *Alternativa Popular Revolucionaria* (APR) is a Chavista-leaning political coalition founded in 2020 as a response to the "anti-worker policies" of the government of Nicolás Maduro,

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[9] I discuss the concept of socialism of the XXI century in the next chapter.

[10] One of the interviewees though, Ignacio, spent considerable time working with the PSUV in Venezuela. s His knowledge of politicians and diverse factions within the party was exceptional.

according to their Facebook page. Chavismo has been, until now, very successful at maintaining unity in Venezuela by focussing its rhetoric on an external enemy: more recently the US and its economic sanctions; it is therefore difficult to gauge how much political clout this competing organisation will have. The organisation does, nevertheless, echo the concern of many of the Trotskyist-leaning solidarity activists interviewed here, as I discuss in the next chapter. It states in its founding communiqué that it is opposed to the "criminal imperialist aggression against Venezuela at the hands of US imperialism and its European allies" but it *also* denounces the government, stating Maduro seeks to arrive at a pact with the elites and capitalists to "restore neoliberalism" (*In Defense of Marxism,* April 20 2021). I note that some solidarity activists interviewed here were present (virtually) at the APR's inaugural congress, alongside Alan Woods and other members of the International Marxist Tendency.[11]

The contested gains of the Revolution

The two groups of interviewees contest existent data on Venezuela; when they do not, they contest who they believe is responsible. The Chavista government can claim substantial poverty reduction—from 54 percent in 2003, to 29.4 percent in 2013, right after Chávez's death, according to World Bank data. Some scholars claim that this reduction reflects only an increase in income attributable to Venezuela's higher oil revenue in that period, i.e. that it was not really a reduction given other structural elements of poverty and work productivity are not considered in those metrics (Ponce and González 2015; Freije 2008).

One of the most touted successes of the government was the reduction of the GINI coefficient down from 0.48 in 1998, to 0.38 in 2010 (up slightly at 0.40 in 2012, although low in relation to other Latin American countries). However, the distribution of income for those who are in the lowest 20 percent of the population improved, from 4.1 percent in 1998 to 5.7 percent in 2010,

[11] This group broke with the Workers' International Committee in 1992. It was founded by Ted Grant, founder of Militant, given issues with the Labour Party in the UK and is currently led by Alan Woods, see chapter 3.

according to the government. Venezuela's Human Development Index score (measuring life expectancy at birth, expected school years, mean school years and GNI per capita in 2011 PPP dollars) increased dramatically during the Chávez era, too: from 0.672 in 2000, to 0.763 in 2016. Most Latin American countries experienced similar increases in their human development scores, and decreases in their inequality scores, as the region underwent sustained economic growth and poverty reduction (Galván, Amarante, and Mancero 2016). It is fair to say, nevertheless, that the Chavista governments, up until 2014, were spending around 40 to 50 percent of total public spending on social (education, health, culture, pensions) spending (*Observatorio Social* CEPAL).

Certain policies in the Chávez era promoted women's working rights, particularly the *Banco de la Mujer*, which provided financial and technical services to aid women in the poorest sectors (Lacruz and González 2007; Block 2016). Venezuela's Bolivarian constitution of 2001 recognises work at home as an economic activity, and even incorporated all the masculine and the feminine versions of all political actors mentioned, making an explicit invitation for women to participate equally in politics (Wilpert 2003).[12] The Gender wage ratio is also 93.8, above the continent's average, 87.2 (ECLAC 2020). Unfortunately, the proportion of women to hold seats in the new 2017 National Constituent Assembly is only 22.2, below the continent average of 31.6 (ECLAC 2020)—a fact that points at the difference between legal frameworks, governmental discourse and Venezuela's structural realities.

Problematically, the government has not provided *any* data to the World Bank since 2015, and only certain data to the UN's Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL). Venezuela's statistical capacity score in 2019 was 57.7, down from 90 in 2008. Moreover, the agency tasked with collecting social indicators for the Ministry of planning, SISOV, with which I had collected data for my MPhil research in 2014, was closed as of 2016.

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[12] An interesting note on the constitution: it prohibits state financing of political parties—a move that is seen as proliferating the influence of money in politics. Historically, COPEI and AD enjoyed generous state funding, but their lack of accountability and widespread corruption led to this article.

What the little data available seems to show is that the economic crisis has reversed all the gains and made the situation significantly worse. Poverty has increased to a staggering 96 percent as of 2020, with extreme poverty lying at 79.3 percent, according to a report by the Catholic University of Venezuela (F. Singer 2020; España et al. 2020)—levels unseen in Venezuela, now the poorest country in Latin America. The GINI coefficient has gone up to 51—meaning Venezuela is now the most unequal country in the region after Brazil. The Human Development Index has gone down to 0.726 in 2018, in part due to Venezuela's fall in GNI per capita. Life expectancy has decreased steadily: 73.13 in 2010 to 72 in 2018 (the second lowest in South America). One of the clearest health indicators, infant mortality rate, also increased from 18.9 per 1000 births in 2014 to 30.9. in 2019 (CEPAL 2020). I note that Chavismo's health expenditure has always been incomprehensibly low compared to other social spending, 3.2 of GDP in 2015 (CEPAL 2020). Cuba, in contrast, spent almost 13 percent in 2012, and 10.9 percent in 2015, the highest in the continent (the average being 6.9).

Distressingly, *BBC* reported that in 2017, 64.3 per cent of people had lost weight that year, 11.4 kg on average, with those in the poorest sectors losing most. 8 out of 10 said they were eating less because they did not have enough food at home (*BBC News* February 4, 2019). CEPAL's 2020 report confirms that 21.2 per cent of the population lives below minimum level of dietary energy consumption—the highest in the region (the average for Latin America and the Caribbean is 6.3 percent).

In terms of the distribution of food aid itself, the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Venezuela (UNHRC 2019), based on a study of 558 interviews with victims and witnesses of human rights violations, states that:

1. "There are reasonable grounds to believe that grave violations of economic and social rights, including the rights to food and health, have been committed in Venezuela [...] As the economic crisis deepened, the authorities began using social programmes in a discriminatory manner based on political grounds, and as an instrument of social control, disproportionately affecting women" (2019, 14).

2. "The authorities have particularly targeted certain individuals and groups, including members of the political opposition and those perceived as threats to the Government due to their capacity to articulate critical positions and to mobilise

others [...]". The report quotes that at least 15,045 people have been detained for political motives between January 2014 and 2019 (2019, 8).

3. "Venezuelan indigenous peoples face serious violations to their individual and collective rights. [We] are particularly concerned about reports of threats and violence against indigenous authorities and leaders, targeted repression of Pemons (an indigenous community) who oppose the government" (2019, 14).

The report was slammed as being one sided by the government, as well as by solidarity activists aware of it, who feel the UN is US backed, and therefore unjust to the Venezuelan government. The report certainly overlooks the impact of sanctions on the country and omits referencing violence committed by opposition supporters in 2017. However, the UNHRC claims suggest there are serious reasons to believe that Venezuelans' democratic, economic and social rights have been completely overturned during Maduro's presidency. I add that in September 2020, a new independent international fact-finding mission of the UNCHR (2020) sent to investigate the situation in Venezuela, concluded more definitively that the FAES and Maduro's government had committed crimes against humanity.

I also note that according to Bolton's book (2020) between 2018 and 2019, the US has imposed four major sanctions on Venezuela. It blocked its ability to trade gold; froze PDVSA's assets (the national oil company) including its US subsidiary Citgo; sanctioned its central bank (freezing it out of the world's financial systems); and imposed an economic embargo. These sanctions are clearly not to be taken lightly, and have had a major role in further impoverishing an ill-maintained economic system.

Race and skin colour in Venezuela

Given many of the solidarity activists I interviewed made a point of racialising Venezuela's conflict (see chapter 6) it seems important to nuance some of the ways racialisation operates in Venezuela, especially given Venezuelan migrants themselves rarely, if ever, mentioned race in their understanding of the conflict.

Considered one of the more 'mixed' colonies of Spanish America, Venezuela had a small indigenous population that meant the colonisers imported considerable amounts of labour through slavery to work in the coffee and cocoa plantations. It is estimated that over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries some 100,000 Africans entered the country (Herrera 2005) and that by the end of the colonial era (1522-1821) 60 percent of Venezuelans had African origin. Of the 25 per cent classified as white, 90 per cent had some African ancestry (Soriano 2018). In this regard, Venezuela is similar to Brazil and Cuba, in that it shares a majority dark-skinned population: 67 percent (Brazil), 61 percent (Venezuela) and 54 percent (Cuba) (Gott 2007).

Mestizaje (miscegenation), became the forging discursive element of the nascent Latin American nations who strived for a sense of nationality—rejecting Spain and contemporaneously rejecting indigenous and afro-descendent groups—groups that helped win the independence wars in the first place. Mestizaje's modern subject, the *mestizo*, was culturally mixed, of indigenous, black and European descent—a mixture that allegedly dismantled and transcended the old colonial racial order.

During the late nineteenth century, positivist thinkers in Venezuela continued to argue that Anglo-Saxon (white) societies were 'successful' because they 'worked harder,' implying people of colour were poorer because they were 'naturally lazy' and 'unintelligent.' Not incidentally, these are stereotypes of Chavistas and the popular classes that still circulate amongst Venezuelans, including some of the interviewees, as I discuss in chapter 7.

The 1930s oil boom in Venezuela saw *mestizaje* and its inherent egalitarianism "repackaged as a national cultural value" (Bolívar et al. 2009). The rise in fiscal revenue loosened social mobility and feeding the sense that progress and modernisation was not limited exclusively to whites. The idea of the *mestizo* citizen, symbol of racial equality, was tied to democracy itself and readily embraced by politicians of the mid-twentieth century.

'Poet-politician Andrés Eloy Blanco, who in 1944 coined the notion of '*patria café con leche*' (coffee with milk nation) to illustrate Venezuela's particular racial project, "attacked any expression of racial discrimination as un-Venezuelan," (Wright 1990, 2) effectively wedding the idea to the nation. In practice, it has always been understood that "more milk is better than more coffee" (Nichols 2013). As late as 1945, political elites among them Arturo Uslar Pietri, stressed the need to contract European labourers, advocating and promoting continued

whitening (Wright 1990). The calls led to a ban on non-white immigration to Venezuela, and the influx of around 1 million Spanish, Portuguese and Italian immigrants in these decades.

For Hazel Marsh (2017, n.p.), in an article written for *The Conversation*, Venezuela "was best known for its beauty queens and its oil" – these are, not incidentally, the two national icons that best "represent the racial and cultural politics that are driving today's unrest." Marsh attributes Venezuelans' belief in the superiority of Europeans to the impact that the foreign-owned oil sector had on the Venezuelan middle classes in the mid twentieth century, taking from Venezuelan scholar Miguel Tinker Salas. In Tinker Salas' (2009, 172) own words "over time, intellectuals, academics and artists actively participated in formulating a national, social and cultural project that identified the economic interests of the foreign oil companies with the welfare of the nation." I discuss how this 'euro-philia' continues to be part of the national consciousness in chapters 6 and 8.

I add that the historical and cultural contributions of afro-descendants in particular have been "ignored, undervalued or construed" (Ishibashi 2007, 26; Pineda 2017b). The remarkable slave rebellion of Coro in 1795, for example, was historically silenced and "completely excluded from Venezuela's nascent narratives of nationhood" (Ruette-Orihuela and Soriano 2016, 337). School textbooks disproportionately represent whites and mestizos (77.5 and 13.6 per cent respectively), whereas afro-descendants and indigenous people account for 4.7 and 4.2 per cent respectively (Ramírez 2002). Gulbas (2013) has also found that white-European physical characteristics are still considered more beautiful—ideas persevered by the media, as Ishibashi's (2003) study on black bodies in Venezuelan television confirms.

In sum, *mestizaje/patria café con leche,* is a "hegemonic political ideology" (Moreno Figueroa 2010, 388) that 1) aims for a desirable, yet unattainable, social equality; 2) values the idea of whiteness that has served to maintain white supremacy; 3) conveniently disguises the inequalities that lead to racism by attempting to neutralise the historical facts of indentured labour that have forged them in the first place (Bolívar et al. 2009); and 4) has been internalised by the population in such a way that Venezuelans are not able to acknowledge their own racist postures (Ishibashi 2003; Charier 2000). This is especially clear in the way one of the interviewees, César, an Afro-Venezuelan, dismisses the idea of racism in the country, even when he is the principal victim of it (see chapter 6).

Chávez and our 'Brown America'

It is in this context of deep invisibilisation of race that Hugo Chávez enters the political landscape in 1998. He was the first dark-skinned president of Venezuela, and he identified himself as afro-descendent and indigenous:

> Racism is very characteristic of imperialism. Racism is very characteristic of capitalism [...] Hate against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth, because of my curly hair. And I'm so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it is African. [Hugo Chávez, September 21, 2005].

Because senior political and military leaders (and winners of the 'Miss Venezuela' beauty pageant) traditionally come from the 'white-settler class,' many solidarity activists agree that for the opposition, "the physical presence of Chávez in the presidential palace was an uncomfortable reminder of the existence of an immense, impoverished and non-white underclass in their country [...] a reality that most of them have long chosen to ignore" (Gott 2007, 271). Ciacariello-Maher, in an interview with Cecily Hilleary (2014), explains that "part of what angered the elites so much when Chávez came to power was that he was a person who didn't 'look like he was 'fit' to govern."

Chávez successfully used his physical appearance to his political advantage, given he understood that a majority of the country was non-white. By openly acknowledging the racial burdens that accompany his colour of skin and physical features, by embodying the racial roots that are traditionally marginalised, Chávez sought to build national unity in a brown '*pueblo*,' a concept of 'Venezuelan people' that implies the need to expel the old ('white') social order. He effectively managed to fathom this 'people' along racial (skin-colour) and class lines and brought racial issues to the fore of the debate—a debate never before addressed despite Venezuela's profound racial inequalities. Chávez made himself part of what he and solidarity activists agree was the more 'legitimate' pueblo, and the protagonist of its political saga.

I note that this discourse, however, has served to simplify and radicalise the political divide in racial terms, as I discuss fully in chapter 6. Given that at least 60 per cent (INE 2014) self-identify as *moreno* in the last census (dark-skinned) the reality is that there are also millions of dark-skinned Venezuelans that are against Chavismo.

Skin-tone and discrimination in Venezuela

Many different phenotypic cues contribute to how Venezuelans and other Latin Americans differentiate, categorise and rank one another, but the extensive mixture of indigenous peoples, Africans and Europeans has meant skin colour in particular plays a determinant role in 'othering' (Banton 2012). Telles (2014) shows that where perceived identification by others is pertinent, self-identification with an ethno-racial group is less adept at revealing structural inequalities and phenomena of discrimination when compared to skin colour. In fact, ethno-racial categories, such as indigenous or black, hide skin colour variation and distinct racialised experiences in Latin America.

The 2011 national census report explains that afro-descendent groups in Venezuela solicited the inclusion of a question they called 'ethnic self-recognition.' These groups have also asked for *constitutional* recognition since 1999, but this has not been granted to date (INE 2014; see also Rivas Brito and Ruette-Orihuela 2019). The term *moreno*, that very broadly describes 'brown skin' in Venezuela, was used in the question alongside 'white,' 'afro descendant,' 'black,' and 'other,' the indigenous population was counted separately. *Moreno* relates only to skin colour, unlike the other terms which represent ethno-racial categories. It encompasses a wide gamut of brown skin tone as well as different phenotypic features, in Venezuela and other parts of Latin America (Guimarães 2012; Gravlee 2005; Telles 2014) and covers the majority, 51.6 percent of the population. Although we can presume authorities chose to avoid the use of the word 'racial' versus 'ethnic,' the reasons behind the choice of *moreno* as a category for self-recognition remain unknown. The fact that *moreno* was included nonetheless points to the determining character of skin colour versus race as a consequence of extensive admixture in Venezuela.

Camardiel et al. (2005) suggest that Venezuelans today refuse to bring race to the forefront because merely asking about race and racism is an acknowledgement of their existence, which contradicts this internalised belief that skin colour in Venezuela does not matter. This is on display in the interviews with Venezuelan migrant: issues of race were very rarely mentioned. Racism *is* practiced in Venezuela, however, as a phenomenon of exclusion, carried out at an individual level, based on physical characteristics.

For Esther Pineda, an afro-Venezuelan scholar:

> it has traditionally been practiced through symbolic annihilation, that is, through language, jokes, nicknames [...] omission, invisibilisation, among other naturalised practices that allow for discrimination to be enacted with complete impunity" (Pineda 2017a, n.p.).

The agglomeration of certain phenotypes and specific skin tones in the lower income groups of the population is also evidence of the structural racism long denied by the national discourse. A study that looked at mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome markers to estimate what the author's call 'components of admixture', was conducted in Venezuela to compare 'components' vis-a-vis socio-economic level (H. Martínez et al. 2007). The researchers took blood samples from two groups: one from a private hospital as a proxy for higher income, and one from a public hospital located in a poorer district of Caracas, as a proxy for lower income. The higher socioeconomic group showed a high European component (78 percent), and the lower socioeconomic group showed a high indigenous and African component (40 percent and 30 percent respectively). The study points to the fact that ideas of racial democracy did not help overcome the burdens of indentured labour, or colonial social stratification: they simply perpetuated white hegemonic discourse, and helped cover whites' 'settler colonialist' status in Latin America and Venezuela.

Chávez's missions

For many scholars, the '*Misiones*,' Chávez's flagship poverty alleviation programmes of which many of the *colectivos* are part of, were a response to the heightened political competition of 2003 (D'elia and Cabezas 2008; Corrales and Penfold 2007; Hawkins 2010; Haggard and Kaufman 2008). The popular social programmes are constantly mentioned by solidarity activists (especially those with less on-the-ground knowledge) as some of the most exemplary achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution, so it is important to clarify what they are, and exactly what they achieved.

Financed by the state oil company's revenue (PDVSA), and created by presidential decree, they stood (and currently stand) under direct presidential purview—this allows them to bypass regular legislative budgetary oversight (Vera 2009). The policies were *sui generis*: they covered a wide array of objectives, tackling deficient access to health, education, state-issued

identification—and were arguably veritable efforts to combat exclusion, especially for those in the informal sector (Lopez Maya and Lander 2011). They were also aimed at reversing public opinion, achieving "popular adhesion" to the figure of the president, and increasing the electoral registry (Aguiar 2009, 318).

I note that despite their conceptual similarity to neoliberal compensatory policies (including ones that accompanied Pérez's infamous structural adjustment measures in the 1990s) they are perceived of as achieving social inclusion because recipients, at least at the time, felt they were *part* of social development projects and nation-building, not simply *recipients* of aid (Daguerre 2011; López-Maya and Lander 2011; Strønen 2017). This was, as Strønen (2017, 5) calls it, taking from Gledhill's (2000) work on Chiapas in Mexico, "a new model of dignity", of collective identity and political agency that countered the social stigma of marginalisation, and the shame associated with receiving aid.

The best-known missions, *Barrio Adentro* and *Mercal*, (also those most familiar to interviewees) were created in December 2003 to attend to the urgent health and nutritional needs of the residents of the barrios in Caracas. New health-care centres located inside the barrios were built, and Cuban doctors who provided on-site care were brought in exchange for subsidised oil to the Cuban government. By 2008, there were at least 30 different missions attending to housing, single-motherhood, identification, and social security, besides health and food distribution.

For the opposition, and for Venezuelan migrants I spoke to, the missions reproduced three principal flaws of social policy in Venezuela: institutional improvisation, lack of long-term planning, and clientelistic redistribution of oil revenues; for Chavistas the policies were flexible and desperately needed (Daguerre 2011). For Venezuelan migrants the missions were also associated with the 'lazy' and 'corrupt' nature of the Venezuelan 'people' more broadly, themes I discuss in chapter 7. For solidarity activists, they were inspirational (see chapter 3 and 9), to the extent that many thought these policies could and should be replicated elsewhere.

By 2014 and the oil crash, the missions faced severe funding problems and attended to less than 10 percent of the Venezuelan population (España 2015). *Barrio Adentro* went from serving 2.6 million people in 2015, to less than 200,000 people in 2017. By 2018 and come the sanctions, only one mission was fully functional: the food box distribution mission, known as CLAP (*Comité Local de Abastecimiento y Producción*). Today it attends 92 percent of families, although

unfortunately 46 percent on an irregular basis (España et al. 2020)—again facts that are not mentioned by solidarity activists.

Venezuela's mafia state?

For Venezuelan migrants, and for opposition leaders, the Maduro government is not merely corrupt, it is criminal. Accusations regarding Maduro's involvement with narco-trafficking were consistently underlined, as were references to the government's exorbitant corruption. Its known relationship with Hezbollah was often mentioned in the interviews—even though *Foreign Policy* wrote in 2019, that there was little reason to suspect that regime change would stifle the Lebanese terrorists' presence there (see Clarke 2019).

Drug-trafficking claims are described at length in a report *InSight Crime Foundation* —an NGO working on crime in the Americas—published in 2018. In it, the foundation presented their arguments for believing that the Venezuelan state is a 'Mafia State': namely that high-ranking members from within the government have been indicted or convicted of drug trafficking.

Already in 2008, *The Guardian* had published an article entitled "Revealed: Chávez's role in Cocaine Trail to Europe," based on the testimony of deserters of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), openly supported by Chávez—clearly the allegations are not new.[13] *InSight* names 40 high-ranking members of the government, mentioning it has information on 123.[14] Except for those that have in fact been indicted and charged (including

[13] The group of government officials involved in the drug trade are dubbed the "Cartel of the Suns," taking from the stars the generals of the Venezuelan National Guard wear on their epaulets, a term first used in 1993—before the Chávez era—when two anti-drug chiefs were first investigated for ties to the cartels they purported to dismantle.

[14] I note that the report simply states that its investigation is the product of three years of field research in Venezuela, but no methodological details are given.

President Maduro himself in May 2020), the list does not explain how evidence has been collected.

More compelling are the allegations made by Hugo Carvajal, former high level Chavista and head of Venezuela's intelligence service, who has also been indicted and faces extradition for drug trafficking; Leamsy Salazar, Chávez's former bodyguard, who defected in 2014; and Eladio Aponte, former Venezuelan supreme Court Justice who fled in 2012. They have all been source witnesses for the US Department of Justice in these allegations. In 2020, Maduro himself, and another 14 members of his cabinet were charged by then US attorney General William Barr for their intimate connections to the drug trade.

For supporters of the government and solidarity activists interviewed here, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the 'war on drugs' is an excuse: it aids espionage and intelligence in the countries it operates in (see Lefebvre (2014). The Chávez and Morales governments expelled the DEA from their countries in 2005 and 2008 respectively alleging espionage. This has created the sense amongst these supporters that none of the news regarding drug-trafficking is accurate.

For journalists Koerner and Vaz (2019):

> The goal is never to prove anything or present substantive debate, but to further poison the well of US public opinion against Venezuela, legitimating regime change as US state policy. Rather than victims of murderous US sanctions, Venezuelans are depicted as the purveyors of an anti-American drug war. In fact, the most egregious dealers of death and deceit in the hemisphere are, as always, US policymakers and their stenographers in the corporate media.

Koerner and Vaz (2019), in their article criticising a report by the Wall Street Journal, feel all defectors have a "clear incentive to fabricate information in order to secure their status in the United States and protect themselves against possible prosecution." According to their subheading, the media and the US treasury is "relying on traitors' testimony"—their use of the word 'traitor' assumes that defecting from the government is treasonous, which speaks to their bias. The authors do not mention those that have been imprisoned for drug charges: for example, the nephews of Cilia Flores, the First Lady, apprehended as they attempted to seal a deal that would smuggle 800 kilograms of cocaine into the US, and sentenced to 18 years in

prison. They also fail to mention the Air France flight that departed from Caracas with 1.3 tons of cocaine on board, under the purview of the Venezuelan Bolivarian National Guard. For Koerner and Vaz "independently verifiable evidence" is missing. How this could be garnered, however, is unclear.

What does seem clear is that the Plan Colombia, successfully enacted in cooperation with the US, forced drug routes via Venezuela (see Smilde 2017). Drugs can only traffic through Venezuela with the consent of the Armed Forces. Whether top officials in the Maduro and Chávez governments are directly benefitting from the trade, or simply turning a blind eye to it is hard to determine. It is possible that allegations incriminating them have been done so hastily, but in either case, the converging testimonies described, at very different time points, can hardly be dismissed.

There is no definitive way to prove whether the government is in fact a 'mafia'. What is important to stress here is how the discourse—in referencing criminality—makes use of morality to build an impenetrable divide, an argument I make often in this research. Guaidó can exhort for forgiveness, but if the other side is accused of being a 'mafia', this is exceedingly uphill to achieve.

The paradox of Violence

All Venezuelan migrants interviewed had been victims of criminal activity of some sort—some had been kidnapped, others lost a member of their family robbed at gunpoint. Most talked of wanting a 'normal,' 'peaceful' life, in reference to their living in fear and their decision to migrate, as I discuss in chapter 8. Caracas became the most violent city in the world in 2016, in terms of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. It has remained in the top-three since 2011.

From 2006 to 2013, the most significant problem for Venezuelans became 'insecurity'—above unemployment, corruption, the economy, and political instability. The inordinate levels of criminality significantly coloured their understanding of the 'immoral' qualities of their fellow citizens and their disillusionment with the country more broadly. Crime and impunity are, with reason, at the heart of their discontent with the Chávez and Maduro presidencies. It is in

part how Venezuelans understand being 'wronged' as I also discuss in chapter 8.[15] Of significance is that fact that criminality is not an issue that solidarity activists bring up in the interviews.

The exponential rise in homicides and petty delinquency (tripled in the years between 1998 and 2008) is particularly unnerving given that—at least in the Chávez years—poverty was *reduced* on many accounts (as discussed above). The paradox is still under-examined. Structural accounts point to the fact that more than 56 percent of Venezuelans were under 30-years of age in 2009, and 16 percent of young males were unemployed. Most state-centric accounts believe part of problem revolved around a well-intentioned but inefficient approach to crime, where police forces and judicial institutions were neglected, in the hope that decreasing poverty and inequality would solve the structural issues around criminal activity (Briceño-León 2012; Zubillaga 2013; Smilde 2017). A dramatic decrease of detentions, following President Chávez's preference for no suppression, led to high disorder in judicial processes and impunity. In 1998, for every 100 homicides, there were 118 arrests. By 2010 there were barely 9 arrests for every 100 homicides, i.e. 91 percent of homicides had no arrests, ruling or sentence. Police forces became increasingly involved in crime, and those disproportionately affected by were the urban poor—Chávez's political base (Zubillaga 2013). For Samet (2019, 35) policing was "just the tip of the iceberg": courts were ineffective, prisons were 'incubators' of organised crime, firearms were ubiquitous.

Answers to the question of violence in Venezuela lie beyond the scope of this research. Maps of the most violent areas of Venezuela show that border regions, and areas along the drug routes, are the most violent—i.e., part of the problem points to this increased competition for dominance in the illicit market.

For Smilde (2017; see also Crespo and Birkbeck 2009; Crespo 2017) however, it is the de-legitimisation of institutions—understood as the breakdown of their moral authority to exert power—that holds the important part of the puzzle. For Smilde (2017) more specifically, the influx of extraordinary oil rents undermined the government's "institutional capacity for

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15 See also Samet 2019, *Deadline*.

exerting social control." Smilde (2017) does not explain exactly *how* this occurs, yet one could suspect that the sudden influx of resources makes them more susceptible to corruption. The government prioritised relieving certain short-term social issues by creating *para*-institutional organisations—such as the missions I discuss in the next section—which meant reducing the funding available for traditional institutions (police, schools, large public hospitals, etc).

Ethnographic accounts have highlighted the diminished mechanisms of socialisation that foment empathy—in other words "the means through which individual actors adopt particular norms, rules, and practices associated with membership of a given group" (Rodgers 2017, 648). Merton's cultural strain theory, which suggests people will find alternative means to achieve *culturally* valued goals, i.e. not simply the education and means of subsistence that Chávez had thought were sufficient. Violence became a major source of self-worth, and appearance and material wealth became increasingly valued during the Chávez era (Crespo 2010; Moreno et al. 2009; Smilde 2017). Crespo (2010), distinguishing between cases of criminal actors before and after the 2000s, understands the absence of these empathy mechanisms as Durkheimian 'anomie': before 2000s criminal actors still saw their actions as illicit; newcomers to crime in the years of Chávez and Maduro did not. Crespo (2010) also points at specific psychosocial authoritarian and narcissistic personalities product of de-socialisation in Venezuela. Others emphasise how violence becomes moralised in its prevalence: to survive, and defend your own, violence is required.

Clearly, the undertaken research in this area has diagnosed some of the issues, but it leaves much unanswered. I note in reference to the paradox, taking from Smilde (2017) and Ponce and González (2015), that the poverty reduction achieved by the Chávez government was 'superficial' to the extent that quality of employment, education, and neighbourhoods remained largely unchanged. Increased income was, in effect, transferred to those spaces still affected by structural violence "creating new inequalities, resentments and conflicts typical of processes of change" (Smilde 2017, 308).

I also note that Chávez although against any repressive model of policing, adopted a mix of 'progressive' (humanist) and 'heavy-handed' (*mano dura*) militaristic policies. Maduro, in contrast, would very openly embrace the use of deadly operatives against the residents of the barrios, and began a practice of systemic extra-legal executions (Hanson and Zubillaga 2018; UNCHR 2019; 2020). In fact, in 2017, the General Prosecutor of Venezuela confirmed that 21

percent of the violent deaths that had occurred that year, had been in the hands of the state. The overwhelming levels of criminality, and perhaps more importantly the state's devolvement in it, were never mentioned by supporters of the government interviewed here.[16]

I return to these theoretical ideas in chapter 4, before turning to the empirical work with these issues in mind. I will first look at transnational solidarity networks and how they have evolved historically, as a means to contextualise the work of Venezuela solidarity.

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[16] Taking from Wacquant (2001) and Mbembé (2003), we can understand this 'hardened hand' as a compensatory mechanism to account for state policing's lack of legitimacy, a form of 'necropolitics': the post-colonial state's eroded capacity to sustain public order, whose power is limited to administering death.

Chapter 3. Transnational solidarity

The central question regarding transnational solidarity networks, such as the ones interviewed for this research, perplexes any rational choice account of political behaviour: how does an 'other' become a political subject that needs to be defended, or to whom responsibilities are owed? (Stites Mor 2013).

In this chapter, I look at how transnational solidarity movements have evolved historically within the left, and take a brief look at other solidarity movements in the continent, most notably those for Nicaragua, Cuba, the Zapatistas, and Chile—all strongly related to Venezuela solidarity. I also examine the concept of XXI Century socialism, coined by Heinz Dietrich Steffan that made Chávez's revolution so attractive to many outside Venezuela, importantly solidarity activists. I then describe how the different Venezuela solidarity campaigns interviewed here, see themselves and their goals within the broader 'internationalist left,' taking from their websites and pamphlets. Lastly, I examine the origins of 'solidarity' as a philosophical, but specifically moral concept, or deontology: intricately tied, as thinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries argue, to our understanding of our relationship to others, and what our social duties *ought* to look like. The concept can help situate, at least theoretically, some of the feelings, values and aspirations that participants of this study share, especially those that see themselves as being 'in solidarity' with Chávez's revolution.

Origins of international solidarity

Solidarity Song

Peoples of the world, together
Join to serve the common cause!
So it feeds us all forever
See to it that it's now yours.
Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!

When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!
Black or white or brown or yellow
Leave your old disputes behind.
Once start talking with your fellow
Men, you'll soon be of one mind.

In the solidarity song, written at the end of the 1920s, Bertold Brecht (its lyricist) extols the potential different peoples—of different colours—must be "of one mind." Here lives "a wish to share and act commonly in order to overcome the atomising pressures of a voracious imperialist capitalism," interpret Hatzky and Stites Mor (2014, 127).

The aims of the international workers' movement, echoed in this song, called for a global working-class solidarity able to transcend national and racial confines—historically, a goal central to the socialist tradition.

Scholarly accounts on international solidarity movements share no singular historic thread, though Hatzky and Stites Mor (2014, 132) trace the origins of solidarity to the anti-slavery movement that began in the 1790s, as well as more general struggles of class solidarity in 19th century Europe. I note they mean of solidarity *campaigns* and not the political-moral *concept* I discuss at the end of this chapter. The Anti-Slavery Societies in Europe and North America were precursors to modern-day transnational movements. Their success in 1807 was "the first collective and public expression of global solidarity and protection of human rights," and benefitted from the transnational activities of former slaves like Frederick Douglass (Hatzky and Stites Mor 2014, 132). As one of the first examples of transnational solidarity with Latin America, Jones (2014) acknowledges the men that left Britain in the 1800s to fight in Simón Bolívar's independence wars.

Most other historical accounts of solidarity movements begin with Charles Fourier and the utopian writers of mid 19th century France, who called for ideas of fraternal justice and new models of 'association' and 'harmony.' The utopian socialists and later Marxists opposed the "liberal attitude in capitalist England," (ter Meulen 2017, 36) which resulted in the appalling living conditions of the working classes. In this period, working class movements began arguing for a working-class solidarity centred on shared class oppression—a solidarity that

could rebuild social unity post industrialisation. In fact, Marx, living in exile in the UK, was especially impressed by Britain's working-class movements and their ties to the North in the American Civil War (Featherstone 2012).

Internationalism and anti-imperialism

In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels speak of 'proletariat internationalism': an overcoming of nationalist preoccupations to allow for an *international* united workers' struggle that could signal the road to a communist and classless society (Zoll 2000).

In an analysis of Karl Marx's later writings, Foster (2000), distinguishes the key elements of socialist Marxist internationalism: 1) the critique of international exploitation, and 2) the national and international working-class movement—although a once-promised book on the 'world market' would never come to fruition (Marshall 2014).

The ideas inspired the founding of the First International (1864-1876) in London, and the Second International (1889-1916) in Paris. They would mark the origins of a form of "global consciousness," central to today's solidarity activism (Hope 2011, 12). Trotsky, most notably, understood that the Russian Revolution's long-term survival depended entirely on its *global* success. This need for 'internationalism' and a global-workers' alliance would become cemented in the voice of Lenin, and one of his key texts *Imperialism: The highest stage of capitalism*, that saw global revolution as the only way to overcome capitalism's crisis and 'revisionism' in general (Lenin 1996 [1916]).

The espoused cosmopolitanism that guided the founding of the Second International fell before the decision of most socialist parties to support their governments in the First World War (Keck and Sikkink 1998). It was a betrayal for Lenin, who saw the war as imperialistic: "an annexationist, predatory and plunderous war," in his words (Lenin 1996 [1916]), one that exploited the proletariat to advance a bourgeois state. Lenin's imperialism can be understood more broadly as a "structural domination of peripheral countries and regions by core powers" through financial capital, exploitation of resources, monopolistic capitalist associations, and the territorial division of the world among a few capitalist powers (Lenin 1996 [1916];

Domínguez López and Yaffe 2017, 2518). Venezuela solidarity activism shares Lenin's perspective on anti-imperialism, as I discuss in chapter 9.

The Third international, also known as Communist International (or Comintern) was conceived as a highly centralised proletarian party with local Communist Parties, called on by Lenin himself in Moscow in 1919. The Comintern included anti-colonial movements and resolved, among other things, to overthrow the 'international bourgeoisie.' Revolution would have serious and tragic outcomes in the 20th century, but the Comintern—albeit in a paternalistic way—was the first to form a movement of workers struggling under capitalism and 'distant others' struggling under imperial rule (Fisher 1955; Hatzky and Stites Mor 2014).

From these ideas, and taking an ideological stance similar to that of solidarity activists, Foster (2000) suggests no genuine internationalism can exist "that does not have anti-imperialism at its heart." Harris (2009, 28), again from the perspective of the more radical left, and looking specifically at internationalism, distinguishes between two forms of cooperation between people of all nations for the common good: liberal (which he understands as bourgeois) and socialist (proletarian) exemplified by the Cuban regime. Harris (2009) notes that Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara theorised a concept of 'internationalist solidarity' that was inspired by Marx's and Lenin's anti-imperialism, and by the anti-imperialism of Jose Martí, Antonio Maceo, and Simón Bolívar. For El Ché, the Cuban Revolution was "in solidarity with all the oppressed peoples of the world" (Guevara 1997 [1961], 229): Cuban internationalism, and true solidarity more purposefully, seeks to collaborate in the independence and revolutionary struggles of other countries (this included Venezuela in 1962).

For Harris (2009, 28)—and solidarity activists—'liberal' internationalism, based on European cosmopolitanism, does not oppose:

> the exploitative relations of production, the unequal international division of labour, the global stratification of power and privileges, the unjust distribution of income and wealth, and the hegemonic domination that are inherent in the existing international order.

Castro's and Guevara's internationalism, on the other hand, does. I problematise the way in which solidarity activists fail to question if the Bolivarian Revolution has dealt with the injustices Harris (2009) mentions *effectively*—however from his perspective, the point of internationalism is not necessarily to correct these failures and injustices, but rather to oppose

and make them visible. I note, however, that the anti-US sentiment of Venezuela solidarity activists is based on moral outrage against US foreign policy and interventionism—and not, say, anti-corporatism.

The Americas and the anti-imperial struggle

The idea "that workers on one side of the world could alleviate the struggle of workers living under a dictatorship on the other" (Jones 2014, 1), continued at the core of the international labour movement throughout the 20th century. It fostered the World Congress against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression in Brussels in 1927 which allowed participants from Latin America, Africa and Asia to network, discuss and develop their own ideas of revolutionary socialism—ideas sometimes counter to the 'orthodox Left' (Hatzky and Stites Mor 2014). The network would eventually lead to one of the first cases of South-South solidarity movements in Latin America: the "Hands off Nicaragua" committee, founded in Mexico in 1928, that aimed to support the guerrilla war of César Augusto Sandino against US intervention—a movement that would be resurrected in the 1980s against Reagan era foreign policy, as I discuss in the next section.

Diverse US social movement also played a role in international solidarity. For Striffler (2019) throughout the 1800s, and early 1900s the US public associated empire with Europe. While some felt that US military intervention was a betrayal to US democratic values, others simply did not want to "incorporate 'tropical peoples' into the nation-state"; for Striffler (2019, 21) this was simply a racist, paternalistic and "oddly imperial form of anti-imperialism" that is not 'internationalist' in the sense I have been describing. It had no qualms about intervention and extended US presence in Latin America— it simply disliked 'colonies.'

Striffler (2019) distinguishes two independent streams of US anti-imperialism: black internationalism, that related racial oppression within America's borders with the US' push for expansion; and the (whiter) radical-socialist movement that made a similar connection. Black internationalism was particularly active in the Spanish Civil War, as part of what Featherstone (2012, emphasis added) calls "an ongoing engagement with the *shifting maps of*

grievance through which fascism was contested."[17] The Mexican Revolution and the US military's occupation of the Caribbean intensified more radical feelings of anti-imperialism in the first two decades of 20th century. However, once the US emerges from the Second World War a superpower, there was little domestic opposition to an empire, and under McCarthyism the labour movement itself purged the Left out of its ranks.

Human rights and solidarity movements in the mid-to-late 20th century

For Striffler (2019, 11), it was the undermining of progressive left politics and the dismantling of the left in America at the onset of the Cold War, that "essentially destroyed the broad current of anti-imperialism" narrated here. Alternative internationalisms emerged and Human Rights advocacy came to play a central role in emerging transnational movements, with a distinctive form of 'solidarity' divorced from political projects, one that used professional organisations and NGOs to respond to more urgent crises (Striffler 2019). For Striffler (2019, 15), however, and from the perspective of the radical left in the US, even when these groups opposed neoliberalism, they shared in its logic by "embracing a politics that moved away from the state as a key site of struggle."

Throughout the 20th century, the Latin American left, more specifically, understood transnational solidarity, of the kind I discuss in this section, represented "a powerful political resource for accessing public opinion in distant regions of the world" (Hatzky and Stites Mor 2014, 130). In other words, they awarded coveted "external validation" (Stites Mor 2013, 4). These campaigns today are aimed at granting *international* legitimacy, or what theorists call 'political cosmopolitanism,' a concept I discuss in the next chapter.

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[17] I return to the idea of grievance and populism in chapter 4.

I note that a famous derogatory expression for one who provides this 'external validation' is 'useful idiot.' The expression is attributed to both Stalin and Lenin, although the facts behind this are contested. For Stalin, validators included most prominently the Moscow correspondent for the New York Times, and Pulitzer Prize winner, Walter Duranty, who highly praised his regime in the paper. The idea relates to how Venezuelan migrants see solidarity activists: i.e., as 'naïve outsiders', ideologues who blindly aid a regime's propaganda efforts internationally. I argue that for solidarity activists, helping the Maduro and Chávez governments gain legitimacy abroad represents a deontology or moral duty.[18] They believe the most important way they can contribute to the Bolivarian project is by helping Maduro improve his international standing and avoid intervention in Venezuela.

Chile Solidarity Campaigns in the US and UK

Importantly, for some of the themes in this thesis, human rights violations in Latin America during the 20th century were generally targeted at the left (Striffler 2019). In fact, a history of transnational human rights activism can be traced to the estimated 200,000 Chilean exiles who formed diaspora communities and alliances with leftist groups in their host countries (Kelly 2013). Kelly (2013, 167) also names these groups 'solidarity activists': "an ad-hoc group of exiles and leftists who worked 'in solidarity' against the abuse of military dictatorship." For Kelly, solidarity activists shared "higher devotion to a *political* cause" (2013, 167, emphasis added), that he contrasts with Amnesty International's shunning of any mention of politics in its bid to transcend political squabbles.

Solidarity activists interviewed here (some exiles, others part of Chile solidarity campaigns) draw parallels between Allende's story then, and Venezuela's crisis today. For them and leftists world-wide, Salvador Allende's democratic triumph stood as the beginning of a pacifist socialism, one that was brutally eviscerated by Augusto Pinochet's US-backed coup in 1973.[19]

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[18] See chapter 9 for a complete discussion of this theme in the interviews.

[19] This idea is not however factually correct: the communist party in the Indian state of Kerala had already been elected to rule democratically and pacifically in the state as early as 1957.

The US' hand in the matter is no secret. The CIA spent millions helping the campaign against Allende, even paying the head of the secret police. Records released in the early 2000s also confirmed the CIA received direct instruction from Nixon to attempt to foment the coup (*CBS* September 19, 2000). The Venezuelan case looks no different to solidarity activists from the outside.

Leftist groups in the US at the time established the Non-Intervention in Chile group and focused on disseminating alternative media products that countered the anti-Allende rhetoric in the mainstream press (Goff 2007). This solidarity group was part of the North American Congress on Latin America, NACLA, whose goals are still deeply related to those of solidarity activists today. According to their 1966 flier, they aimed to: "build a community of informed and committed individuals who combine research and action" and who would "work to broaden the base in North America for a reorientation of US policy toward Latin America." For them a growing number of Americans at the time were troubled by the "widening gulf between [their] lives and interests and the lives, needs and aspirations of more than 200 million people of Central and South America" (as quoted in Goff 2007, 96). These concerns live on in the minds of many American solidarity activists interviewed here.

The UK Chile Solidarity Campaign was also formed in the immediate aftermath of the coup in opposition to the new regime. This campaign attempted to build on "the empathy felt [towards] Allende's socialist experiment" (Wilkinson 1992, 57) and focussed its lobbying efforts on the trade union movement and the Labour party. The campaign was more successful vis-à-vis influence on UK policy: indeed, the then Labour government withdrew their ambassador to Chile as a result of the campaign's pressure and even refused to renegotiate Chile's debt.

The 3000 Chilean refugees that had entered the UK helped maintain the campaign alive, even when the administration changed to the Tory Party in 1979. Although these international efforts lost momentum as the prospects of toppling Pinochet's brutal regime became less certain, the campaign successfully managed to persuade MPs to take up human rights issues surrounding Pinochet's government. I note that although many activists campaigned for human rights issues alongside Amnesty International at the time, today paradoxically, they accuse the organisation of being pro-US and recriminate its strong stance against Venezuela's government (see chapter 9).

The Solidarity with Nicaragua campaign

Social movements of the 1960s and the New Left, advocated for major social reforms and liberation from colonial domination and imperial hegemony, particularly in Central America (Heztky and Stites Mor 2014). The presence of revolutionary movements in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua inspired the dimmed internationalist current that had been invested in a socialist revolution. For many of the internationalists seeking economic justice, what was happening in Central America became "the central pillar of hope and faith for those who still put their faith in social revolution" (Hobsbawm 1995, 436). Venezuela today is no different for many solidarity activists, as I describe in chapter 8. Nicaragua in particular stands out for the sheer number of times it has been under US occupation. As such, the country haunts the minds of many interviewees who associate the Sandinista fate to the Bolivarian one.

The transnational campaign supporting Sandinistas in Nicaragua argued that it was not only supporting those struggling for liberation, but that the campaign was in fact weakening US imperialism—imperialism traced, again, directly to the CIA. The CIA trained, armed and directed the *contra-revolucionarios*, or Contras (a group of former National Guardsmen of the deposed Somoza government) after the popularly supported Sandinista Front for National Liberation came to power in 1979. Whilst operating out of Costa Rica and Honduras, as well as in parts of Nicaragua, the Contras attacked villages, killed and kidnapped thousands of civilians—those they deemed 'Sandinistas.' The Reagan administration also imposed an economic embargo on Nicaragua, blocked its international loans and even ignored a World Court ruling that deemed its actions against Nicaragua illegal. To sustain its policies, Reagan built (not surprisingly) a discourse around the criminality of the Sandinista government—a discourse that solidarity activists equate to the one surrounding opposition to the Chávez and Maduro governments today. I note that unlike what has happened in Venezuela, the CIA conducted military actions of its own in Nicaragua: aerial raids, attacks on oil tanks, and the mining of Nicaraguan harbours in 1984—all actions solidarity activists believed could befall Venezuela during the Trump Presidency.

There were major activist networks pulling forces to halt the US-backed guerrilla war against the Sandinistas. The anti-Contra-war campaign involved over a thousand peace and justice organisations in 1983 and grew to over 7000 in 1986. The networks organised several successful activities aimed at engendering public but more importantly congressional opposition to the

war (Peace 2008, 63). A couple of the Americans interviewed here also visited Nicaragua and organised work brigades to help with the cotton and coffee plantations as part of these efforts in the 80s. The activists then returned to help build this very vibrant grass-roots campaign that lasted more than 7 years—i.e., until the Sandinistas were defeated at the ballot box in 1990.

The campaign was highly successful and managed to raise the political cost of a direct US attack on Nicaragua and constrained US activity there (Peace 2008; Perla 2009). Indeed, Oliver North, part of Reagan's security council at the time, wrote that the principal hindrance to intervention in Nicaragua was, in fact, US public opposition (Peace 2008).

The UK Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign continues to exist and was always present at the Venezuela Solidarity events I attended. I note all the events I attended enjoyed the presence of both the Venezuelan and Nicaraguan ambassadors to the UK, who spoke on behalf of their respective governments and against, what they decry, is US terrorism and an international press conspiracy against their states. Thus, the campaigns serve as external communicational platforms for the governments they seek to defend.

Both the Chilean and Nicaraguan campaigns are fundamental to Venezuela solidarity for several reasons, including the fact that many activists interviewed have participated in both. More importantly the events in those countries: 1) heightened the anti-American sentiment of the continent, and that of Americans who felt their policies were two-faced, excessive and outright immoral; and 2) they advanced the sense that the US treated Latin America as its backyard, i.e. it refused to let it's people choose their own fate unless its governments subject to American liberalism. The two campaigns promoted the sense that activism of this kind could be (relatively) successful.

Cuba Solidarity

Perhaps even more foundational to the solidarity work around Venezuela has been the work in favour of Cuba's revolutionary government. Cuba's political leaders have been seeking ideological allies to stand with them against isolationism ever since they got into power. Although the revolution was unable to continue its direct sponsorship of insurrections around the world, it designed promotional materials and global campaigns that sought to disseminate

the key premise of left solidarity: the disenfranchised around the world can unite (Bustamante and Sweig 2008).

US aggression towards Cuba and its civilians (known as the Cuban Project or Operation Mongoose) was a leading focus of the Kennedy administration. The project included repeated attempts to overthrow the regime, amongst them the infamous 'Bay of Pigs' invasion launched in 1961—a conflict that set the stage for the US-Soviet confrontation commonly known as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The US' apparently ineffective and highly unpopular subsequent policies towards Cuba have in fact helped the regime draw the victim card and gain much sympathy around the globe. Cuba has done so more successfully than once oil-rich Venezuela, and the Eastern Block, despite its unwillingness to grant civil liberties and other basic political rights to its citizens. It is no surprise then that Cubans have spent considerable energy organising brigades that give foreigners the opportunity to view their model first-hand, under the aegis of the Cuban Institute for Friendship and Peoples. Cuba's symbolic role as an 'underdog' rebel has indeed become mythologised through the years in great part due to the revolution's long-standing achievements in health and education, ones that are even more impressive given the economic blockade.

The large UK branch of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign has been active for around 57 years, according to its 'About us' page. It campaigns for an end to the blockade and the US' occupation of Guantánamo—a blockade which, according to the campaign, is aimed at "toppling the revolutionary government," a phrase solidarity activists repeat often when mentioning Venezuela. It also lobbies MPs in the UK, organises brigades and specialist tours, sells Cuban merchandise, and works with some unions and NGOs in Cuba. More recently, the organisation signed a letter of appeal to President Biden published as an advertisement in the New York Times on July 23rd 2021.

A successful strategy often employed by both solidarity campaigns involves hailing any anti-revolutionary as violence-prone. It is not surprising then that the Cuba Solidarity Campaign recently retweeted the aggressive comments made by Miami Mayor, Francis Suárez, who called for military action against the current Cuban government (July 16 2021) to emphasise this precisely. Among other comments the organisation retweeted is the related idea of: "Latin Americans are always silenced if they don't agree with the US" (July 18 2021). Both retweets attempt to argue: 1) that the blockade seeks to topple a *popular* government, and 2) that the US

attacks anyone in Latin America who does not agree with them. These are, again, central tenets of solidarity discourse that are extrapolated to the Venezuelan case.

Although the Cuba Solidarity campaign has had what is arguably 'superficial' impact, opposition to the embargo has grown in the UN and even in the seats of the US Congress. Obama very prominently changed the tune towards Cuba in his presidency, although believing that the campaign was responsible for this, is very much a stretch.

Zapatista Solidarity and the Anti-globalisation movement

Post-Marxist thinking of the late 20th century argued that for NGO's to be successful in achieving transformation, they had to link their interventions to "an overarching *radical* analysis of the causes of underdevelopment," focused on the empowerment of marginalised groups (Hope 2011, 5, emphasis added). One of the interviewees of this study specifically mentions Gunther Frank's development thinking and dependency theory: in the interviewee's words "that underdevelopment was not a condition of backwardness, but something that is done to people. And it's done by the imperialist countries" [interview with Andy 2019]. This thinking was central to the Anglo-Saxon baby-boomer solidarity activists I interviewed that saw in afro-indigenous Chávez and his participatory politics the opposition to imperialism they had envisioned.

The momentum of the left's campaigns after the fall of the communist world in Eastern Europe—and Fukuyama's (1992) alleged 'end of history'—focused, therefore, on shedding light on the resulting poverty and social exclusion brought about by the neoliberal economic policies of the new ideological hegemony; the original, more ambitious left internationalism became harder to sustain as trade union solidarity faced increased resistance (Bieler 2014). Transnational solidarity campaigns began to represent a new role for the left, raising awareness towards political subjects in other places, and groups that shared in this 'common cause'—opposing NAFTA, or supporting the Zapatistas in Mexico, for example.

The uprising of the Zapatistas—a group of mostly rural indigenous people—in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994, is considered the first post-communist rebellion in Latin America. Since then, the Zapatistas have sought to build an alternate and autonomous system of governance, that includes healthcare, education and food production. Though they align

themselves ideologically with the anti-neoliberal and anti-globalisation movement more broadly, they uniquely synthesise ideas from libertarian socialism, Marxism and Mayan tradition. The Zapatistas also oppose the plundering of natural resources, and practice what they call a 'participatory', radical or bottom-up politics that seeks to fight the state's disconnection to *el pueblo's* needs—a politics highly attractive to groups in the radical left, one related to Chávez's own understanding of participatory democracy.

The Zapatistas in particular, "caught the imagination of people both in Mexico and abroad," and have inspired an impressive amount of scholarly work in the last two decades (Olesen 2004b, 89; Cleaver 1998; Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1997; Khasnabish 2013). There are several support committees around the world that seek to raise awareness and spread the Zapatista message, the UK Zapatista Network, and the Chiapas Support Committee in the US being the largest and most influential. The Zapatistas have also arguably been a catalyst for broader online causes, hence its being named "a movement of movements" (Khasnabish 2013, 68).

Zapatista solidarity is, in relative terms, much more appealing than Venezuela solidarity today. The Zapatistas have had a highly successful communication strategy, and attracted high-profile figures such as Oliver Stone, Naomi Klein, Gabriel García Márquez, Eduardo Galeano among others to their cause—the kind of support Chávez managed to garner from celebrities early-on. I note that original support for Chávez waned once President Maduro's human rights abuses became vox-populi; only the support of very minor groups in the radical left remain. Support for Zapatismo is, clearly, not nearly as controversial.

Lastly, I add that the anti-war and anti-globalisation movements of the early 2000s (whose expansive growth and development is attributed to the growth of the internet) were also important strategic allegiances for the Zapatista movement, and some of the solidarity work described here. As an example, Mack, one of the activists interviewed here, began his 'solidarity journey' fighting in the war in Iraq, and later joined others against it through the Act Now to Stop the War coalition (ANSWER) that was part of this broader movement. Bustamante and Sweig (2008, 228) in fact call the movements "a new framework through which to sell [Cuba's] ideas to a broader public," although is important to bear in mind that these movements have been substantially more widespread than those focused on supporting the left in Latin America.

The movements are said to have risen from opposition to free-trade agreements originally, though have no singular leader, or name. Their consensus is instead based on an opposition to neo-liberalism, corporatism, and an urge to preserve the natural environment; hence why many scholars, including Noam Chomsky, point out that 'anti-globalisation' is in fact a misnomer:

> "No sane person is opposed to globalization, that is, international integration. Surely not the left and the workers movements, which were founded on the principle of international solidarity—that is, globalization in a form that attends to the rights of people, not private power systems" (*Croatian Feral Tribune* May 2 2002).

Chomsky's quote points at some of the core themes discussed thus far around solidarity: how it is in favour of the rights of the people, and hence very much against private enterprise. The interviews with solidarity activists, and their involvement with these movements more specifically, show that activists' view of past US involvement indeed colours their discourse, understandings, and fears, around the Venezuelan conflict. What is important to note about all these movements and who they defend, as McPherson (2003) argues, is that the US history of involvement in Latin America in particular, grants political clout to *any* resistance to the US (domestic or international).

Political Parties and Solidarity Work

We could assume that solidarity activists follow what politicians in their own countries have to say about Venezuela. Yet this was only the case for those in the UK intricately tied to former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and the political movement *Momentum* (which seeks to reform the Labour party from within), and those with ties to *Unidas Podemos* in Spain.

In 2013, the then Labour backbencher praised Chávez and his revolution as an "inspiration to all of us fighting back against austerity and neoliberal economics." His shadow Home Secretary, Diane Abbott, said back in 2012 "I think the importance of Venezuela is it shows

another way is possible"—a theme of 'hope' repeated consistently across the interviews.[20] Corbyn, and his entourage would later refrain from commenting on Venezuela once Corbyn was elected leader of the party: their association with Chavismo was being used by the press to argue that he aimed to turn the UK into another Venezuela, no doubt a blunt over-statement. Corbyn mostly refrained from commenting on Maduro's government publicly; he only spoke about "opposing outside interference in Venezuela" (*The Guardian*, February 3 2019). Once he stepped down, he renewed his involvement with both the Cuba and the Venezuela solidarity campaigns: throughout the lockdown in 2020, he actively conference-called in and attended several of the campaign's events online.

A couple of UK-based interviewees, specifically those associated to the International Marxist Tendency (IMT), consider Corbyn to be a reformist, and so were critical of his tenure. The Tendency is an orthodox Trotskyist organisation founded by Ted Grant, long-time leader of the original *Militant* Tendency. It conformed the Committee for a Workers' international in 1974, at the time the largest Trotskyist organisation in Europe. Grant separated from the committee in 1992, after disputes regarding whether to work together with the Labour party in the UK (which Grant originally favoured) and founded the IMT. Grant's new IMT, today led by his friend Alan Woods, believes strongly in ending privatisation and market economics, and instead believes in introducing a state monopoly of foreign trade. Solidarity activists that belong to the tendency dislike Corbyn's reformism; they are also very much against the policies of Maduro's government for the same reasons, and were not surprisingly therefore involved with the new anti-Maduro Chavista party, the *Alternativa Popular Revolucionaria*.

In Spain, solidarity activists were members of *Izquierda Unida* and *Podemos*—now *Unidas Podemos*, a party that has been presented in the Spanish press as being "under the shadow of its connection to Chavismo" (*El Mundo*, December 14 2018). Some of the members of the party have even been advisers to the Venezuelan government, most notably Juan Carlos Monedero, who circulated part of the discourse on Socialism of the XXI Century (see the next section). The press' attack on Chavista-leaning politicians has had decidedly more muscle in Spain than

[20] I discuss this theme of 'hope in the alternative to neoliberalism' in chapter 9, page 240.

in the UK, given historic ties between Spain and Venezuela, and the number of Venezuelan migrants there. Venezuela's crisis is also a consistent topic in the Spanish press: most Spaniards know of President Maduro but cannot name the President of Portugal. It is no surprise then that *Unidas Podemos* have also distanced themselves from the Bolivarian movement, again, seeing how the press has feasted on Spanish politicians' relationship to Chavismo.

The government of Pedro Sánchez, from the Spanish Socialist Workers' party (conformed in coalition with *Unidas Podemos*) has been ambivalent towards Chavismo, perhaps for these reasons. Although Sánchez has officially recognised Guaidó as interim president, like most EU countries, and given asylum to opposition leader Leopoldo López, Sánchez refused (unlike Macron or Johnson) to receive Guiadó personally. Much like Corbyn, Pablo Iglesias, leader of *Unidas Podemos* and ex Vice President, stopped praising Chavismo, but has continued to speak against intervention (see chapter 9). During the course of the interviews, I also spoke briefly to another ex-leader of *Podemos* and ex-fan of the Bolivarian Revolution, Iñigo Errejón. It was equally difficult to tell his current stance on Venezuela: Errejón openly stated the Bolivarian movement had fundamentally gone astray, but it was clear he would never side with the opposition, or advocate for intervention there.

Solidarity activists point to this attack on their politicians when explaining why they distrust what is published in the media on Venezuela: even if the ills that afflict the country are true, the only reason they appear in the press is to make Iglesias, Corbyn and socialism look bad.[21] Solidarity activists did not question their chosen politicians' distance from their cause: they simply highlighted the role the press has had in 'silencing' them and socialism's successes more broadly.

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[21] I discuss this resistance to the media in chapter 5.

Socialism of the XXI Century

In his book, *Der Sozialismus des 21 Jahrhunderts*, German sociologist Heinz Dietrich Steffan (1996) argues that the leading 20th Century ideologies, free-market capitalism and Marxism-Leninism, had failed to solve humanity's problems: hunger, exploitation, economic oppression, sexism, racism or the destruction of natural resources. Dietrich argued that the process by which to achieve a transformation of society should be 'revolutionary,' yet not violent or immediate, rather gradual and peaceful—a discourse that would be extremely appealing to Chávez's early idealism. Dietrich (and later Chilean scholar Martha Harnecker et al., 2012) would underline this new socialism's commitment to a participative democracy, one that expressly distances itself from the mistakes of its Soviet incarnation. As I noted in the introduction, this commitment to democracy as a fundamental normative value—above, say, future equality or the empowerment of the popular classes—is debated amongst solidarity activists. I turn to this topic in chapter 5.

Chávez, heavily influenced by Dietrich at the time, told participants of the 2005 World Social Forum (WSF) that it was their task to re-invent socialism: "a new type of socialism, a humanist one which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything." He added that this is "possible to do under democracy, but not under the type of democracy being imposed from Washington" (*venezuelanalysis.com*, January 31 2005). Importantly, Chávez reasoned that the answers would emerge as new systems develop, so long as these systems were "built on cooperation, not competition."

Juan Carlos Monedero, a Spanish academic from the Complutense University of Madrid, (initially a founding member of Podemos in Spain, and an adviser to Hugo Chávez) would also take a stab at building a theoretical definition that could underlie the so-called Socialism of the XXI century. Monedero would tie the concept to what he calls the "radicalization of the golden rule," or in other words, the idea "that socialism is love" (Monedero 2008, n.p.). With empathy as a society's pre-eminent normative value, socialism is:

> a system of social, normative, political and economic and cultural organisation that searches for liberty and justice, able to harmonize society's material, institutional and intellectual resources, with the goal of achieving the equality of personal capacities, the liberties of individuals and collectives, the solidarity amongst members of the

> community, the defence of differences, the respect of the environment, peace between nations and equal conditions for all the peoples of the world (Monedero 2008, n.p.)

I note that the concept of love was tied to several of Chávez electoral campaigns—that of 2006, for example, with the slogan "*Chávez por amor*." I discuss the importance of the concept of solidarity Monedero mentions at the end of this chapter, and how solidarity activists in fact express 'love' for the Venezuelan people and Chávez more fully in chapter 7. Here I note that Monedero's understanding of this new socialism is, inadvertently or not, influenced by liberalism: in its defence of the liberties (of both individuals and collectives), and especially its defence of 'difference'—ideas that do not tie in neatly with the more Manichean understanding of politics that are pushed in populist spheres.

This updated, more liberal understanding of socialism is not reflected in the interviews, as I discuss in Part II. Solidarity activists did not refer to themselves as being 21st Century Socialists specifically: perhaps because, and this is especially true for those that had lived through the Cold War, the fight for socialism and solidarity was more than anything a fight against US imperialism. The concept is important in so far as it reflects activists desire to incorporate a peaceful and democratic transition to socialism and the emotional investment activists placed in the success of the Bolivarian revolution.

Situating online transnational activism

I note that most of today's Venezuela solidarity activity has been enacted in the online world. As Gillan and Pickerill argue (back in 2008) in their account of transnational anti-war activism, the internet most certainly has facilitated transnational activism by offering "a relatively inexpensive and highly efficient means of transcending geographical boundaries" (2008, 60). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the internet has become the *only* way transnational activism can operate—Venezuela solidarity is no exception. Little has been written in regards to the influence online networks have had on left-solidarity campaigns more specifically, although of course, much can be translated from literature on digital activism and the digital public sphere more broadly, including the more recent #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter

movements.[22] Bennett, Givens, and Breunig (2008) show how the internet, already in 2008, had become central to protesters' daily activities and how reliant activists are on digital communications for their consumption of information. Devin (2011) does note how transnational solidarities remain fragmented and virtual, and insists that though they interfere in interstate relations, they are no substitute for them: they remain less effective at enacting policy change. Social networks have been, nevertheless, the principal way in which 'discourse' understood in a postmodern sense, 'travels.' They are also what I argue is the 'antagonised sphere' in which participants in this study interact with their respective causes and positions.

Here I refrain on making an analysis of *if* and *how* digital spaces transform activism and political action more broadly, as these questions are already being tackled in studies looking at movements with more transnational clout than Venezuela solidarity campaigns. Rather, I explore how solidarity activists inhabit online spaces, and cope with their small scale of influence, in a world that is increasingly hostile to their ideas and beliefs.

Venezuela Solidarity as a transnational network and campaign

> Basically, I often —as someone who helps to organise protests and movement activity— I often get asked to by my friends, who were not that political, even sometimes people in the movement: 'you know, what? What impact can you have with a demonstration? Like, what does it really do?' And one of the examples I often quote is the demonstration in Venezuela during the coup in 2002. And the massive impact of that had been, you know, really putting a stop to that and bringing Chavez back in. So I think yeah, I think that's incredibly inspiring, and something we can learn from [Sahas, interview 2019].

[22] See Caiani and Pavan (2017) for an interesting account of what they call the "inconvenient solidarities" of extreme-right online networks in Europe; see Stephan (2013) for an account of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association that used online networks as a 'safe space' to promote women's rights in the Arab world.

> The people of the barrios, the low-paid workers, the tenant farmers, the Afro-Venezuelans, the indigenous, the women, the LGBTQ+ coordinated with the military in order to defeat the coup and to defend their revolution. This says something important about the nature of the ongoing political struggle in Venezuela. It shows that the radical governments of the last two decades have achieved something very significant that goes beyond the economic benefits accrued to ordinary people, beyond the millions of homes built, beyond the provision of healthcare and education services. What has been created in Venezuela isn't just a benevolent state; it's a democratic revolutionary process that has given the working masses a voice, a stake in society. This process has politicised the millions, mobilised them, empowered them, drawn them for the first time into the running of their own society. It has taken up their interests and developed structures that allow them to take up their own interests. That's why millions of Venezuelans defend their state even as it faces a level of systematic sabotage and destabilisation that's creating widespread suffering [C, interviewee, part of an article written in his blog].

Here I explore the aims of several of the Venezuela solidarity campaigns and organisations—what their 'solidarity' entails—as described by the groups themselves. It is outside the scope of this work to arrive at a history of international solidarity towards the Bolivarian revolution over the past 20 years of Chavismo—a history complicated by "ideological differentiation, lack of institutional continuity, and inconsistent presence" (Striffler 2019, 5)—to my knowledge, such history has yet to be written. However, I will trace the short history of the organisations involved, taking from the organisations themselves and some of the interviewees.[23]

Here I note that although the campaigns themselves refer to solidarity 'with Venezuela,' they mean more specifically with Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution and Chavismo. What the following exploration of the diverse groups hopes to show is that there are several competing sub-groups amongst solidarity groups—with competing agendas and priorities and associations that as I mention, are not always in tandem with one another. Importantly, although I have suggested Venezuela solidarity is 'solidarity' from the perspective of

[23] Steve Striffler's (2019) book *Solidarity: Latin America and the US Left* makes an attempt at providing a history of broader US to Latin America solidarity, but overlooks Venezuela solidarity entirely—perhaps because it has become so controversial.

interviewees, it can also be understood theoretically as 'political altruism' given the relation of difference between activists in the Global North, and Venezuelans in the Global South. I explore these theoretical differences more specifically in the last section of this chapter.

In their seminal work on advocacy networks in international politics, Keck and Sikkink (1998, x) suggest political science has "tended to ignore such nongovernmental actors because they are not 'powerful' in the classic sense of the term": they depend simply on the production and exchange of information—what other scholars might deem 'negative' power. Although the course of shaping public opinion is by no means established, activists (including those I interviewed) at least hope to foment what Habermas (1990) calls 'moral outrage'—in the case of Venezuela solidarity activism, outrage surrounding US imperialism and the opposition's racist behaviour—by use of traditional media, social media, petition signing, small-scale rallies, and door-to-door mobilisation (see Figure 1).

ACTION ALERT: Tell Boris Johnson - Venezuela needs its gold for COVID-19 fight

Figure 1. Screenshot of email asking subscribers of the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC) to sign a petition asking the Government of Boris Johnson to give to President Maduro Venezuela's gold assets in the Bank of England

It seems pertinent to note that Venezuela Solidarity activism cannot be considered a transnational *movement*, given its scale and scope. Venezuela solidarity is better described as a transnational network of activists, under Sikkink, Riker, and Khagram (2002) paradigm, and as a specific transnational campaign that has different names in different places. Although there are Venezuela solidarity campaigns in many different countries, they do not interact with each other as such (organise protests on the same day, for example). Some simultaneous, cross-campaign interactions do occur online.

As discussed previously, the campaign takes ideological weight from the campaigns that exist to defend Cuba from the blockade, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the Chilean Left during Pinochet's regime, and to some extent those which aimed to prevent the Iraq war in 2003—although Venezuela solidarity, as I discuss, is significantly more controversial.

Keck and Sikkink (1998, 1-2, emphasis added) define 'transnational advocacy networks' as "networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of *principled* ideas or values in motivating their formation"—and here I note the deontology implicit in their understanding, which is crucial to my principal argument on the appeal of morality. Transnational networks of activists can leverage supra-national political resources to influence local outcomes (Stites Mor 2013), i.e., they help "transform the practice of national sovereignty" by clouding the distinction between a state's relation to its own citizens and its relation to an international system (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 2). This is especially true of human rights activism and the push to adhere to international law.

Importantly, Keck and Sikkink (1998, 2) admit that the fact that these networks are "motivated by values rather than by material concerns," makes them fall outside traditional political categories of actors. The networks are, according to the authors, also prevalent in issues that share "high value content" and "informational uncertainty"—given that at the heart of these campaigns lies "information exchange" (1998, 2). I suggest that we instead think about these campaigns as invested in 'knowledge production' (rather than mere 'information exchange'), and hence the use of 'positionality', vis-à-vis subjectivity in speaking of campaigns and activisms. The positionality embedded in what is being shared suggests information is not simply *exchanged*, as Keck and Sikkink (1998, 2) also admit to: it is "*framed*" to target specific audiences, encourage action, in other words, selectively communicated and contextualised so as to spur Habermas' (1990) 'moral outrage'.

Taking from the interviews and from Striffler's (2019) account of US solidarity in Latin America, I identify five fundamental aspects of Venezuela solidarity (although these points could equally apply to international solidarity movements associated with left internationalism more broadly):

1. it is rooted in an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle that emphasises the right to self-determination and/or national sovereignty;

2. it is racially rooted within African, Asian and Latin American experiences of exploitation;

3. it is conceived of as a *shared* experience of oppression, that looks past geographical location (and race), towards a common socio-economic location;

4. it stems from a sense of responsibility (or guilt) at the suffering inflicted by the US government, and other imperial powers, irremediably tied to the privileges experienced in the Global North (see chapter 9);

5. it shares a political commitment to radical and revolutionary transformation of the economic order, which has a long history in the left, and to some extent Socialism of the XXI century.

I note the idea of a common socio-economic location is especially important in understanding how solidarity activists come to view themselves as part of 'a grieved people' in the populist sphere and debate, regardless of their citizenship, or current location.

Hands off Venezuela (HOV)

'Solidarity with Venezuela' begins right after the presidential coup of April 11 2002, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. Some of the activists I interviewed mentioned Chávez failed to gain the attention of the international left initially given the fact he was a man of the military, rather than, say, a man of the unions.

Many solidarity activists come to hear about Chávez through the documentary film "The Revolution will not be Televised." The film by Irish directors Donnacha O'Briain and Kim Bartley (2002) is shot inside the presidential palace, and follows the coup—before, during and after—and is, in the words of Roger Ebert (2003), Pulitzer Prize winner and supporter of Chávez, "unique in film history." According to Ebert's blog, it is also "clearly biased in favor of Chávez— most clearly so in depicting his opponents" (Ebert 2003). In other words, the film's knowledge production is clearly positioned in favour of Chávez, although solidarity activists rarely understand it in this way.

The film shows how the coup failed when hundreds of supporters surrounded the palace and loyal members of the presidential guard managed to arrest the culprits and bring President Chávez back to power after 36 hours. The film does not show that there had been a large opposition march two days earlier, of an estimated 400-500 thousand people. (Polls at the time, as I have discussed, showed Chávez's popularity had declined significantly that year.) A portion of those in the march (Human Rights Watch estimated 5000 people) headed to the presidential palace, where Chávez supporters were gathered. Confrontations ensued on both sides, but the private media, vehemently against Chávez, showed only the opposition being attacked. The true story of the violence that took place that day is marred by conflicting accounts and agendas. Ultimately Chávez, an elected president, was deposed by sectors of the military, and most countries in Latin America condemned the coup.

M, is a member of the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) previously discussed, and was involved in the founding of 'Hands Off Venezuela' (HOV) one of the solidarity campaigns I looked at for this study.[24] He has been traveling to Venezuela every year (sometimes twice a year) as part of the campaign's efforts. For him there was:

> a military coup against a democratically elected government, the interference of foreign governments like the United States in particular, but also European governments. We decided to organise a solidarity campaign in the tradition of other solidarity campaigns that have been held in the past, for Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile. There was a very strong campaign for Chile here in the 70s, so there were people that had participated in some of these campaigns.

The initial aim of the campaign was, therefore, to defend democracy in Venezuela— i.e., democratically elected president Chávez from a coup that put businessman, and US ally, Pedro Carmona into power. M also mentions the campaign's historical counterparts—discussed in the previous section. HOV's website, more succinctly, frames their story thus:

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[24] I refrain from giving him a pseudonym in this section, to protect his identity in the empirical chapters.

> Alan Woods, editor of 'In defence of Marxism', made an appeal to defend the Bolivarian revolution, to oppose US intervention in Venezuela and to ensure that truthful information about what was really happening in Venezuela would reach the trade union and labour movement outside.

Knowledge production, as I discuss in the empirical chapters, is a central aspect of Venezuela solidarity. In fact, HOV grew from a desire to share 'truthful information' with the trade unions— historically invested in solidarity work—given the international news on Venezuela was becoming increasingly polarised and would eventually come to favour opposition to Chavismo almost entirely.

HOV now works in more than 30 countries, mostly as an effort to counter the international media narrative on Venezuela. According to their page, its goal is to raise awareness within the trade union movement in different countries. The unions that support HOV, as far as I have been able to verify, are ASLEF (Locomotive Engineers and Firemen Union), and RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport workers). HOV also works with the Student Marxist Federation in the UK.

In regards to the principles it adheres to, the HOV page states (as of September 20, 2020) that these are:

1. solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution,

2. opposition to imperialist intervention in Venezuela,

3. building direct links with the revolutionary and trade union movement in Venezuela.

HOV organises public meetings, video screenings, supports moving motions in parliaments, and sends solidarity delegations to Venezuela, and as mentioned, most recently supported the *Alternativa Popular Revolucionaria*, who are Chavistas against Maduro. According to its Wikipedia page, the campaign also "issues press releases to counter unfavourable western media reports on the Chávez government." The campaign was thanked by President Chávez himself when he visited the UK in 2006 (and refused to meet with then Prime Minister Tony Blair).

Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC)

The other UK based organisation is the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC). Its 'About' section on their Facebook page (as of September 20, 2020) shows it shares very similar goals to HOV—but was founded later, in 2005:

> The progressive developments underway in Venezuela today are some of the most inspiring in the world. The Venezuela Solidarity Campaign is a broad-based campaign in solidarity with this social progress and for the right of the Venezuelan people to determine their own future free from external intervention.

The reason for the existence of two broadly similar solidarity campaigns in the UK is unclear from what I was able to gather—this was not central to my research—but it might be HOV's explicit Trotskyist bent, and Ken Livingston's (former Mayor of London) subsequent endorsement of VSC (a larger broad-based left coalition).

VSC have organised 19 events in 2019, which speaks to the volume of their activity in London, far greater than that of HOV. Their Facebook page lists more than 11,000 followers—which is an impressive number. As of May 2020, only 6 unions of 19 listed on their Wikipedia page mention an affiliation to VSC on their website: UNITE, UCU, National Education Union, NAPO, National Union of Mineworkers, and Communications Union (CWU).[25]

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[25] The TSSA (Transport Salaried Staff Association) was affiliated to an older organisation founded by one of the participants for this research, the Venezuela Information Centre, according to their website. I take this to mean that this information has not been updated, and new membership to VSC has not been established officially.

Figure 2. Protest outside of the Bank of England (organised by HOV in June 2020) asking Venezuela's gold to be handed over to President Maduro. Image taken from the HOV website, taken by HOV.

Figure 3. Facebook profile picture for Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC), showing a (brown) Venezuelan woman at a Maduro rally in Venezuela.

Photos of Trump and Guaidó and Dominic Raab and Guaidó removed for copyright reasons.

Figure 4. VSC email invitation to online meeting to discuss UK-US-Venezuela relations.

UNITE, one of the six unions that continues its support for VSC, is the second largest trade union in the United Kingdom. With more than 1.2 million members, it is committed to "protecting workers rights and equality and diversity in the workplace," as stated on their webpage (as of September 20, 2020). One of the aspects of their work includes what they define as 'Solidarity': i.e. being "engaged in action to support workers and communities across borders and continents." UNITE explains that Venezuela has had:

> One of the most democratic and progressive governments in the world, has extended free healthcare, education and workers' rights, showing there are real alternatives to cuts and privatisation. Record levels of investment in public services have seen four million Venezuelans lifted out of poverty and the minimum wage become the highest in Latin America. However hostile elements in the US and in the old Venezuelan elite do not intend to allow the Venezuelan people to determine their own future with numerous attempts to overthrow the elected government.

The statement ends by explaining why international 'solidarity' is vital: the campaign is needed to defend 'the Venezuelan people.' 'The people' are churned out consistently throughout the interviews, by both groups, yet the narrative implicit in this quote summarises quite succinctly what solidarity activists, also defenders of the Bolivarian Revolution, are trying to communicate: 1) that Venezuela is a an admirable democratic and progressive government; 2) that it invests highly in public services and lifted Venezuelans out of poverty; and 3) that the US and the white Venezuelan elite are trying to force regime change.

Australia Venezuela Solidarity Network (AVSN)

The Australia Venezuela Solidarity Network (AVSN), on their Facebook page (as of September 20, 2020) states it is:

> dedicated to building solidarity with the people of Venezuela in their struggle against US led imperialism and to build Socialism of the 21st Century. It has groups in every major Australian city, and organises a diverse range of events, from film screenings to solidarity brigades.

Figure 5. Australia Venezuela Solidarity Network (AVSN) Facebook page cover photo.

The Maritime Union of Australia, that supports and is a member of the AVSN, passed a motion on July 8th, 2017 that summarises the aims of most solidarity groups studied here:

1. To pledge our resolute solidarity with the people of Venezuela and their Bolivarian Revolution.

2. To reject the intervention of the US and other capitalist powers in Venezuela.

3. To oppose the attacks by violent, fascist gangs of the right-wing opposition in that country.

4. To call on the Australian labour movement to express solidarity with the Venezuelan people, and against right-wing attacks on Venezuelan democracy.

5. To call on the government and parliament of Australia to dissociate itself from US intervention in Venezuela's internal affairs, and to express full support for a peaceful resolution of the current crisis in Venezuela.

Through associations with organisations such as the Maritime Union of Australia, AVSN raised $10,000 for community groups in Venezuela in 2019 alone (Slee 2020). In early 2020, it was also able to send a delegation to Venezuela to "promote people-to-people solidarity," one of the only solidarity campaigns that has sent an entire delegation recently (Fuentes 2020). Part of the funds raised were handed over to an audio-visual project supporting communes and a social-political agro-ecological school. I note that solidarity work has not historically entailed direct transfer of funds to the groups (see chapter 5, 140-141), but Venezuela's dire circumstances have pushed the campaign to move towards this more 'financial' interpretation of the word solidarity.

Other Venezuela solidarity groups around the globe

The two organisations that I interviewed specifically dedicated to countering the international media narrative on Venezuela were Spain-based '*Voces en lucha*', and UK based '*Alborada*'.

Voces en lucha, headed by a Spanish couple who travelled by foot through South America for two years, describes itself as:

> A space for communication, that began on our two-year journey, starting in Chile and ending in Cuba, along the many territories of the Abya Yala.
>
> Its fabric is painted by some of the popular movements and resistances (native peoples, peasants, urban dwellers, women, Afro-descendants...), as well as by the national and territorial processes of change in the struggle for emancipation that inhabit this vast and battered region. Learning to look from the periphery, we need to decolonize thought and show diversity without homogenising it. The objective is to recover and disseminate tools that contribute to the democratisation of spaces of knowledge, and allow for the construction of dreams of equality in diversity (as published on their website as of September 20 2020).

Alborada on the other hand, is anglophone and UK based. Similarly, the organisation screens documentaries and arranges talks around Latin American politics. It considers itself to be:

> an independent voice on Latin American politics, media and culture. We provide a progressive take on the region, offering perspectives rarely found in the mainstream.

There are two other very active organisations that I did not have opportunity to interview: the 'Venezuela we are with you Coalition' and the 'Hugo Chávez People's Defence Front,' in Canada. There is also an Asia-Pacific Venezuela Solidarity Network that includes the Philippines-Venezuela Solidarity Network; the Nepal-Venezuela Solidarity Network; the Socialist Party of Malaysia, and the Working Peoples Party in Indonesia.

I note that all these activist organisations emphasise the Bolivarian Revolution as a process of 'the people' and the 'working masses.' Their interest—and discourse—is centred on a preoccupation with "peasants, urban dwellers, women, Afro-descendants"—and (purportedly) not ideology. I discuss how this plays out in chapter 7.

The deontology of Solidarity

> We are clearly witnessing what is probably an irresistible shift in public attitudes toward the belief that the defence of the oppressed in the name of morality should prevail over frontiers and legal documents [Former U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuellar; quoted in Rieff (1999, 1)].

In 1840s France, *Solidarité* emerged as an alternative to the discourse of individualism and the problematic 'atomisation' that resulted from increased industrialisation (ter Meulen 2017). Both Saint-Simon and Comte argued for a new social and political order that stressed the interdependence of individuals. Even liberal thinkers, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, spoke of *enlightened self-interest*": minimal self-sacrifice for the common 'good' that ultimately serves the self (Siedentop 1994). Durkheim would later distinguish between 'mechanical' and 'organic' solidarities: where one refers to the relations among members of the similarly-characterised communities of traditional societies; and the other to the links formed by the individuals of modern society through cooperation and division of labour (L. Wilde 2013).

In 1896, León Bourgeois argued further that without solidarity, "individuals cease to exist": they cannot maintain security and prosperity without it (ter Meulen 2017, 45). For him, association and solidarity—not economic competition, or a Darwinist survival instinct—are the defining

features of social life. Like Gide and Durkheim, his framework bases solidarity on the *instinctual* connectedness of individuals, instead of on the theology or metaphysics of existence.[26]

Richard Rorty (1996) is arguably the first to bring back the concept of solidarity to the late 20th century. Interestingly for Rorty, this idea of our 'intrinsic' humanity and commonality, is in fact *also* "remnants of an outdated, metaphysical way of thinking" (L. Wilde 2013, 69). Instead, solidarity needed to be built, or sustained, in the "imaginative ability to see *strange* people as fellow sufferers" (Rorty 1996, xvi, emphasis added). Rory's 'ideal type' figure, the 'liberal ironist,' recognises that what unites her with the rest of humanity is a susceptibility to pain—most especially the pain caused by other humans, i.e. humiliation. For him, our common susceptibility to humiliation is the only thing required to widen human solidarity. (Rorty misses the extent to which this 'bond' is neurologically limited to those that are 'like us,' see chapter 4).

It is Kurt Bayertz who first admits that the concept of solidarity has rarely been the object of theory. "Positive obligations to act," as he explains, are rather difficult to place in both ethical and political thought (Bayertz 1999, 4). Bayertz gets at the etymology of the word in Roman law of obligations, *obligato in solidum*—the pay of common debt—to describe the origins of the principle of mutual responsibility between the individual and society, now applied more extensively. 'International solidarity' falls into Bayertz third category of 'solidarities': namely a commitment towards common interests or against particular opponents, in reference to justice and rights. For Bayertz, this kind of solidarity also denotes "the emotional cohesion between the members of these social movements and the mutual support they give each other in their battle for common goals" (1999, 16). In the empirical chapters, I describe how interviewees in defence of Chavismo share this particular understanding of 'solidarity': the 'emotional cohesion' towards others who are 'fighting their battle' was frequently mentioned in the interviews. However, their solidarity is not necessarily 'mutual', or reciprocal, as Devin (2011) notes. At least in the context of the interviews, 'solidarity' is understood as unconditional

[26] Bourgeois' solidarism became the principal ideology of collective action in early 20th century France, and guided the establishment of its welfare state.

defence of an 'unknown' group of others. Bayertz does avert to the ethical dilemma inherent in solidarity that has, he believes, been responsible for the difficulties in situating it conceptually: its lack of claim to universality. One is 'solidary' towards specific groups and actors. I add that, consequently, one is *opposed* to others—an opposition that can be especially problematic in highly radicalised spheres and contexts.

Chandra Mohanty (2003, 49 emphasis added) account is relevant as she focuses on this antagonistic aspect of solidarity. She finds in a "common context of struggles *against* specific exploitative structures and systems" the motivation that determines the "potential political alliances" of solidarity movements. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas (1990), treats solidarity as the obverse aspect of justice, and would argue in the late 20th century, that 'cosmopolitan' solidarity forges itself out of shared moral outrage or indignation. This is a central premise of this research in that two very different groups contest the legitimacy of the Maduro government but in fact *share* feelings of deep moral indignation—only against different actors. In this sense, we can say *both* groups act 'in solidarity' with Venezuela while responding to a populist 'moralising' logic and political environment that pities them against each other.

For Habermas (1990) 'cosmopolitan' solidarity takes place in response to significant human rights violations or mass violence, and is, he argues, fleeting and less meaningful in terms of organising political life, inasmuch as it is contingent on specific temporal events. This is similar to what Peter Rippe (1998, 357) understands as 'project-related' solidarity.' Rippe in fact cites "solidarity with the leftists in Chile [and] with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua" among other examples of this type of solidarity—two campaigns that share activists with Venezuela solidarity work as discussed.[27] Dean (1996) refers to these as 'conventional' solidarities: those that are constructed in terms of 'us' and 'them' and offer a restricted range of available identity concepts. For Striffler, this kind of focused activism is a result of neoliberalism and the decline of traditional large-scale oppositional movements—although I would argue that he means the decline of international workers' movements, more specifically: the feminist movement, and anti-racism movements, for example, have expanded exponentially.

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[27] Scholz (2008) differentiates this from her concept of political solidarity.

Scholz (2008)—who attempts a broad theory of political solidarity—distinguishes quite successfully between social, political and civic solidarity. Her political solidarity as a "moral relation that marks a social movement wherein individuals have committed to positive duties in response to a perceived injustice" (Scholz 2008, 6) is particularly apt in her use of the word 'perceived,' as I discuss subsequently in the next sections.

Charity, Altruism and Condescension

Featherstone (2012, 5) understands the political concept of solidarity as "a central practice of the political left," and he examines specific instances of solidarity formed with the US 'North' during the Cotton Famine. His historical work asserts the existence and importance of subaltern groups in solidarities 'from below.' He is presumably contrasting this with the more 'expected' solidarity towards 'those who have less,' which Pierre Leroux (1840) in *De l'Humanité* sees instead as 'charity'.

Here I rescue Leroux's understanding of charity in that it suggests an unequal relation—what others authors call 'political altruism' (Passy and Giugni 2001). Political altruism describes a specific activism in the North that tends to issues in the South—that they have no stake in—out of a sense of moral responsibility (Passy and Giugni 2001, 5). I argue that this moral responsibility is particularly meaningful for activists, although it is not entirely unproblematic.

Jones (2014, 167), in discussing the work of Mavis Robertson, one of the most important Chile solidarity activists in Sydney, Australia writes "[Robertson] attributed the founding of her desire to support the underdog to her mother, who always 'had her eye on all the little countries.'" There is a slight condescension or paternalism in Robertson's and her mother's understanding of 'the other,' that is qualitatively different from solidarities that emerge from a *common* struggle. Here, Robertson seems to be engaging in 'political altruism,' or 'charity,' that stems from a position of power. With regards to solidarity activists in this thesis, they *perceive* a common struggle with the Venezuelan 'people,' even if others perceive that they are in a position of power and not struggling (see chapter 8). This makes for an important tension between 1) how solidarity activists view themselves and their own experiences of marginalisation (that affects the way they understand their solidarity); 2) how as scholars we might categorise them; and 3) conversely how Venezuelan migrants stereotype them as 'agents of privilege' because they come mostly from the Global North (see chapter 8).

Empathy and Solidarity

For Heyd (2007) solidarity is mediated through commitment to a cause. For him, "it is not a raw feeling but involves cognitive and reflective elements, as well as the commitment of individuals to remain loyal to the collective cause even when it means ignoring their self-interest and potential personal gain" (2007, 118). Heyd (2007) also suggests solidarity's normative dimensions demand loyalty from members of the group. This explains in part why solidarity activists viscerally dislike leftists who do not support Chavismo, as I discuss in chapter 5.

Similarly, Gould (2007, 149) takes from feminist theorists who have re-conceptualised the role of empathy to define solidarity as a "moral reflection in international affairs" that shares an "imaginative" understating of the "perspective, situation, and needs of others as a basis for moral action in response to them." Gould's work stands out as one of the first who sought to conceptualise a new form of solidarity "more suitable for the new forms of transnational relationships" (2007, 148) of the kind explored here. In so doing, she makes three important points about *transnational* solidarity work:

1. it's "feeling-with," i.e. emotional pull that impels supportive action (also stressed by Wilde 2013).

2. its "disposition to act towards others who are recognised as *different from* oneself" (2007, 157) but that we come to identify with—which Heyd (2007, 118) suggests "does not come naturally to us but takes a conscious effort aimed at the achievement of an impersonal goal."

3. its "shared values" and a "commitment to justice" (2007, 156) as constitutive of relationships—I turn to these moral values in the next chapter.

In what regards (2), I note that solidarity activists I interviewed accept they come from a different racial and cultural location; this does not, however, hinder their understanding that they are also somehow part of 'the (Chavista) people,' as I have mentioned. They either understand themselves to be part of (and in defence of) an international working class; or they align their ideological identity to the Chavista or revolutionary-left movement more broadly. I discuss at large in chapter 7.

In the context of gender and the feminist movement, Butler (1990, 21), similarly rejects the idea of "unity" on the basis of an "agreed-upon" identity as prerequisite for solidarity. She questions what she calls the "exclusionary norm of solidarity" amongst 'women', that is, a norm of solidarity towards those purported *similar to* oneself (in contrast to Gould's second point). The qualitative difference between Gould and Butler suggests that thinking of 'charity' or 'altruism' as a relation of difference, and 'solidarity' as a shared struggle (although not necessarily a shared identity) is conceptually valuable. Solidarity activists *feel* a shared struggle with the 'good' Venezuelan 'people', against the 'bad' US and elite interests, even when a crucial part of their identity is not shared.

Lastly, I note Gould (2007, 156) explicitly rejects "solidarity in support of inhumane, dominating or pernicious projects." Interestingly, in the Venezuelan case, many would argue that the Bolivarian revolution, *is* an 'inhumane, dominating and pernicious project,' given its egregious violations of human rights. The fact that this does not stop solidarity activists from believing that they stand in 'solidarity' shows the Venezuelan case is particularly challenging to theorise. Arguably in this case, I will not be examining ontological aspects of solidarity, i.e., whether activists are in 'solidarity' or not. I find it more compelling to understand how participants make sense of what they see as their solidarity towards (and against) a particular group of 'others.'

Solidarity and Foucault's 'ethics of self-formation'

Taking from various authors, solidarity as a political norm or ideal describes a shared commitment to economic and social justice, on the basis of a common struggle, *felt* as a moral duty. This commitment exists in several actors and groups but is also part of an ideal of what human and transnational relations ought to look like. Summarising, solidarity is distinctively deontological—bolstered by pressing moral emotional concerns—but importantly also antagonising. It is both for and against a specific group of others, and therefore susceptible I argue, to populist logic. I discuss these theoretical observations, specifically those regarding morality and populism, in the next chapter.

Chapter 4. Legitimacy, Moral Judgement and Populism

In understanding the appeal of populism in domestic *and* transnational contexts, as well as its de-legitimisation of pluralism, the literature on populism—largely state centric—needs to further address several theoretical points that I tend to in this chapter. I start by looking at philosophical normative and descriptive sociological understandings of legitimacy that help situate some of the moral arguments interviewees make when defending their position on President Maduro. I then look more specifically at moral judgements, and what I term moral logic (a specifically parochial form of morality) that sees morality as a form of group 'boundary work'—a boundary work of us good/them bad, that relates strongly to populism. I use these two broad understandings of legitimacy and morality to knit together a broader sociological understanding of populism as a political logic that vouches for a particularly moral (and therefore, seemingly meaningful) project, one which can help explain more fundamentally how political spheres become polarised and deaf to exhortations of dialogue.

Legitimacy

It is only when the exercise of political power has been contested—in acts of disobedience, resistance, or massive exodus, all seen in the Venezuelan case—that we have a serious reflection on whether an authority's claim to power is "legitimate." Legitimacy concerns those reflecting on it, or affected by it, are "getting something in return for their subordination, sufficient for them to acquiesce most of the time" or leave or revolt (Tilly 1991, 594). As I understand it, interviewees support for, or aversion towards, the Maduro government, stems from an acceptance or rejection of Maduro's claim to political power in Venezuela—his legitimacy.

The word legitimacy stems from the Latin root 'lex'—law—the adjective, *legitimus* originally meaning 'lawful.' The Oxford Dictionary states legitimacy is "conforming to the law or to

rules," but also "able to be defended with logic or justification; valid." The concept of political legitimacy implies more broadly that a *de facto* monopoly over violence, is insufficient to *justify* a claim to political power. Arriving at an analysis of the principles that constitute political legitimacy—in other words, what constitutes the 'rightful' exercise of power in a *normative* sense—has been a central task of political philosophy since Ancient Greece (Beetham 2011). As a subject of inquiry, it is more often associated with thinkers of the Enlightenment. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Hume have all famously offered accounts of political legitimacy and authority, each with their own understanding or critique of the idea of the 'social contract': how individuals, in Locke's case from the 'state of nature,' come to accept constitutional rule and the establishment of political institutions.

Political scientists and sociologists in the 19th and 20th centuries, became more interested in *descriptive* theorisations of socio-political orders and were curious about the complex historical processes of normative structures and inner-societal cohesion implicit in the apparent legitimacy of regimes. For Chris Thornhill (2011, 1), sociology in its very origins evolved in opposition to the (Enlightenment) idea that legitimacy derived from 'external acts of reason' or from constitutions, or "rationally generalised principles of legal validity."

One of the most influential of these sociological accounts was developed by Max Weber. For Weber, power holders can only count on subordinates following their mandate—without use of coercion—if and only if they enjoy legitimacy. Weber's typology traces a historical transformation where people hold *legitimitätsglaube*, a belief in legitimacy, either because the social order is accepted as tradition; there is faith in the rulers (what Weber terms 'charisma'); or there is trust in the legality of the system (Weber 1964).

Because these beliefs vary widely, social-scientific accounts recognise that legitimacy is multidimensional. Empirical approaches such as this one, try to understand legitimacy's 'social subjective' aspects: in other words, the logics that frame the justification for exercising and accepting political power and authority. Importantly for this research, within and outside a nation-state's borders. The central questions for understanding legitimacy here are therefore: what knowledge, values, beliefs are being reproduced that allow for acceptance or rejection of the use of power? How are ideas about legitimacy and illegitimacy sustained, *embodied*? And lastly, how is a legitimacy, one untied to the confines of the state, conceived and granted?

In philosophical accounts—understood as normative—there exists a tendency to discuss legitimacy as an externality, given its theoretical concerns. What social scientists, and specifically sociologists are trying to argue is that legitimacy is fundamentally a perception that is constructed. Legitimacy is also fundamentally not a binary, rather a dialectic process. I contend it is highly influenced by the media and socially circulating ideas—and *felt* on a collective and subjective basis. Such a descriptive account does not assume that power is legitimate (or illegitimate) simply because certain, or enough people come to believe that it is, i.e., that there are no incorrect or correct ways to exercise power as long as it is willingly accepted—an objection philosophers tend to make of what they see as reductionist understandings of legitimacy. Rather, my task here is descriptive: to elucidate those beliefs that underpin approval and rejection of Chavismo as holders of power. For my *descriptive* empirical analysis of the beliefs regarding the legitimacy of Maduro's presidency, I will, in fact, need to contrast each groups' *normative* understandings of 'rightful' exercise of power, as I do in Part II.

Legitimacy and morality

For social psychologists, one of the most basic tenants of the concept of legitimacy, or more specifically, legitimate hierarchies, is that they are associated with cooperation; illegitimate ones "are associated with domination" (Lammers et al. 2008). In their reasoning, "the consequences of power seem to be determined by how power is *conceived* and *conceptualised*, and how it is *acquired* and *wielded*, not just by the amount of resources possessed" (Lammers et al. 2008, 563 emphasis added).

In what regards the Venezuelan divide, solidarity activists highlight the aspects of the Revolution that show how it has positively transformed the lives of disenfranchised Venezuelans; Venezuelan migrants highlight the corrupt aspects of the regime that show how it is merely self-interested. For both groups then, as Beetham (2011) points out, the government's legitimacy is justified in terms of how 'morally' power is exercised.

Beetham (2011) explains how—especially in contexts where political performance matters—political authorities depend on the cooperation of those they serve: their capacity and effectiveness depend on their "moral authority," which impinges on their ability to convince people that the political system is both fair, and enacted fairly (2011, 1416). For Beetham (2011),

a "power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be *justified in terms of* their beliefs"; where morality is of utmost importance (Beetham 1991, 11). Beetham effectively suggests that loss of moral authority, akin to the one Maduro faces today, *stems from* a perceived 'immoral' exercise of political power. Put differently, because those who exercise political power enjoy status, privilege and access to the means of violence, they must show that they "merit [their power] and use it to serve a more general interest than merely their own advantage"—i.e., they must be *perceived* as having moral virtue (Beetham 2011, 1419). Whether this is the case or not, is (and should be) up for debate in the public sphere.

Legitimacy and political power

In conceptualising political power, more specifically Chavismo's 'reach,' interviewees think broadly of its policymaking, agenda-setting, decision-making, and most importantly whether this power has yielded positive or negative effects over the lives of Venezuelans (or their own lives, in the case of Venezuelan migrants). This 'lay' understanding of power reflects an intuitive feel for what political power *does* —I note the example of an interviewee, Hector, who underlines how he feels Chavismo has criminalised his aspirations of earning a higher wage (see chapter 8). Political power in his conception is not merely a 'juridic-discursive' exercise of "supremacy in the making, application and enforcement of law" (Buchanan 2003, 146). Such a definition misses the degree to which governance affects diverse aspects of our lives outside the law, including governments' ability to manipulate aspects of public opinion. The juridic conception suggests thinking about politics solely in terms of '*meta*-political' established frameworks, or 'constitutionalities' (Hamilton 2003, 3). It reinforces judicial sovereignty and fails to account for other sites of political power: conflicted group interests, elections as an evaluation of government performance, among many, many others.

In contesting Chavismo's power, interviewees think not only of its ability to enact laws, but rather in its ability to impose discourses that orient specific values, lived relations, how to think about the political, and even who the 'enemies' of the nation are. The extent of this power is especially evident in Global South contexts where political actors sometimes practice what Mbembé (2003), taking from Foucault, terms 'sovereignty': the ability to decide over life and death in their use of force—Maduro's use of military operatives in the *barrios* described in chapter 2 are a prime example of this reach.

Foucault's idea of *governmentality* is a broader (but perhaps more material) way to conceptualise political power: although slippery, it is a complex form of power "which has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument" (Foucault 2009, 107–8). I will use the term often in the next chapters to include influence over the media apparatus as a form of knowledge and influence over the judicial system as a major technical instrument, but principally to describe political power that is, again, not simply juridic, but rather all-encompassing.

Because political power, as Buchanan (2003, 151) explains, "involves *some* persons imposing rules on others," it is antithetical to equality—and freedom. Wielders of power effectively impose their will, as I have suggested: governmentality deeply affects how we live, which is why these scholars argue it is evaluated morally. As Lukes (2005, 37) explains in his famous *Power: A radical view*, any talk of interests invites judgements of a moral character, "so it is not surprising that different conceptions of what interests *are,* are associated with different moral and political positions." Both Beetham (2011) and Lukes (2005) suggest that power can be seen as 'moral,' when it advances common interests; *or* immoral, when it goes against common interests or is self-serving. Foucault, similarly although without recourse to normativity, suggests that his concept of biopower, for example, can "exert a positive influence on life" (Foucault 1990, 137). Taking from the interviews, I argue, as these scholars do, that power does not necessarily always seem or feel immoral: for solidarity activists especially, Chavismo in power *is* for historical and racial reasons, *moral*, as I discuss further in this chapter.

For many other scholars, holding political power *itself* is perceived as immoral—a view that stems from Machiavelli's principal argument on the corruptive qualities that power engenders. Specifically, for C. W. Mills (2000 [1956]; also Urbinati 2019), it is the possibility of what power *can* do, more than what it actually does, that makes it seem 'immoral.' Power feels *immoral*—US power, for solidarity activists, Chavismo for Venezuelan migrants—when it is deemed self-interested and therefore imposed—or we can take it further, non-consensual. This is the denunciation populism makes of existing power structures, as I discuss in the last section. If political power does not advance the interests of those it is imposed upon, it is perceived of as domination, or imposition, and imposition feels 'immoral,' among other reasons, because it requires forms of overt or covert coercion.

For interviewees, the exercise of this governmentality is judged on a *moral* basis—largely (but not exclusively) taking from an understanding of whose interests or what Hamilton (2003) calls 'needs' are being served and to what extent it is being 'imposed.'

Consent and Political Legitimacy

Our intuitive response is that governments are legitimate—and hence 'moral'— when they are *democratic*. Indeed, all interviewees point to the democratic achievements or failings of the Maduro government to show why they considered his government to be legitimate or not. But democracy does not imply *ex ante* equality of power. Even in a democracy there are power asymmetries: certain actors wield power over others (judges, police officers, legislators, the executive). So why do participants, and all political ideologies that value democracy (including Socialism of the XXI Century), *sense* that democracy addresses political power's fundamental moral challenge to the equality of persons?

An answer is the notion of 'consent,' prominent within normative accounts of legitimacy. It was perhaps first described by Étienne La Boétie in his 1577 essay *Servitude Volontaire* that—much like Gramsci centuries later—pondered on the acceptance of domination. Consent theory came to replace 'divine authority' theories and is more explicitly associated with the work of Hobbes in the 17th century. How this 'consent' materialises remains unclear. Some, including Locke, argue for a 'tacit' form of consent, i.e., as long as a community is not rebelling, or leaving residence, there is 'consent.' Yet this 'consent' cannot purport to suggest 'legitimacy': as Rousseau famously argued, a collective process is ultimately required to determine the scope of the use of power that is being consented to, and who is being consented to use it. Hume also famously countered that the state is almost always the result of violence—not consent.

'Consent theory' as it is often referred to, is deeply related to two fundamental ideas about legitimacy: the importance of democratic participation, that take from Rousseau; and ideas about public reason, that take from Kant. In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt, a consent theorist, proposed that the legitimacy of power derives "from the initial getting together" of people (1972, 151). For Arendt, power—a collective engagement and human construction—must be based on consent and persuasion. Having looked extensively at totalitarianism, she suggests only *legitimate* power is power, which she distinguishes from strength, force, and violence (these being what she terms 'natural phenomena'). John Rawls (2007, 124) would later

also underline the 'joining consent' of legitimacy, that is, how legitimacy is an ongoing evaluation of a political regime.

When Venezuelan migrants speak of Venezuela as not being 'normal' (see chapter 8), they are essentially justifying the illegitimacy of Maduro's government on the grounds of its disfunction or disservice to the Venezuelan people. This understanding relates to other contemporary accounts that argue for a more intuitive 'principle of utility' as a source of political legitimacy. Hampton (1998) in particular suggests political authority is "the invention of a group of people" seeking to find collective solutions to collective issues, that *benefit* from particular leadership, or authority. Raz (1986, 56) argues for a 'service conception' of authority that sees illegitimate—but effective—authority, as that which does not *serve* those it governs. We can tie this 'utilitarian' concern to the approach to morality I briefly describe in the next sections, where what is 'moral' is understood as that which promotes 'well-being' (see Lakoff 1996).

Taking from Kant, Rawls endorses a strictly "political" or procedural view of democratic legitimacy, independent of doctrines of religion or morality: only power "exercised in accordance with a constitution (written or unwritten)" that has been endorsed by all citizens "in light of their common human reason" is legitimate (Rawls 2001, 41). For Rawls, this understanding arrives at the counter-intuitive idea that a political decision that is legitimate, can also be 'unjust.' Rawls' understanding is consonant with the etymology of the word, but his definition falls into some of the juridical tropes described above (as noted by Mouffe 2002) and sits uncomfortably with the 'lay' understandings of legitimacy explored in the interviews: i.e., that it relates more explicitly to the moral use of political power. Arguably, certain regimes can also accommodate legality to suit them.

Legitimacy and Democracy

Buchanan (2003) advances a modern moral conception of political legitimacy—for him a 'liberal' understanding —that resembles the one shared by the states that have pronounced themselves against Maduro and is touted forth by Venezuelan opposition leaders. He argues that "an entity that exercises political power is morally justified in doing so if, and only if, it meets a minimal standard of justice, understood as the protection of basic human rights" (Buchanan 2003, 146). Buchanan (2003, 158) raises the point that legitimacy is based on "the most fundamental moral principle of all, the principle of equal concern and respect for

persons"—a principle that requires the promotion of the basic interests all persons have. *What* all persons' basic interests are, and what they ought to be, is evidently contested.

Buchanan (2003) refutes the view that 'consent' secures the legitimacy of the state system, as for him it is a state's "credible commitment" to the protection of human rights that grants legitimacy—not mere consent of those governed. He differentiates consent from what he calls 'democratic authorisation': that an agent can only be justified in wielding political power if they have been chosen to do so through democratic processes. The emphasis this idea places on democracy as the principal source of legitimacy is importantly why solidarity activists argue so fervently for the democratic credentials of the Maduro government, and why Venezuelan migrants highlight instead its authoritarian and dictatorial tendencies (see chapter 5).

There are, nevertheless, accounts that contest the idea that only democratic processes make for legitimate use of political power. Specifically, 'democratic instrumentalists,' such as Richard Arneson (2003) and Steven Wall (2007), argue that sacrificing 'political' equality for 'overall' equality, does not undermine legitimacy. As I have noted in the last chapter, many solidarity activists strongly defend this notion, i.e., that there is an ideal collective outcome (an end) that is independent of democratic processes (the means)—processes that they feel only benefit the individual. Arguably, this view more strongly adheres to traditional Marxist-Leninist socialism that some of the interviewees share, as I discuss in the next chapter.

The case of Venezuela (among others) shows how this instrumentalism is weak argumentatively. The limiting of Venezuelans' political liberties, for example, has meant social benefits are distributed discriminately on political grounds: governments will lack incentive to enact policies in the interests of 'the powerless' when accountability can be manipulated. Governments can avoid revolt by using need, and access to basics, to coerce 'consent' or acceptance, thus why international human rights theorists insist that *all* rights (political, economic and social) should be prioritised equally. In other words, human rights are *indivisible*, as affirmed in the UN Vienna Declaration of 1993: a hierarchical understanding of some rights over others, is theoretically unsound, even if this fact does not live so plainly in the political world, as I discuss further in chapter 9.

Intuitively, interviewees believe democracy to be *prima facie* moral even when it does not solve the problem of equality. Part of the reason lies in the fact that today the only equality that can be advanced for all simultaneously is civic: the equal opportunity to choose the wielder of

power, who then determines how it will be wielded—and whose interests are advanced. The difficulties inherent in defining the rights of individuals vis-à-vis the collective, was described by Kant in *Theory and Practice* (Part 2) (see also Mouffe 1992): that is, that the right of any person implies some restriction or loss of privilege for others. This is most obvious in the tensions that continue to exist between political and civil rights, and economic, social and cultural human rights. Political and civil human rights have been hard fought and won in what concerns race, sexuality and gender, i.e. we should be able to claim these rights 'equally' and simultaneously—at least in most democracies today. Economic, social and cultural human rights on the other hand, call for negotiation amongst interest groups. Choosing *who* will wield power fairly amongst equals, and having that choice be respected, is the only way to *accept* the outcomes of what Habermas' (1996) understands as the deliberative processes of democracy that seeks to negotiate these tensions. Democracy wields leadership decision to the collective, in the assumption that actors understand what their true interests are (regardless of whether this is the case or not). The idea underlines a collective agency that feels intuitively legitimate.

The 'democratic hypothesis' supposes that in advancing the interests of 'the people' as *majority*—popular sovereignty—the interest of the *whole* polity is served. To guarantee fairness, it also supposes there are conditions in place to allow for these majorities and their interests to change, as opinions circulate freely. Taking from Bobbio (1987), Urbinati (2019) argues that this second aspect is *constituent* of democracy—not simply a liberal adornment: popular sovereignty is insufficient without constitutional will to protect civil and political rights that allow opinions, and therefore, majorities to change. To function efficiently, and fairly, democracy must protect these rights. Not coincidentally, the theoretical tensions that exist between 'liberal democracy' and 'popular sovereignty' are replicated in the interviews between anti and pro-Chavistas; they are part of the uneasy relationship that exists between populism and democracy, something I turn to at the end of this chapter.

Legitimacy within Venezuela and beyond

Venezuelan migrants today contend that Chavismo is both illegitimate and immoral given most Venezuelans—'the people'—are suffering economic and social hardships at its hands. Venezuelan migrants claim Chavistas have only advanced their corrupt personal interests (and the interests of drug-trafficking) in dealing with Venezuela's oil wealth, and more directly, have

wrongfully banned opposition leaders, and used state force against 'the people' who oppose them (see chapter 5 and 9).

Solidarity activists claim that in its exercise of power, Chavismo has advanced the interests of the Venezuelan 'people,' against the elite, and against the US' sphere of influence. In bringing those who have not historically wielded power before to do so, and in fighting US domination, Chavismo is enacting a form of justice, and is thus both legitimate and moral in its exercise of power (see chapter 5 and 6). This moral principle seeks to right wrongs and is willing to castigate those who it feels have committed them historically. I discuss this further in the next sections.

Ideas of 'the people' are thus at the centre of the contended understandings of legitimacy, democracy, and the moral exercise of political power, as I discuss in chapter 5, 6 and 7—hence why, among other things, I contextualise the divide as 'populist.' I note, however, the groups interviewed are reflecting on Chavismo's legitimate use of political power from outside Venezuela's territory; though Venezuelan migrants have been subject to it, at least in the past. Legitimacy, however, in more practical terms, is not only awarded by those subjected to a government. Fellow nation-states, and all kinds of transnational organisations legitimise and delegitimise governments—Amnesty International is a good example. President Maduro's government does enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of Russia and China, and in many other countries in the Global South. This international aspect of legitimacy, or put differently, "that national communities are not the exclusive source of political legitimacy in the global realm" (Peter 2017), is what theorists call 'political cosmopolitanism.' It has a real impact on governance, especially in the Global South. It is from losing legitimate face in the eyes of the West, that heavy sanctions are being waged against Venezuela. That political cosmopolitanisms *matter* is evidenced in the importance governments assign their 'external validators,' as discussed in chapter 3.

In chapter 8, I describe how Venezuelan migrants resent the fact that solidarity activists give their opinion on Venezuela's affairs, in part, because they 'can come and leave as they please' [interview with César, 2019] and (most) are subjects of powerful rich nations. This appears, at first, to be a political philosophy argument based on a type of political 'nationalism': because solidarity activists are not subject to Chavismo's policy choices, Venezuelans argue their opinions are invalid—and immoral. Only those that, in Locke's terms, consent to making the

body politic under a government, and are obliged to submit to its governmentality, *ought to* speak about its legitimacy and whether continued consent is warranted. And yet the fact that fifty countries do not consider Maduro to be legitimate—on their understanding of a breakdown of the democratic process—is surfaced by many Venezuelan migrants to support their claims of Maduro's illegitimacy. What elicits Venezuelans' resentment, and sometimes rage, is therefore not the post-hoc political 'nationalist' rationalisation of legitimacy, just described, but rather whether these international actors fundamentally agree with them or not. I discuss this significant contradiction further in chapter 8.

Today, Maduro continues to be a legitimate president for a small but highly important group of Venezuelan society, the military, who have benefitted monetarily from his government. Maduro's continued *de facto* presidency—very much despite sanctions against his illegitimacy—strengthens the widely accepted thesis that what matters for sustaining regimes is loss of legitimacy *within the ruling elite*. However, to secure his monopoly, Maduro has been forced to employ what Beetham (2011) describes as 'costly' coercion—a coercion many see evident in the numerous extrajudicial killings and repression of protests that his government has undertaken. Coercion can collapse rapidly, though, if actors lose the will to use it, or those who enforce it give themselves to the highest bidder (Beetham 2011); but we are yet to see if and how this plays out.

Moral judgement

Hume argued in his *Treatise of Human Nature* back in 1739, that our moral rationalisations have a strong emotional foundation. Darwin and Westermarck would follow in the 19th century, locating the origin of our morality to our instinctive feelings and our sociality (Pipatti 2019).

In *The origin and development of moral ideas*, Westermarck (1976 [1906]) in fact argued that moral feelings arise from two notions: our interpretation of an agent's intention, and conversely how we believe we would have acted, put in that same situation. For him, there are two basic moral feelings: those of approval and disapproval. Here Westermarck points at the distancing or boundary work done by moral emotions and their concomitant judgements: implicit in them is the idea that 'I' or 'we' would have acted similarly (or differently). Importantly Westermarck argues, taking from Hume, that we are naturally prone to evaluate acts as expressions of a

persons' 'nature' (what I have called 'essentialising'): i.e., that the object of moral judgement is not an action, but the intention behind it, "construed as an expression of the person's character" (Pipatti 2019, 29). I find this concept helps explain some of the dynamics and contradictions witnessed in the interviews, especially attributing an 'evil' nature to 'the other' based on a list of their actions.

Since the late-twentieth century there has been an increased focus in trying to understand how the association between emotions and morality operates. There is growing consensus on the idea that moral emotions are biologically wired: moral emotions elicit responses from neurotransmitters, neuroactive peptides, hormones and the autonomic nervous and musculoskeletal systems, as do other emotions (Stets and Turner 2006). More controversial for sociologists—Stents and Turner (2006) argue—is that emotional moral responses also seem biologically evolved. The fascinating work of Francs de Waal (1996, 1982) conducted on primates, shows they share rich moral emotive capacities: attachment, empathy, sensitivity to social rules, giving, avoidance of conflict, and also a desire for revenge when reciprocity is violated. For Stets and Turner (2006, 546) the difficulty for sociology lies in accepting that culture "expanded the range of situations activating moral emotions" but that the capacity and propensity for our moral emotions stems from "hominid and neuroanatomic evolved mechanisms." Crucially for this research, neuroscientists have found that our moral judgements are shaped by our "valuation of other people's social behaviour" and our affective links to them—in other words, that they are largely parochial, group-based and useful for boundary work (T. Singer et al. 2006, 466).

Psychologists have shown that acts understood as having harmful consequences, are universally considered to be 'wrong': judgements of dishonesties or illegal behaviours, for example, are negative—only a small amount of variance is explained by country and culture (Vauclair and Fischer 2011). This is how what is 'right' is argued and justified as 'universal', and why morality seems to give interviewees a sense of superiority. This reasoning develops at a young age: when harm is intrinsic to a specific act, children understand that the act is *universally* wrong, "even in another town or country and even if adults were to say the act was permissible" (Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993, 614). On the other hand, moral values such as obedience to family, authority, and sexual behaviour—where harm is not imminent—vary widely across culture (Haidt 2007). Importantly, we do not readily differentiate these two moralities.

Certainty, experience and positionality

From the interviews it seems that moral values, built on emotional association, provided a sense of stability or *certainty*; moral values assert meaning (Giner-Sorolla 2012). For Giner-Sorolla (2012, 35), it is only through affective associations that we can act upon our values; they form "the end-point concepts that anchor our beliefs about what is good and bad." Considering different positions with no emotional way to choose between them is incredibly taxing, and brings in *uncertainty*—for psychologists, an existentially threatening condition (Giner-Sorolla 2012). This was evident in the interviews: very few interviewees had recently changed their minds about the benefits or shortcomings of Chavismo.

Fundamental ideological change is rare, and 'often disruptive' (Homer-Dixon et al. 2013, 345). Advances in neuroscience, in fact, have shown that the brain responds to intellectual threats in the same way it responds to physical threats (Damasio 2001; Kaplan, Gimbel, and Harris 2016; Lamm and Singer 2010). Questioning our biases is useful, but most "prefer the certainty that derives from following our emotionally based attitudes" (Giner-Sorolla 2012, 36)—and these, in fact, hold benefits including resistance to colds (Fazio and Powell 1997) and being more decisive (Kraus 1995). Given Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck's (2016) findings on the relationship between vulnerability and support for populism, the idea of certainty becomes especially insightful in understanding how populism might become appealing to these groups, as I discuss in the last section.

Because moral emotions share cognitive, cultural and somatic elements, the habitus is also useful in describing deeply entrenched dispositions reiterated through practice. The habitus tends to "protect itself from crises and challenges" and so rejects "information capable of calling into question accumulated information" (Bourdieu 1992, 62). Both Ignatow (2009) and Sayer (2005) develop the idea of a 'normative orientation'—or 'ethical disposition' —of the habitus, a dimension that Bourdieu, as explained in the Methods chapter, famously overlooked. Ignatow (2009, 100) finds the concept of habitus particularly attractive because it can be seen, if adapted, as "a jumble of intertwined bodily-cognitive, bodily-social, and social-cognitive phenomena" so deeply engrained they are experienced as 'second nature.' Bourdieu's model also explains variation in moral dispositions according to social context (Sayer 2005).

I note that participants were keen to stress events from their lives that—they believed—had shaped their idiosyncratic moral and political positionality: Mack describes his experience in the Iraq war as guiding his anti-war sentiment; Liesel talks about how austerity was hurting fellow LGBT+ classmates. Bourdieu's habitus helps situate the weight of these experiences, although Bourdieu weighs *early* experiences more heavily than those of adolescence or later life that interviewees sometimes spoke of. This is not to say that actors do not sometimes modify their position, rather that presenting contradicting evidence produces significant cognitive dissonance and emotional distress.

I found there was clearly some *reflexivity* involved in privileging certain experiences over others in these 'internal conversations,' or explanations participants were giving themselves for their unique moral positions. In this sense, the analysis in Part II highlights an 'interpretative phenomenological' idea of morality and values, where they are shaped, justified or perceived of as stemming from certain lived experiences. This does not mean that they *necessarily* do stem from experience (many are indeed shared with the broader discourse on Chavismo and anti-Chavismo) rather, interviewees *reflect and narrate them in this way*. Their experience of injustice or inequality are sought out to strengthen and rationalise what I have defined as each of their positionality. As Bourdieu and Hauser (2006) argue, these positions/dispositions might already be there, but they appear nonetheless self-conformed. Idiosyncratic experiences are also partially explicative of the fact that many interviewees had parents and brothers or sisters with whom they profoundly disagreed with on the Venezuelan issue: certain life choices had led them to experience injustices in unique ways.

Moral logic and the moral qua political

Moral conflicts, such as the one evident in Venezuela's divide, are "an intrinsic, irremovable element in human life," writes Isaiah Berlin (Berlin 1997, 167). Similarly, from a philosophy critical of an individualistic and disembodied understanding of 'the moral,' Seyla Benhabib 1992, 125), writes:

> *Moral judgment is what we 'always already' exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitute our life together.*

Both Berlin and Benhabib speak to the gravitas of social life's moral dimension—a centrality largely overlooked in sociology, where there has been a tendency to view moral action as an external (reactionary) system of regulation (Sayer 2005, 9), or as subjective—a view at odds with structural explanations (Abbott 2020). The study of morality itself, as that which concerns invisibilised notions of 'right' and 'wrong,' was historically at the heart of sociological inquiry—prominently in the works of Durkheim and Weber. The past two decades have seen re-flourished interest, especially in what concerns its emotional bearings, however, sociologists interested in morality today, unlike psychologists and philosophers, have "few places to congregate that are explicitly defined by that interest" as the sociology of morality lacks an institutionalised subfield (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010; Harkness and Hitlin 2014; Sayer 2005).

The importance of morality in shaping concepts of ourselves and our groups, means sociology needs to address the moral practices of everyday effectively, if it is to understand how 'folk' sociologies and boundaries are built and sustained. I find that a particular problem with the results of those who do study morality (from both an individual and group perspective) is that the moral systems they 'find' depend on the moral questions they ask their research participants. Methodologically, sociological accounts do not seek to probe or prime specific answers to moral questions under specific circumstances, rather they seek to understand the ways in which morality becomes compelling in meaning-making, and an all-pervasive aspect of sociality. The few sociologists interested in morality have documented the diversity of moral systems as shared by co-nationals, working class cultures (Sayer 2005), gendered forms, and religion. They have shown that it is, indeed, central to understanding group formation (Lamont 2010, vi), though there is still a wide gap in the field.

By morality I mean very broadly a system of beliefs based on embodied principles of 'right' and 'wrong' that bear on the welfare of others. The 'lay moralities' I tend to here, concern how interviewees—non-moral philosophers—believe "the world *ought* to be" (Prinz 2007, 1) and their normative rationales. In this sense my task, much like with legitimacy, is entirely *de*scriptive—not *pre*scriptive. I take moral beliefs to be values, to the extent that serve to guide, justify or rationalise our choices and positions, and characterise what we find to be 'right' and therefore *meaningful*. For Schwartz (1992, 1) who built an influential scheme for classifying values, these are ranked hierarchically both by individuals and culture. They are the 'criteria' against which we evaluate others but also ourselves. I take a 'Humean' perspective that sees

moral values as intimately tied to affect, emotion and feeling, taking from a number of sociologists and moral psychologists that see corresponding moral *judgement* as interrelated to intuitive cognitive and embodied processes (Prinz 2007; Lukes 2008; Sayer 2005; Ignatow 2009; Cohen 2014; Giner-Sorolla 2012). It is with an emphasis on value priorities that I refer to 'lay morality' as a 'system' of values.

For the purposes of the analysis in the chapters that follow, I make an all-important distinction between what I understand for 'morality' and 'moral *logic*,' taking from Giner-Sorolla (2012) and Elster (2005). Beliefs based on 'true' morality (or what Elster calls moral 'norms') *must* be equally upheld for all, i.e., they are "not conditional" (Elster 2005, 204)—the Universal Declaration of 1948 is a prime example. Morality reflects an 'everyday Kantianism' in "doing what would be best if everyone did the same" (Lukes 2008, 57). Crucially, Giner-Sorolla (2012) argues true morality is highly exacting to meet, and almost no person can put it into practice perfectly.

On the other hand, moral *logic*, or Elster's 'quasi-moral' norms, invoke the absolute nature and universal substance of morality for *parochial* aims (Giner-Sorolla 2012). To explain this difference, Giner-Sorolla (2012) uses the example of Nazi propaganda and its manipulative use of moral feelings to decry Germans as having been injured unjustly, and to justify their subsequent actions. Moral logic uses morality to stress the "'we' are good/ 'they' are evil" antagonism—populism's key trait. In Elster's (2005) conception, quasi-moral norms emphasise reciprocity: eye-for-eye reasoning, or conditional cooperation—not incidentally, one of the strongest displays of morality in primates (De Waal 1996). This distinction, and moral logic's 'use' of the premise of morality as universal, makes it easier in my view, to understand how populism's moral antagonising operates so successfully. (I describe this more fully below.)

This logic is most evident in the contradictions that stem from each groups' political position. Solidarity activists attack the opposition for being 'coup-mongers' and anti-democratic but celebrate Hugo Chávez's coup in 1992; Venezuelan migrants reject solidarity activists' opinions because they have not lived in Venezuela but are happy for other international actors who share their view to intervene in the country. Effectively, they are merely justifying their contempt for 'the other,' not demonstrating that they abhor coups, or intervention. Thus, there is an abuse of moral feelings at work (I note, specifically contempt and anger) when making an

appeal to specific injury and 'transcendence'—a bid that seeks to strengthen and elevate the in-group.

Nietzsche and 'boundary work'

I found it highly significant that solidarity activists have sacrificed important career opportunities because of their political position on Venezuela. To assume they are merely ideologically 'brainwashed' is simplistic: the transcendent dimension of what is 'good' above the material benefits of advancing their careers, solidifies a specific sense of self for them. It would appear morality *matters* a great deal to solidarity activists. Representing what is 'true' becomes a 'technology of the self' in Foucault's conception, if we take activists as acting on a particular moral order from which they evidently derive worth. There is also something highly compelling about maintaining a political position in the face of opposition, as one interviewee, Damien, describes: "the more of my opponents I anger, the more I feel like I'm doing the right thing" (see chapter 9).

I mentioned earlier that moral judgements of 'the other' are essentialising: we imagine people to be 'made' of 'substances' that are determinate (Lakoff 1996). In other words, participants imply that it is not just actions that are 'wrong'; actors themselves are. This is part of interviewees 'folk sociology' of the out-group, or 'the other.' For them, being 'wrong,' 'evil', 'immoral', conversely 'right,' 'virtuous,' 'moral' *constitutes* 'character,' i.e. it is predictive of how others will act subsequently (Westermarck 1976 [1890]).

The determinate aspect of this judgement might have been useful from an evolutionary standpoint, but it is, nevertheless, highly problematic. These specific assessments of 'the other' are reminiscent of Nietzsche's famous and controversial critique of morality as removed from any true measure of right or wrong, and rather a "free-floating expression of vengeful resentment against some (real or imagined) perpetrator" (Anderson 2017, n.p.). Nietzsche's 'cynical' or highly sceptical analysis of morality suggests that powerlessness engenders hatred against oppressors—a feeling he characterised as *ressentiment*, and key to understanding enmity and the evaluation of others (and things) as 'good/evil.' Although extreme, Nietzsche's ideas are useful to the extent they emphasise feelings of 'powerlessness' that are related to interviewees' moral logic. In the empirical chapters, I highlight how *both* groups feel powerless against those they emphatically appoint blame to—Chavistas and US/opposition, for

Venezuelan migrants and solidarity activists respectively. Nietzsche highlights the emotion of disgust as characteristic of this morality, useful to understand the extent to which groups felt viscerally 'repelled' by 'the other' (see chapter 8).

In understanding how certain grievances come to be experienced and felt by interviewees as 'wrongs' done to them, their vulnerability or 'powerlessness'—the feeling of being 'forced' out of Venezuela for Venezuelan migrants, and feeling their ideology is consistently marginalised for solidarity activists—*Self-Determination Theory* (STD) is particularly insightful. STC proposes three basic human psychological needs, applicable cross-culturally: *autonomy* ("self-endorsement of one's behaviour"), *competence* ("experiencing opportunities to exercise, expand and express one's capacities") and *relatedness* ("feeling socially connected") as indispensable aspects of psychological wellness of individuals that concerns the realisation of their potentials (Ryan and Sapp 2009, 76). In my analysis, I note how both groups seem to experience lack of competence: for Venezuelans the reduced ability to make material choices; for solidarity activists, the reduced ability to voice their political position, without experiencing career backlash. These feelings seem related to 'Nietzschean' powerlessness and concomitantly a moral judgement of 'the other' seen as responsible for that feeling. I find it important, however, to stress that suffering, harm or injustice, or the diminishment of well-being is *not* subjective. Our judgements might be 'fallible' and 'biased,' but damage can indeed be inflicted, even if we do not recognise it (Sayer 2005).

In-group/Out-group moral judgement

In understanding the appeal of boundaries, Brewer's (1999) work on reciprocal feelings of 'in-group love' and 'out-group hate' is also useful. Brewer (1999, 433) takes an evolutionary biology perspective that sees morality as arising from individuals' dependence on others' willingness to "expend resources to another's benefit." She takes group membership to be "a form of contingent altruism"; moral judgements stem from the paramount necessity to determine loyalty, trustworthiness, and to distinguish selfishness, psychopathy, and apathy—all detrimental to the group. Emotions are also fundamental to determine trustworthiness, vis-a-vis language: they are much harder to 'fake' (Giner-Sorolla 2012).

For Brewer (1999, 435), once groups become larger and depersonalised, cultural customs and institutions take on the character of "moral authorities"—although *how* institutions that

maintain in-group loyalty and cooperation 'take the character' of *moral* authorities—in other words, how these authorities derive legitimacy, is unclear in her work. When out-groups are seen to subscribe to different moral rules, "indifference is replaced by denigration and contempt," feelings that are expressed time and time again against 'the other' in the interviews. Taking from the Realistic Conflict Theory of intergroup relations (LeVine and Campbell 1972; Sherif and Sherif 1953), Brewer suggests out-group hostility is especially strong when groups are competing for resources or political power (as is the case in Venezuela). Importantly, given morality is purported as absolute and universal, resulting moral superiority is "incompatible with tolerance for difference" (Brewer 1999, 435); I return to the importance of this point in the next section on populism. Brewer hints at a study by Sidanius (1993), which she uses to conclude that "moral superiority provides justification or legitimisation for domination or active subjugation of out-groups" (1999, 435). Here I extend commentary on the significance of this, by suggesting that moral superiority is appealing to the extent that it elevates conceptions of the self and of the group, as well as instils psychological certainty. I note that Brewer's work is supported by what neuroscientists have found with regards to empathy: that it is "sensitive to deeply-rooted parochialism and in-group bias" (Chiao and Mathur 2010), the building blocks of deep divides.

Marx and historical-racial morality

Solidarity activists do not feel that diminishing the political and civil rights of the opposition—or outright repression of their opinions—is problematic, a feeling we can relate to the denigration and contempt that Brewer identifies against those deemed morally inferior. The feeling is especially contradictory given many of them were involved in the human rights campaigns against Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s, alongside Amnesty International, that is, these activists had been invested in defending political and civil rights previously.[28] Here, and in the subsequent chapters, I discuss two reasons for this disjunctive: 1) they question the veracity, methods and interests of human rights organisations today, including Amnesty and the UN

[28] I discuss this ideological contradiction more fully at the end of chapter 9.

(see chapter 9); and 2) their particular understanding of Venezuela's conflict as a racial-class struggle, sees the diminishing of the opposition's rights, as an enactment of justice, a retribution (see chapter 7). Put differently, they see in Chávez's and Maduro's governments an opportunity for "wrongs to be righted": for the power to be 'given back' to its 'legitimate' owners—specifically the brown and black poor of Venezuela.

Despite these expressions of moral judgement, Engels' and Marx' purported the explicit 'non-morality' of their dictums. For Lenin especially, 'philosophical idealism,' in its efforts to base socialism on ethics, posed significant danger to the socialist movement. These were ideas incompatible with a 'scientific' understanding of the 'laws' that govern capitalism and revolution (North and Kishore 2008)—laws that underpin historical advancement. Save extraneous interference, "communism [is] historically inevitable, and moral questions generally superfluous," as A. Levine (2019, 44) explains. Orthodox Marxists in fact called themselves 'scientific socialists' to differentiate themselves from those they saw appealing to justice—the so-called 'utopian socialists.'

Yet it is hard to doubt the idea that Marxism holds a powerful moral message (Lukes 1990a, 27): especially evident in the way solidarity activists justify their political beliefs. Scholars have in fact contested the idea that Marxism is devoid of moral content, using more 'modern' understandings of morality. For Peffer (1990, 9) the reason for Marx's reticence to morality was a "healthy reaction to the excessively metaphysical views" of his time. Marx and orthodox Marxists *were* in fact making a moral claim in their view of exploitation, class domination, alienation: all words which denote normatively objectionable actions—even when Marx did not develop a 'moral theory.' In other words, Marxists today are 'utopian socialists' "despite themselves" (A. Levine 2019, 47).

Marxism is "a morality of emancipation that promises communism as universal freedom from the peculiar modern slavery of capitalism," writes Lukes (1990a, 22). Marx's radical demands for an egalitarian distribution of freedom, as he understood it, suggests a specific deontology, i.e., a call of duty or obligation, according to Peffer (1990)—one which many solidarity activists I interviewed subscribe to. Socialism, as Lukes (1990a, 27) understands it, portrays itself as being primarily concerned with issues of justice; however, what is promised is not 'justice' and 'rights' but rather the conditions for emancipation that make them unnecessary. It is precisely this premise, and promise, of Marxism that solidarity activists reference when they describe

'hope' in Chavismo (see chapter 8). I note that in the Marxist tradition—unlike in Socialism of the XXI century—freedom can only be achieved through violent struggle, hence its consistent use of metaphors of war, and (like Schmitt), its "ingrained suspicion of compromise" (Lukes 1990a, 22).

One could argue solidarity activists defend stripping the opposition of civil rights because they seek not merely to change the 'economic base,' "but also the super-structural institutions and forms of consciousness that depend upon it" (A. Levine 2019, 53). The most effective way to do this, argue revolutionary Marxists, is via social revolution: the expropriation of proprietors and the ruling class. However, the prominent feelings of 'doing what is right,' and contempt for the opposition more specifically, suggest that this exclusion is not simply a reasoned acceptance of Marxist doctrine, but more powerfully a justification that stems from the idea of exclusion as a means for vindication. I term this 'historical-racial' moral logic: the objective suffering of poor brown and black Venezuelans is used to mark opposition members as racist and justify both their exclusion from the political system and a particular contempt towards them.

Espejo (2015, 74), in discussing populism's exclusionary logic, suggests that the hegemonic group considers itself *entitled* to exclude those who do not pertain to 'the people,' because for "the populist, 'the people' is not the actualisation of individual freedom and collective autonomy through the common recognition of each individual's freedom and equality." Espejo (2015), as I understand it, is implying populists do not consider individual rights to be collectively constitutive of 'the people.' I argue, more specifically below, that populists are concerned with the collective and individual rights of a *specific* 'people.' Their sense of entitlement seems to have more to do with: 1) the moral accusation made of those they want to exclude, one which gives them the upper moral hand; and 2) seeing exclusion as the means to enact justice for the 'true' people.

The problematic assumption the exclusionary logic makes is not simply that the middle-classes should endure repression of their political opinions, nor that it does not matter if the middle and upper classes are wronged—although these are of course highly problematic—rather, that all political opposition, in assuming it has been at some historic point 'privileged,' *should* be repressed on moral grounds. This precludes the possibility that those same impoverished brown and black Venezuelans, and indigenous populations, could in fact at some point, suffer at the hands of the Chavista government, or have serious concerns to voice

against it (as the UNCHR report suggests they do). I note that the opposition is not exempt from wanting to exclude 'the other' from the political system, as I describe in chapter 8: Marcos very frankly explains why he would exterminate all 'communists' for the damage that he believes they have 'done' to Venezuela. This is in part why I argue that *both* sides respond to this populist logic. Here I simply note a Marxist understanding of morality and justice, that I feel is highly relevant to the group of solidarity activists.

Populism as an analytical category

> It's not about Chavistas or anti-Chavistas, no [...] The patriots and the enemies of the nation. That's the historic battle in Venezuela today (Hugo Chávez, speech in San Carlos, January 10, 2003).

I contend, together with Samet (2019), that theories of populism are especially placed to help understand the nature of Venezuela's political divide and its polarised public sphere, but more importantly its *radical* aspect: the aspect which makes consensus prohibitive from both sides. I have argued briefly in chapter 1 that in so far as the political subject in contention is an idea of 'the people' whom each side claims to represent; and to the extent that moral logic is used to engender an extremely intolerant view of 'the other', we have a populist divide that goes beyond the location of the actors in question. In this section, I expand on these theoretical ideas.

Populism's appeal has generally been explained (especially in the West) in relation to constitutional democracy's failings to deliver on its promises of broader equality in the context of globalisation and neoliberal hegemony (Urbinati 2019; Goodhart 2017). This is no doubt one prevailing factor at play, but the question of how populist moral appraisals are *appealing* from a subjective-collective standpoint, is never openly addressed in the political science literature on populism. That populism makes an antagonistic moral appraisal of politics is in fact one of

the very few definitional tenets that theorists today agree upon,[29] so this is really an impending fundamental question. The answer is assumed to be simply that they *are*: division and boundary drawing is appealing—and necessary—for group self-assertion. But the question is how are *moral* boundaries especially appealing?

Arlie Hochschild (2016) most notably, also Demertzis (2006, 2013); Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck (2016); and Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza (2017), are some of the few scholars that have been interested in understanding the emotional aspects of populism. There is growing consensus in what regards the 'emotionality' of populist politics, but relatively little empirical work to show for it (Müller 2016). I contend that to understand the appeal of populism's 'moral' politics, we also need to understand the appeal of morality in politics—more specifically moral judgement—tasks traditionally handed over to philosophers, and more recently, moral psychologists.

Specifically, that moral judgements and boundaries are particularly *meaningful*, is an important aspect of populism that needs to be explored, if we are to consider Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck (2016) findings that populism is especially attractive to those feeling most vulnerable in society. Questions such as how moral appraisal is experienced remain largely out of the scope of theoretical accounts of populism—the leadership (or top-down) and state-centric approaches that have dominated this literature do not readily ask these questions.

Sociology and social psychology seem better placed to analyse populist/moral variations between groups, uncover populist/moral frameworks and their social consequences, and explore its phenomenological aspects. Indeed, a partial answer, although removed from populism theory, can be found in the work of sociologist Michele Lamont (2000, 3), who, in looking at the experiences of both white and black working-class men in America and France, concludes that morality functions "as an alternative to economic definitions of success and offers them a way to maintain dignity and to make sense of their lives in a land where the

[29] See Ramiro and Gomez 2017; Elchardus and Spruyt 2014; Pauwels 2014; Rooduijn 2014; Stanley 2008; Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Michael Wuthrich and Ingleby 2020; Mudde 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015

American dream is ever more out of reach." She then describes how morality is used to engage in 'boundary work'—between imagined communities of those 'like me.'

The meanings of populism

To use the concept of populism analytically is problematic in that its meaning has been abused extensively. Everything from the ranks of messianic leaders of the calibre of Perón, to the auto-reflexive intellectuals of Podemos in Spain, the indigenous movement of Morales in Bolivia, the socialist *narodnichestvo* in nineteenth century Russia, even the semi-deity figure of Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, India, have all been labelled 'populist.' The fact that populism has historically been hard to map on the one-dimensional spectrum, has aided the plethora of definitions. Labelling such diverse movements as 'populists' seems to be an instinctual, rather than intellectual pursuit—'excitable speech' to quote Judith Butler (1997).

In twentieth-century theories of Latin American populism it has been used to describe:

1) stages of development (Tella 1965; Germani 1974);

2) clientelistic and short-term public policy, especially one which appeals to the urban and rural poor (O'Donnell 1979; Cardoso and Falter 1979);

3) a political strategy (Weyland 2001);

4) a charismatic leader (Conniff 1982; Drake 1978; Burbano de Lara 1998).

Furthermore, 'lay' definitions of populism tend to have impending pejorative connotations: the idea that populism 'simplifies' politics, or that it is 'mere rhetoric,' or that it is 'of the masses,' also populism's association with weak governmental institutions, "cheap emotionalisms," crises of representation, and personalistic authoritarian leaders, have all contributed to seeing the concept in a negative lens (Comaroff 2009, 9). Unfortunately, these associations also obscure the term's utility. Specifically, the negative overtones mask the tightrope relationship between populism and the democratic principle of popular sovereignty through which it is legitimised (Worsley 1969; Samet 2013; Urbinati 2019; Espejo 2015)—in other words, that populism is based on aspects of democracy, even if it can and many times does, subvert it.

I approach populism here, instead, as a polarising political logic from 'the ground-up'. In this, and taking from several theorists,[30] I focus on trying to understand what populism *does* and how it appeals to collective thinking—importantly for this research, collective thinking that transcends borders and coerces increasingly polarised discourses in the public sphere or political environment. Populist logic articulates a series of shared grievances (real and perceived) to frame politics as a *moral* conflict—a conflict powerful enough to question the legitimacy of institutions. It partitions the political field between those who have been wronged, 'the people,' the central political subject it claims to represent, against those responsible for those wrongs (generally an elite) (Samet 2019; Laclau 2007). In so doing, it asserts the moral superiority of one people over the other, therefore debasing any vision of pluralism (De la Torre 2015).

Populist and moral logic

For Samet (2019) (also Martín-Barbero 1993), 'the popular' is the concept with "greatest salience" for Latin American Studies. As an adjective, 'popular' is said to mean that which is prevalent or current among the general public (Oxford Dictionary). It also refers to that which is relating to, deriving from, or consisting of "ordinary people or the people as a whole," as well as "generated by the general public; *democratic*" (emphasis added), definitions that hint at the consensus of a majority, and a latent ambiguity between 'the ordinary' and 'the whole people.' 'Ordinary' carries the stigma of being unimpressive, normalised, generic.[31] In this vein, one of the most pertinent definitions of 'popular' as related to 'populism,' is that which is "intended for or suited to the understanding or taste of ordinary people as opposed to specialists in a field"—an antagonism or opposition most populist theorists emphasise. The Oxford Dictionary also presents two obsolete definitions of 'popular': "of low birth, plebeian"; and also "vulgar, coarse, ill-bred"—meanings that trace a historical association of 'popular' with lower

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30 Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015; Samet 2019; Urbinati 2019; Laclau 2007; Stanley 2008; Hawkins 2010

31 Fernando, a solidarity activist interviewee from Australia, explicitly challenges the semantics of the word 'ordinary', which he dislikes, and calls working-class Chávez supporters 'extraordinary.'

economic class and disenfranchisement from the political system, not coincidentally depending on the context, also a majority that shares in some form of collective grievance.

Scholars who take a top-down or 'supply' approach, i.e. those who have looked exclusively at leader discourse, have termed this the 'Manichean' logic of populism, which pities 'incorrupt' people against an 'evil' elite (e.g. de la Torre 2015; Hawkins 2010). These terms, although accurate, miss the extent of genuine discontent at the heart of populism, which I argue makes moral appraisal *imminent* in seeking retribution in a larger segment of the population.

Populist views of legitimacy and political power, as I've argued, coerce the 'pool' of ideas about the social world and the public sphere—including those of rights, power, democracy, 'the people,' legitimacy, and even race—into zero-sum where no middle ground is possible. In the populist logic of 'us and them,' 'the people' emerges from the identification of a common perpetrator of wrongs—a moralised enemy: they who have 'not cared.' For Urbinati (2019, 14; 77-78) this is, in fact, a process of 'ethnicisation' as well: the substitution of the 'whole' of the *demos* ('the people' conceived constitutionally) with one of its 'parts', i.e., the alleged 'good' part, which leaders "purport to incarnate" by sharing in "some social or ethnographic condition."[32]

Identifying power in a particular act assumes "that it is *in the exerciser's or exercisers' power* to act differently (Lukes 2005, 57). It is this attribution of intentionality or neglect that signals populism's *moral* conception of power. Populist logic as Tilly (1991, 592–93) explains, taking from Lukes (2005), favours a radical conception of power: when X exercises power of Y—even in an unconscious or indirect way—X blocks the realisation of Y's true interests. I argue that, to the extent that Y's true interests are blocked *intentionally* or via *neglect*—which is the accusation interviewees make of 'the other'—power is seen as immorally exercised. It is in this way that populism effectively de-legitimises political opposition. Unlike the cases of subordination that interest Lukes (2005), i.e. where conflict is lacking, populism articulates a verdict: it locates power to *instil* conflict. It assumes X has purposefully or neglectfully blocked Y's interests to foment outrage and draw a (moral) boundary.

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[32] See Subbiah 2020, for a discussion on the use of the term 'ethnopopulism.'

Assigning intentionality therefore seems key to populist discourse. Cushman (2015, 97) discusses folk theories of 'intentionality' in moral evaluation extensively, taking from Jean Piaget: that is, how "we restrict condemnation to 'intentional' harms"[33] vis-à-vis lack of control, which generally suggests harm was not premeditated. Cushman (2015) also differentiates another key aspect of our moral evaluations, what he terms *negligent* harm in: where harm is not intended but "could have been prevented with further care" (Cushman 2015, 100). As I mentioned earlier, both accusations of blame and especially lack of care, were prominent on both sides of the interviews (see chapter 9). In essentialising 'the other' as immoral, moral logic is again assuming ill-intention as a determining feature of 'the other's' behaviour. It predicts that 'the other's' future actions will *by nature* be immoral, and hence it evades continuous deliberation or reflection on its own position. This is, not incidentally, why Coronil (2008) calls 'divides' the "rule of the stereotype"—a rule which dismisses any form of rapprochement: negotiation with 'wrong' is also seen as 'wrong'.

As I describe in chapter 8, interviewees speak of the added value of 'doing what is right,' a deontology in the face of others that do not. It brings an 'ego-boost' or moral superiority, that I tie to the appeal of populist politics. In the case of interviewees—coming from different socio-economic backgrounds but mostly college educated—I will argue that moral logic is a performative aspect of 'boundary work,' yet here the logic serves not as an alternative to economic success, as it does for Lamont's (2000) working-class interviewees, but rather as a claim to a particular 'truth' or knowledge of what is 'good' and what is 'wrong' that enhances the self and the in-group.

In understanding this appeal, I take from Žižek's (1989) (Marxian) critique of ideology, which insists that, for it to take hold, ideology needs to be presented and accepted as *not* ideological: in other words, it needs to stand as representative of True and Right, or that which is too "sacred to profane by politics" (Sharpe 2020, n.p.). We make *others* subjects of 'ideologies,' not ourselves. Indeed, as I have noted, for interviewees, the political position on Maduro's claim to legitimacy is not 'political' it is *beyond*, or much graver than politics—it is moral. We can take

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[33] I note Westermarck had already emphasised this aspect of moral judgement in the 1890.

Žižek's (1989) understanding of ideology as a type of 'folk sociology': an explanation we attribute to others' political behaviour, not ours, given the pejorative sense we bequeath the term. This is indeed the idea that Venezuelan migrants have of solidarity activists and their socialist concerns: that ideology blinds their reasoning on what occurs in Venezuela.

For Žižek (1989), then, ideologies (and what I think of as political positions) do not simply 'brainwash': they allow people to flirt with conscious distance to their ideals. Indeed, we could argue part of the reason participants were critical of their respective political leaders, was because participants were partaking in what Žižek (1989) terms "ideological disidentification": they voice criticism as an assertion of their distance or independence from full allegiance to a faction. In my view, more substantively, their criticism of their own faction is a reflexion of their position as moral, and not political: interviewees feel able criticise their leaders (who can be mistaken) without this meaning they need to abandon their position on the broader issue (which cannot be mistaken, given they are positions based on ideas of what is 'right,' 'valid,' 'true'). Their positions purport universalism and transcendence by definition, so allow little space for relativism, plurality, or tolerance.

The emotional certainty gained from holding the superior moral position—seen as 'transcendent' or 'true'—I would argue, is particularly appealing for those feeling vulnerable in society, namely those who, according to Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck (2016) are more susceptible to engaging in populist politics. Moral logic is therefore one of the key difficulties in overcoming Venezuela's radicalised divide. In thinking about how this is self-reinforcing, Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus' and its binding dispositions is useful. The idea that divides become perpetuated and entrenched is in line with neuroscientific accounts that look at the importance of emotion in resisting change to one's beliefs, change that produces significant cognitive dissonance (Kaplan, Gimbel, and Harris 2016), and highly negative psychological uncertainty (Giner-Sorolla 2012).

Transnational Populisms

One of Laclau's (2007) most persuasive arguments, is that for the definition of populism to be useful as an analytical category, it must transcend specific incarnations. In other words, any definition that turns to a policy, strategy, or politician as defining trait, is weak or rather not sufficiently abstract for conceptual generalisation.

For Laclau (2007), populism is and must therefore be described as a 'political logic,' as I have suggested taking from this idea. Laclau omits the moral or emotional aspects of the logic, instead describing it as one that enables a set of *heterogenous* demands and needs of a constituency to be *homogenised* through an 'equivalence,' i.e. an amassing of those demands into one problem (say immigration), or person (say Obama), or group (say, the Jewish people). This homogenisation creates a sense of unity, and in some cases an identity against an 'other.' Laclau takes this argument to the extreme by saying *all* politics make an equivalence of demands and therefore all politics are populist—a claim many have argued defeats the purpose of abstracting what the concept is in the first place.

Other scholars, known as ideational theorists, have asked instead whether populism is a full or thin ideology (Cass Mudde, most famously). Their debate is, in my view, centred around different understandings of the 'site' of populism, in other words, *what* gives rise to populism. For those that believe that populism is a worldview, an ideology, or a set of ideas, discourse emerges from the *leaders'* view on his or her political and social world. Ideas stemming from the leader are communicated, 'absorbed,' and are then defended or rejected. Scholars that instead understand populism as a logic (Laclau, Mouffe, Samet), locate the grievances, or demands of a group as the catalysts for populist movements. Both understandings of populism are not necessarily opposed to each other: Laclau's more abstract definition accounts for the circumstances of discontent that make certain discourse attractive. It is therefore more suited to studying the 'demand' side of populism this research tends to.

I argue that populist moral logic helps explain the *extent* of the intolerance that takes centre-stage in this research. That is not to say that *all* extreme intolerance is populist (although Laclau might want to argue this). Rather, that in claiming to represent the will of a certain '*good* people,' populism demonises 'the other,' and eliminates any need or desire for consensus or rapprochement. What is perhaps more pertinent theoretically: this abstract and open conceptualisation allows us to explore the radical and antagonistic aspects of the two discourses in a *transnational* context. In centring our understanding of populism on the *logic* that sustains ideas of 'the moral people vs the other,' the analysis transcends any domestic political sphere. Put differently, it allows us to examine the reasoning behind discourses that emerge from transnational debates.

Both sides, as I discuss more vividly in chapter 7, feel that they are somehow part of that 'good people,' regardless of their current geographical location. For solidarity activists, there is an understanding that they are part of the grieved global working class, as I discussed briefly in chapter 3, and discuss more fully in chapter 7. Nevertheless, the grievances of the global working class are not in contention—at least not in the interviews centred around the topic of Venezuela. One could see how the grievances of the global working class against the international corporate elite, could potentially represent a transnational populist discourse, though not discussed here. Solidarity activists' discourse is however never anti-corporatist, as we could expect it to be; it is always anti-American above anything else.

Having said this, I note that discourses on both sides are clearly still anchored to a particular location, Venezuela. The understanding of a 'people' is never truly divorced from its place of origin—although as I've noted solidarity activists will argue that they are somehow part of a 'global' working-class. Effectively then, although solidarity activists and Venezuelan migrants are dispersed around the globe, their discourses express ideas and feelings about a specific Venezuelan 'people' and the space those particular people inhabit.

Populism, Legitimacy and the aversion to compromise

What seems clear is that democracy and its mechanisms do not resolve the tension between social and economic inequalities (brought about by market capitalism), and the promise of equal citizenship and voice (Beetham 2011, 1422). These rights are, and historically have been—as evident in the way they were contested when they were first brought forth in the Universal Declaration—always in contention. Populism, in seeking to resolve this tension, promises to remove the interests of 'the elites' and instate the legitimate will of 'the people.' In so doing, populism accepts only one 'true people' and presents only one will—irretractable and infallible. What I see as a particularly 'populist' understanding of legitimacy is not widely accounted for in political theory discussions on legitimacy: the degree to which the government or leader *symbolises* a particular version of that 'true people.'

Dichotomies of apathy-care, friend-enemy, right-wrong, embed 'boundary work' and sustain and deepen radical divides, including the one I tend to in this thesis. The friend-enemy dichotomy (that Chávez himself defends in the quote at the beginning of this section) was introduced as that which *defines* 'the political' by the controversial Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt,

liberalism undermines politics to the extent that it seeks to substitute the inherent struggle of legitimacy with procedure or the law (Mouffe 1999; Strong 2007). For him, any solution to this struggle that rests on compromise, i.e., brought forth by 'liberal' democracy, can never be final and can never advance democracy's claims of equality because it will be prey to perpetual discussion (Strong 2007, xiv). The influential political theorist of Nazi Germany, instead, underlines that it is only through the identification of a common enemy as a political group (that is, not as individuals), that 'we' can come to understand what 'our' interests are. He states: "Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence" (Schmitt 2007 [1932], 27). Conflict is for Schmitt, Laclau and Mouffe, *inherent* to politics—an idea related to Lenin's (1996) converse understanding of pacifism's (also "democracy's") ability to obscure the contradictions of imperialism "and the inevitable revolutionary crisis to which it gives rise" (Lenin 1996, n.p.).[34]

Schmitt underscores the 'high stakes of politics' that populism seems to be vying for, but contrary to interviewees, for him the political is *beyond* the moral: moral claims, in his view, deny "the finality of death in favour of an abstract universalism," which he was vehemently against (Strong 2007, xvii). This was because Schmitt (of all people) recognised—much like Adorno (2001) and Butler (2005) —the potential that claims to *universal* good have for violence: "the adversary is no longer called an enemy but a disturber of peace [...] thereby designated to be an outlaw of humanity" (Schmitt 2007, 79). Any universal ethical claim acquires a "repressive and violent quality" says Adorno (2001, 17), in its failure to reformulate changing social and cultural conditions, adds Butler (2005). Marcos' logic (chapter 8) again, stands out as a stark example of this violence: he had little qualms about wanting to exterminate *all* communists, because he saw them as a disease inimical to the entire humanity.

I note that even when Schmitt seeks to avoid a moral vis-a-vis a political boundary, such distinction is limited to his own theoretical abstraction: the friend-enemy dichotomy is most convincingly *felt* against the moral character of another, rather than on 'political,' or

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34 That Lenin writes "democracy" in quotations, is suggestive of his scepticism of the idea.

'ideological' grounds. As Giner-Sorolla (2012, 2) contends, the Reich, drew on "the passions of the unjustly wronged and humiliated"—like all ideologies in Žižek's (1989) view, and I contend all populisms. It extolled a concern with morality, which was graver, and purportedly more universal, than that of ideology or even identity. The claim to moral rightness appeals to what is believed to be the (more meaningful) 'higher' plane of universal justice, or truth, placing it at odds with tolerance and compromise.

Populist logic takes on Carl Schmitt's politically appealing but contentious exhortation: it assumes a dyadic 'friend-enemy' society, divided amongst those who wield power and those who don't; those injured and those responsible for those injuries; a 'right' and a 'wrong' people. Laclau (2007) characterises this as populism's charismatic claim to legitimacy, a legitimacy very often based on ethnicisation. For solidarity activists, Chávez and Maduro are understood to be the 'rightful' heirs to power, inasmuch as they represent the poor brown and black people of Venezuela, who are the majority; indeed, this is central to the admiration (a moral feeling) solidarity activists share for these leaders. Urbinati (2019, 63, emphasis added) suggests populism "wants the large majority *alone* to be represented, because (it believes) this is the only *legitimate* part." Its legitimacy is constructed on the belief that it represents and serves the *volonté general* of that people and is thus not 'imposed' (like elite rule is). I argue it also legitimised in the way it enacts justice: it takes from those that 'have had' power and abused it to give it back to its 'rightful' owners.

Although Mouffe (2000) does not address populism directly in her essay on democratic agonism, we can see how she might defend (alongside Schmitt, Laclau, and Lenin) that its discourse animates necessary conflict for social transformation, or the way Laclau defines populism as politics *itself* in its fight for legitimate use of power. Mouffe (2000, 14) who accepts that power relations are "constitutive of the social," argues that the goal of (democratic) politics is *not* simply to eliminate power (and therefore conflict) through deliberation—as some of her contemporaries want to argue (Rawls, Habermas, Benhabib)—but rather "how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values," and therefore more legitimate (Mouffe 2000, 15). For her (2000, 15), the key is 'agonism': the conflict of legitimate adversaries, i.e., one who we combat but not someone we need to destroy and one "whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question." This, she notes, stands in contrast to 'antagonism': the struggle between enemies. For Mouffe (2000, 16) these adversaries share "adhesion to the ethic-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality." The crucial difference

between populist logic and her political 'agonism,' therefore lies in *the conception of the adversary as one who shares in the two 'most important' values at stake* (liberty and equality), which makes them still a part of the larger 'us.'

Where and how to draw adversarial lines without falling into moral logic is unfortunately unclear. I argue that in populism, the boundary built against immoral opponents precludes them from being respected as legitimate adversaries: it puts into question their right to defend their own ideas. If legitimacy is the extent to which a regime can be *justified*, its 'ultimate justification' will always be a moral claim, by nature categorical and grave. Furthermore, the more a regime becomes contested (the more power it demands), the more it appeals to these 'transcendental' logics. The empirical chapters that follow lend support to the idea that once the conflict is laid bare in moral terms, it becomes impossibly hard to dismantle, plea for negotiation, or ask for dialogue.

Part II

Chapter 5. The battle for democracy

Cameron, a long-serving British MP, has been interested in Latin America ever since he was elected to office, when certain groups approached him to discuss what had been going on in Venezuela and the social gains of Chavez's Bolivarian revolution. Although he's never visited Venezuela—because, he admits shyly, he is terrified of flying—he says he was "impressed frankly with the progress that had been made there under Hugo Chavez" in terms of "poverty reduction, eradication of illiteracy, investment in healthcare and decent housing":

> Obviously, Maduro is not Hugo Chávez, but nevertheless he's won another election, it was an open election, and I know that some of the opposition decided to boycott it but, in the end, they weren't prevented from standing. And I think the reason, in my opinion, they didn't field candidates was that they didn't think they could win, and by boycotting it, I think it felt it gave them the sort of opportunity to attempt to occupy some sort of mythical moral high ground, by suggesting that the elections weren't a fit and proper process. But I know that when Jimmy Carter had actually observed elections in Venezuela, he'd actually described that as the safest elections anywhere in the world.

Cameron wants me to know, firstly, that Maduro won the last presidential election fair and square. Although Cameron insists that he does not view Latin America with "rose-lensed spectacles", and that the Chavez administration has, in his view, taken a "number of wrong turns," all in all, Chavismo had been elected by a majority into power, yet again in 2018.

In contrast, Reynaldo Trombetta writing for *the Guardian* (23 May 2018)—to the chagrin of Cameron and many solidarity activists—states "Venezuela has fallen to a dictator."

Where does this profound difference of opinion reside? Ideas of democracy are, as any widespread understanding of a political concept, varied amongst my interviewees but largely similar within the two groups: non-Venezuelan solidarity activists and Venezuelan migrants. Even the academic literature ensnares itself debating the term, so this comes as no surprise. Broadly speaking, Venezuelan migrants I interviewed feel their country has been taken over by a dictatorial repressive regime, a story consonant with the international media's narrative; solidarity activists I interviewed, on the other hand, feel that the Bolivarian Revolution is a grass-roots participative democracy, that is constantly threatened by the US and an undemocratic opposition.

Defining Democracy

Twenty-two-year-old Jack, a young black-British solidarity activist, supporter of Jeremy Corbyn, explains his understanding of Maduro's governance:

> So yeah, I think Maduro seems like an ordinary reasonable guy. And he isn't a tyrant, because his authority does not come from just having control over the police. His authority comes from the hundreds of thousands of people who go out on the streets for him, the ordinary people who go out and say, we support the party, we support the revolution, that's where his support comes from.

Jack is effectively describing what political legitimacy means to him: Maduro's "authority" is framed in terms of popular sovereignty—often confounded with democracy—the support of 'ordinary people' on the streets who vouch for him as a representative of their will. The tell-tale sign he is not a tyrant.

A minimal definition of democracy, on the other hand, according to David Runciman (2018), "says simply that the losers of an election accept that they have lost." The definition's simplicity presupposes an electoral process deemed fair by all groups involved in the contest for state power—especially those that must accept they have lost. Taking this minimal definition at face value, democracy is unable to flourish in Venezuela: the majority of the opposition is unwilling to accept the results of any contest given it believes it has grounds to distrust the arbiter and the system in general. The central question becomes, why would Cameron and other solidarity activists from countries outside of Venezuela defend Maduro's government as a democracy when the legitimacy of the last presidential election is so seriously questioned by the most important international organisations?

The fact is most of us defend democracy as, if not the ideal, at least the "worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time," to quote Churchill's famous remark. So, it is not surprising both groups purport to stand behind it. William Crotty (2005, 5) writes: democracy "has no ideological rivals" given it is "universally invoked (if not always put into practice) to justify regimes or their actions." He then adds: "democracy sets the standards and terms of debate as to how nations are to be viewed and dominates the contemporary political landscape." The intrinsic and related notion of 'majority rule,' so appealing to populism, has come to be seen in the last century as the most 'just' and 'moral' form of overturning 'collective power' to a particular elected representative. It is democracy's ability to be deemed fair and representative that has led to its 'universal' invocation as the most legitimate way for a few to exercise power. Democracy has also been seen as "the only sustainable legitimate order compatible with the conditions of market capitalism," and increased popular demands of inclusion in political processes—with the exception of China (Beetham 2011, 1422).

For Cameron's defence of Chavismo to be considered legitimate, regardless of what he admires of Chavismo's ideology, he needs to defend what he understands are Chavismo's *democratic* credentials first. As an elected representative, Cameron stands to lose moral ground if he were accused of supporting a dictatorship. For him, President Maduro is still popular with the majority of the electorate. President Maduro's government is legitimate, in Cameron's eye to the extent that a majority, the popular sectors of Venezuela, i.e. "the people," stand with Maduro and the Bolivarian Revolution. Here lies the crux of the factual disagreement between

both groups of interviewees irrespective of their ideologies: how does the majority actually stand?[1] As it did in the election? Or as it does in the polls?

Although Venezuelan migrant genuinely believe that solidarity activists' continued support of the Maduro government mean they are: "crazy," "in for the money," or "blinded by their ideology," the reality is, I hope to show, exponentially more complex. Activists' ideas about democracy in Venezuela reflect a belief that Chavismo represents the 'will of the people'—not any 'people' as I discuss in the next two chapters: those who have been excluded by prior political regimes, i.e. the poor brown majority. Hence why Maduro's governance is both legitimate and moral, as I discussed in previous chapter.

For solidarity activists, the opposition did not participate in recent elections simply because they believed they would lose. For Mack, a young American journalist and war veteran from Iraq, who covered the deadly protests in 2017, it is this knowledge of their inability to win that drives them to protest violently:

> When I was there last year, they knew at that point that the election was coming up, that's why the protests were happening, because they knew that if they went to a presidential election, Maduro was just going to win again. So they never intended to be able to take power democratically. And they also know that they can't take power by force because they tried that in 2002, they tried that in 2014; they are incapable on their own of taking power by force. So in my view, from the very beginning, the protestors understood that their strategy was to create enough of an international crisis and spectacle that there's foreign intervention that removes Chavismo from power. And so, they couldn't do it democratically, they couldn't do it by force, the only option to get Chavismo out of power is international interference.

The opposition has lost all but two elections in the past 20 years, though only two solidarity activists were aware of the unusually high levels of abstention in this election and the one in 2017. At 46 percent, the presidential election of 2018 was the most poorly attended election in

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[1] It is interesting to note that in the computational sentiment analysis conducted on the articles published by HOV, the word 'majority' was prominent in the texts and associated with the feeling of joy, see Appendix C.

Venezuela's history. To put this in context, previous presidential turnouts have averaged 79 percent. The opposition had called for abstention, but it is hard to attribute any kind of political will to that number; it could equally represent growing apathy towards the system. Those two solidarity activists argue that 54 percent is a normal abstention rate when compared to Western countries, and that President Maduro cannot be delegitimised, or overturned because of it.

Activists defend the idea that democracy exists in Venezuela because it is understood as the only legitimate way to govern in today's modern politics—but democracy, in their understanding, is not liaised to the political freedoms of 'liberal' democracy: press, religion, assembly, speech, etc. This does not mean that solidarity activists' concept of democracy is narrowed down to elections, rather that 1) when a state represents "the will of the people," understood as a majority, it is legitimate and democratic—in other words, for them popular sovereignty (Hawkins 2010; Samet 2019) and democracy are equivalent; and 2) that as long as rival political parties compete—i.e. there is purported 'agonism' amongst adversaries—elections are valid enough to constitute a democratic state.

As mentioned, solidarity activists also see democracy as giving the traditionally excluded a political voice:

> There are huge levels of inequality still there. And so that's five-hundred years of oppression. And that's what Chávez is having to deal with. You can't deal with that in perfectly straightforward so-called democratic ways. You have to use as much democracy as you can, but you also have to make decisions, which not everybody is going to agree with. And unless we have that kind of revolutionary attitude to dealing with the problems, not only of deep poverty, but of the planet, we're not going to fix things. See what a mess our democracy is here.

Here James—a seventy-plus white British writer-consultant—is arguing that it is seriously difficult to deal with inequality without some degree of authoritarianism, or "revolutionary attitude." For the greater good of dealing with inequality, the end justifies the means—in this case a slightly less consensual way of proceeding. In political theory, this argument is known as democratic instrumentalism, discussed in chapter 4. James' hint of the "mess our democracy is here," represents a generalised disillusionment with representative democracy in the West that Runciman describes as "tired, vindictive, paranoid, self-deceiving, clumsy, frequently ineffectual [and] living on past glories" (2018, 148), although I note Runciman's argument explores possibilities for the future of democracy, not just its demise.

James presents us with a central moral question: is preserving a certain ideal of democracy more important than fighting oppression and inequality? Phrased this way the answer seems straightforward (at least for some), no. But the question implies both a zero-sum game and a rather formalistic understanding of democracy: a procedural bureaucratic consensus. When we think about democracy in terms of the rights and responsibilities that it purports to grant the citizenry, the question that follows is why should political rights preclude equality overall—even if it takes slightly longer to achieve? As I discussed in the theoretical framework can there really be a better chance at equality, when specific political positions are targeted in the Venezuelan case, for example?

In describing a democracy they feel they *do not* have, some Venezuelan migrants, on the other hand, underline the ease with which the government is able to ban and also incarcerate its opponents:

> So this week they banned Guaidó for 15 years. This is crazy. Because firstly, those that are taking the decisions of the Comptroller General, should have been chosen by the National Assembly, and they weren't. They were chosen by this Constituent Assembly, which we all know is shi—crap. [...] the national assembly would have had to strip him of his parliamentary immunity first [...] but because they were rushed, the comptroller simply said he was disqualified.

The pro-Maduro Constituent Assembly, for Wilson a '*mamarrachada*,' loosely meaning 'crap,' appointed the comptroller who banned Guaidó from standing for 15 years because his "personal financial statements contained inconsistencies," according to an article on *BBC* (March 29, 2019). Because Maduro has taken over the judicial institutions by appointing members that are loyal to his government, he is able to control who can run against him. Wilson makes a political argument in regards to democracy's need for *true* agonism (where leaders emerge from the demands of constituents) rather than *constructed* agonism (where the opposition is hand-picked).

The voting system

When justifying their support for Maduro, solidarity activists were keen to stress that the Venezuelan voting system was infallible. Two solidarity activists were international observers

to the 2018 Presidential elections: not surprisingly the same two interviewees that were aware of the high abstention levels for those elections. They were genuinely shocked to read in the international press that no international observers had attended in 2018. James and Tim were both invited by the government to observe, but their presence was being ignored by the media—they complained. Both spoke with great confidence about what they felt was a fair election and a brilliant voting and auditing system. The media's omission of their presence added much to the scepticism they already held towards the *BBC* and more particularly towards the British newspaper *The Guardian*, who they and other solidarity activists feel is no longer left-leaning enough.

James tells me of his visit:

> The electoral system is the best I've ever seen. It's completely fraud proof, it's really, movingly brilliant. You know how it works. It's fabulous. And I really questioned how it works, and so and so forth, and the back-ups. No. It's brilliant.

James and Tim were 'international' and indeed went to 'observe' quite literally, but both are emotionally invested in a particular side of the Venezuelan conflict and defend one side of the narrative. Even if, James insists, he sought to speak with the opposition throughout election day, his position presumes that the opposition participated openly and fully in the election. Although they are not directly affected by the consequences of the government in power (one of the theoretical requisites that constitute the right to vote), it does not mean that they do not *feel* that they belong to a particular side of Venezuela's divide—both openly label themselves as Chavistas. Not being Venezuelan is therefore not enough of a pre-requisite to witness elections fairly; solidarity activists hold an ideological tie with the government's leaders—even despite any personal criticisms they may hold of them.[2]

Cameron, who has never been to Venezuela, paraphrases US Democratic ex-president Jimmy Carter's opinion (known for his role in observing elections) to support his view. According to Cameron, Carter said "Venezuela's electoral system was the best in the world." But the quote

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[2] I discuss these criticisms further in chapter 7.

is misrepresented. Jimmy Carter's foundation for the monitoring of elections, the Carter Center, states on their website:

> In 2012, I applauded Venezuela's use of electronic voting machines as exemplary in the world [...] That characterisation since has been misused by Nicolas Maduro to suggest a broad validation of Venezuela's election system as a whole and of subsequent elections that The Carter Center did not observe. In fact, The Carter Center and others routinely have expressed concern about government interference in recent electoral processes. The Carter Center has not observed elections formally in Venezuela since 2004 (*cartercenter.org*, posted February 4, 2019).

The end of the Carter Centre's statement reads: "This is a critical juncture for the Venezuelan *people* who are calling for democracy" (emphasis added). Carter's people "calling for democracy," alludes, we suppose, to the series of protests that took place in February 2019 (when this post was published). It implies that this (undefined) Venezuelan 'people,' and the Center itself, does not feel that Venezuela guarantees the rights protected by a properly-functioning democracy—an assumption that suggests a majority is against the government. As this quote shows, it is not only supporters of the government who use the "will of the people" to invoke legitimacy: both sides of the divide are invested in presenting themselves as the majority and therefore the most democratic, what I have argued is key in populist spheres. The Centre avoids saying explicitly that the elections are rigged; they simply express concern with the electoral process.

By quoting Carter, Cameron defends the notion that democracy—through fair elections—exists in Venezuela, a point that he uses to justify his political position on the country. For Cameron, Carter's personal political position is implicated in his decision not to observe elections in Venezuela: Carter refuses to grant credibility to the elections run by Maduro, not because Carter is concerned with the electoral process, but because Carter dislikes Maduro. For Cameron, this means there is no reason to believe that the elections are not credible

anymore.[3] Cameron is not ignorant of the fact that Carter has not validated, and not attended subsequent elections in Venezuela (as we could presume). Instead, Cameron believes ex-president Carter has turned partial to the opposition and is unwilling to support the elections in the country, or even simply observe them—least he finds out they are still fair. Solidarity activists, it seems, miss other integral aspects of the electoral process: fair airtime, opportunities to run for office, the impartiality of the arbiters and electoral council, among others. For solidarity activists, the Carter Centre's presumed political position on Venezuela—that coincides with the international narrative on the country—makes its accusations, its 'knowledge' of the elections invalid.[4] Their discourse is similar to that of President Maduro himself and the influence that he believes the US and the UK hold on the company *Smartmatic*: "That stupid guy, the president of *Smartmatic*, pressured to the neck by the gringos and the Brits" (*The Guardian* August 3 2019) he decried. In that televised speech in August 2019, Maduro unabashedly proceeded to vow that he would use the new Constituent Assembly to target his opponents.

For Cameron, it seems ex-President Carter has been duped into the media narrative that Venezuela is a dictatorial regime simply because supporting the Maduro government is seen as 'inappropriate,' and ends up being politically costly in the West. This aspect of radical divides, the way in which those who are emotionally invested in pertaining to one side, *feel* everyone is positioned on that divide, invites dismissal of all information as partial—be it from whatever international agency (the UN included). The questions remain: why did Carter decide to stop endorsing the electoral system? Could some aspects of the electoral process have changed from his initial endorsement? Solidarity activists do not seem to confront these questions—but when they do, activists appeal to a larger moral predicament, as I hope to argue further: the importance of standing against the US and representing the true 'people.'

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3 I tie the idea that my interviewees need to justify their position to others, to what Mercier and Sperger argue is their 'reason'—the evolutionary-adapted mechanism to persuade and justify actions to others—discussed in chapter 1.

4 I discuss the differing 'validities' of knowledge as the basis for opinion on Venezuela in chapter 7.

The fact that James and Tim were subsequently invited to the inauguration of Maduro's second term, and others were invited by the Venezuelan embassies in their respective countries, to attend functions and festivities, shows the extent to which some (though not all) solidarity activists enjoy certain privileges with the Venezuelan government—the sort of privileges that prime Venezuelan migrants to believe that solidarity activists are monetarily benefitting from Maduro's government. However, none of the interviewees had anything *material* to gain from supporting the government, a fact that makes their allegiance an important question for this thesis. As Chase explains:

> Some groups figured that Venezuela was going to be paying for the Solidarity Movement, and so they wanted a piece of the pie thinking that there was some financial value to it, which there wasn't. Venezuela, the country, never gave us a cent.

An interesting aspect of solidarity activists' support is that it hinges, and to an extent breaks, understandings of 'ideological' vis-a-vis 'national' identities and sense of belonging. Although solidarity activists are unaffected materially by the decisions that are made in Venezuela—a criticism that is often made of their strong support—they are invested in the fate of the Caribbean nation to the extent that it stands for certain ideological values that they hold dear, and that they see as part of their identity.

The Hybrid War

Because Venezuela is an oil country, the scenario of US intervention felt extraordinarily real to both groups of interviewees. With Donald Trump in charge, they had reason to believe it could happen: he explicitly mentioned that he would intervene several times (Borger *The Guardian* July 5th 2018).

Figure 6. Image of Trump attached to the emails requesting donations for VSC.

Solidarity activists therefore do not subscribe to the idea of a 'humanitarian' and 'human rights' crisis—terms that are frequently heard in press references to Venezuela. The distrust in the severity of the crisis underlies a belief that the opposition, and the US, needs this discourse of 'Venezuela is not a democracy,' or that in Venezuela human rights are systematically violated, to give the international community an excuse to force regime change (see Figure 6). In other words, the idea being sold by the media (that Venezuela is not just dictatorship, but needs humanitarian aid) is, according to them, an excuse to justify US military intervention.

For solidarity activists, it is the 'Hybrid War' that accounts for the economic meltdown, a product of US imperialism—anti-imperialism as a moral imperative, being one of the most important sentiments solidarity activists share (as I discuss in chapter 9).[5]

[5] Steve Ellner (2019), an American academic who has lived in Venezuela—to an extent sympathetic with the government—includes the instability caused by Chávez's illness in 2013, and the "refusal of the opposition and the United States' government to recognise Maduro's triumph in the elections following his death" as contributors to hyper-inflation. Ellner (2019) does suggest that Maduro's failure to take "difficult but necessary measures," such as modifying the exchange-control system was highly problematic—although, we could argue, this failure can also be attributed to Chávez, who began the policy.

To give a sense of how central this idea is to their cause, the Venezuelan Solidarity Campaign (VSC), who refused to grant me an interview as I explained in chapter 1, held monthly meetings (several that I attended) to discuss the threat of invasion by Trump, even as late as April 2020. Similar meetings were taking place around the world, and I did manage to speak to two leaders of the Australian Venezuela Solidarity Network (AVSN), Tony and Damien, about the protests they were organising around this issue in 2019. Tony, a white Australian activist and academic in his mid-fifties (who has been convicted and imprisoned twice, and who was recently removed from his post at university), summarised his intentions for the protests thus:

> Our slogans for tomorrow are no to US backed coup, yes to independent Venezuela, and yes, they elected their President, deal with it.

For solidarity activists, Trump himself anointed Guaidó, the president of the defunct National Assembly, since no one had even heard about him before he declared himself president. Tim, the South African electoral observer, argues:

> [The US] mistook moaning about Maduro for wanting to murder Maduro and replace him with a US backed oligarch. They got that wrong [...] It's like people in Tottenham might moan about a labour MP, but they're not going to go out and vote for the far-right of the Tory party [...] So what happened when the US tried to impose Guaidó, who's just a Trump-anointed jackass, this guy, made in Washington. No one had ever heard of him in Venezuela like some poll said, 20 percent of people? [...] So it backfired on the street. So the government demonstrations are bigger than the opposition demonstrations.

Although Tim is right to assume that a majority of Venezuelans are not in favour of military intervention (at least according to a survey by David Smilde (2019) at the end of 2018, that found that 54 per cent are against it), Venezuelans *are* in favour of a negotiated pact to remove Maduro (64 percent, according to the same survey).

This idea that Venezuela is genuinely under US military threat and an 'evil' opposition, allows for a forgiving stance on the authoritarian tendencies of the Maduro government. Ignacio, for example, is painfully aware of an issue within Chavismo that he highlights would shock any European: the principal government party, the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venenzuela* (PSUV), does not hold primaries:

> I know perfectly well that any European would be shocked to see the lack of a primary process. But it is simply that Maduro, obviously, after mediating in corridors with others, decides on Rod Dexar. So they propose Rod Dexar. Call votes in favour. And everyone raises their hand. All right. Okay sure, yes, but we were four months away from an imperialist invasion.

In his "*Muy bien, vale sí*" (Okay sure, yes) Ignacio acknowledges how problematic he feels having Maduro hand-appoint leaders in the party is, but then clarifies: "we were four months away from an imperialist invasion." This justificatory clause is telling of how Ignacio rationalises and grapples with what he himself sees as authoritarian, on the one hand; and his underlying belief that the Bolivarian Revolution is a popular democratic process, on the other. For Ignacio, the imperialist aggression against Venezuela justifies Maduro's direct and rapid action, but this justification is not truly valid: Chávez and Maduro had been appointing leaders since the party's inception in 2007, when Venezuela was not, at least as far as I understand, under threat. (It is possible that Ignacio believes Venezuela has always been under threat.) Ignacio's reaction suggests that defending the principal government party against US aggression (what he sees as a corrupt form of power) is more important to him than criticising Maduro—who is in fact a geopolitical 'underdog'—based on an 'impure,' if you will, democratic primary process. This reflects, as I have argued in the introduction, a set of value *priorities*. I add that for Ignacio, who is attacked by his own political party in Europe because of his allegiance with the Venezuelan government, defending the revolution in Venezuela has become part of his defence of self. I discuss this further in chapter 8.

Fernando, an Australian journalist who lived in Venezuela for three years, also alludes to a similar war argument:

> We can then discuss about the electoral process and whatever. But to me, it's utter garbage to say that you stand for democracy if you believe that a free and fair election can be held in the current situation in Venezuela, which is essentially a borderline war, war type situation, and I mean, no country in the world that's been in war has ever held elections.

The idea that the crisis in Venezuela is a "war type situation" leads to an anything goes attitude towards the government of President Maduro. Fernando is also saying that an electoral process *cannot* take place because Venezuela is in the midst of fighting an economic war with the US. This 'state of exception' that solidarity activists attribute to the Hybrid War, justifies the halting

of a real electoral process—democracy's key act. It admits, therefore, that the elections were not 'free and fair.'

It is this portrayal of the crisis as 'extreme,' that makes aspects of democracy secondary to solidarity activists' idea of Venezuelan sovereignty against US power. For Alberto, none of Chavismo's mistakes—and he accepts there have been many—can be corrected by military intervention: whatever people criticise about the government can only be discussed once the war threat is over. Alberto, who is a Basque Spanish national, was a particular interesting case because although he visits Spain often, he lives in Venezuela:[6]

> After twenty years of Chavismo, surely there are many things that can be improved, seriously many things. And obviously after 20 years, many people feel frustrated, and disenchanted because their expectations haven't been met. There we can get into another discussion, when things are calmer, but at the moment, all that is on the side-lines because, if the United States enters, with the squalid ones [*escuálidos*, derogatory term for the opposition] in hand, eh? To blow up Venezuela? Any of the issues that one could have against Maduro, I mean others—not me, others—come to nothing. Because, what will there be? More quality of life? Are there going to be medicines? Will hospitals work? Factories? Will the standard of living go up? Will the country's infrastructure increase? Will the country take a step forward, technologically, industrially? Will it produce more? Which of the deficiencies that you can attribute to the Venezuelan regime could improve with military intervention? I'm still waiting for someone to explain it to me.

The Media and Censorship

According to Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index in 2019, Venezuela has slid back 32 places since 2014, ranking 148 out of 180 in terms of freedom of the press. Another major organisation, Freedom House, considers Venezuela to be "Not Free" in terms of political rights

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[6] I discuss Alberto's story in more detail in the last chapter. He explains the importance of his belonging to the Basque independence movement, in sensitising him to what he feels are the struggles of the Bolivarian Revolution.

and civil liberties—at 16/100, Venezuela is a point below Chad, and the United Arab Emirates. Venezuela's Internet Freedom score is also categorised as "Not Free," with a score slightly below Russia. The issue is politicised to the point where, as Samet (2019) notes, not seeing a problem with the press assumes you take a pro-government stance. Yet nuancing the situation, he notes how the private media "were not simply mouthpieces for the opposition; they *were* the opposition" (2019, 26) as discussed in chapter 2.

To put this in the context of the interviews, the word 'democracy' was not even mentioned by Venezuelan migrants, a fact telling of the perception they share of the government. It was used once to refer to the *Punto Fijo* period (before Chávez) and once to suggest that the government wants to give a semblance of 'democracy' to the international community by allowing certain critical press and media to continue running but closing most of the others. In Wilson's own words:

> My favourite show was that of César Miguel Rondón, that was taken off the air. I don't know how others have done who continue fighting. There's a girl, Ana María Trujillo, she has a show on RCR, that is highly critical. And she's still going. The government tries to, well, pretend that there is a democracy, despite all they do.

For Wilson, a brown vocal coach in his sixties, now living in Perú, 'appearing' democratic means to allow critical viewpoints to air, or to be printed—an idea in line with a liberal conception of freedom of speech. Here Wilson suggests that journalists are 'fighting,' that is, that they are defying the government by speaking against it and that they play a role in exercising discursive power—or the republican idea of power in the negative. This power has not been overlooked by the Maduro and Chávez presidencies, who have done their best to close as many outlets as they believe is justified to do so. President Chávez controversially closed *RCTV* (Channel 2) Venezuela's main television channel in 2007—allowing it to air only via cable. In 2013, business allies of the government then bought over *Globovisión*, the main news outlet for the opposition, and subsequently dismissed all its critical journalists (or they resigned). A similar bought-over took place with two of the most widely read newspapers in the country *El Universal* and *Últimas Noticias* in 2013 and 2014 respectively, and barriers were placed on the procurement of materials for *El Nacional*, the other major country-wide newspaper (Samet 2019).

Leopoldo Castillo, a critic of the government, considered "the nemesis of the president" (*The New Yorker* August 30 2013), famously resigned in 2013 when *Globovisión* was bought over. Castillo's case was a precursor to Rondón's. César Miguel Rondón had been on the air for more than 30 years and was asked to leave his morning radio show in 2019. According to Rondón, he was extorted: either he left, or CONATEL (the National Telecommunications Commission) would close the entire station. He explained that he was not allowed to discuss the government's repression of the protests, or Juan Guaidó as 'interim president,' and so he felt he had no choice. "This is not auto-censorship, this is pure and hard censorship," Rondón concluded (*El Nacional* 28 January, 2019).

One interviewee, Jairo felt the repression *in situ*. He was detained by the police simply because he was a reporter covering elections in his hometown, Maracaibo, in the West of Venezuela:

> J: I was held back once. They arrested me but they didn't take me to jail, they did detain me, the national guard, because I was covering some local elections, I don't remember which ones. They arrested me because I was just a journalist. Just because of that. Then there was a scandal on the radio and I was released. I was detained for about an hour. And I used that [to apply for asylum].
>
> P: Just because you were a journalist?
>
> J: Yes. Just because I was a journalist covering the election. He got annoyed and said come here. You're going to jail.

This incident eventually served Jairo to ask for political asylum in Spain, where he lives today. There was no other reason for the detention, other than the fact that he was a journalist covering a low-attended polling station—a fact that, according to Jairo, irked the pro-government national guard. Jairo's story marked the way he understands who is in power in Venezuela, and where the national guard stands: not in favour of 'the people' but rather in the hands of the government. His story aligns with the National Media Workers Union report that, in 2017, found "498 instances of harassment by state authorities over news articles," and the arrest and jailing of 66 journalists and editors covering the protests that year (Rapoza *Forbes* December 28 2017). *CNN* was kicked off the air completely in February 2017, and 49 broadcasters ceased operation, (though this includes purely music stations). *Deutsche Welle* was also temporarily interrupted from the airways when it began screening a documentary titled "Venezuela—Escape from a Failed State" in August 2018.

According to Artz (2015, 503), an academic involved in Venezuela solidarity activism, Venezuela's new constitution "required expansion of public broadcasting, so Channel 2 was licensed to Venezuelan Social Television." Artz (2015) is suggesting that the closure of *RCTV* was not intended to silence criticism. In his eyes, the take is justifiable given the state needed a channel and *RCTV* (channel 2) had the largest national reach. For Gregory Wilpert, an American journalist publishing in *venezuelanalysis.com*:

> In terms of diversification and democratization, the Chávez government has arguably done more than any government in Venezuelan history or in the history of most countries of the world [by] enabling hundreds of community radio stations and of dozens of community television stations [to] give ordinary citizens access to the media in an unprecedented manner (Wilpert 2007).[7]

For supporters of Chavismo abroad, it is in limiting private ownership of the media and facilitating working-class access to the means of communication (by funding community radio and television stations) that true democratisation has been achieved in Venezuela (Artz 2015)—an idea of democratisation that stands in conflict with, for instance, Wilson's understanding above. Even if the producers of these community radio and television stations admit that these outlets are only able to reach a limited audience (Schiller 2011), Chavismo has given working-class neighbourhoods the ability to produce content that relates more realistically to their lives and difficulties. What ultimately matters to those who support Chavismo is the symbolic weight that these grass-roots efforts carry, as evidence of its commitment to the popular classes.

One can see the problem with having a group of six very wealthy Venezuelan families own the largest commercial media outlets (that garner the largest audience share in the country) and fervently oppose the government. One can also see a problem in the fact that once the government has given you the funds to open a community radio station, you will feel obliged not to speak against it—a violation of your autonomy. The example of *Catia TVe* comes to mind: they broadcast segments several times a day on the advances of the Bolivarian

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[7] Although Wilpert (2007) does not make mention of this, Martínez et al. (2010) explain how community media became a priority only after President Chávez realised community stations had helped him in defeating the 2002 coup (when the private outlets had entirely stopped reporting).

Revolution in exchange for the bigger chunk of their funding from the government (see Schiller 2011). *Catia TVe* did highlight the bureaucratic inefficiency of the state, and its inability to meet some of their basic needs, but, as Schiller (2011, 117) herself explains, "in practice, Chávez was never openly criticised on *Catia TVe's* airways," nor did they purport impartiality.

My aim is not to debate whether Chavez's community media contribute to creating new forms of participatory democracy, or new ways to relate to and define the state, as Fernandes (2010) and Schiller (2011) have done respectively, although quite some time ago. Rather, I note the very different—and fragmented—understandings of democracy and democratisation in relation to the media, that exist across the divide. Access to mediatic opportunities and freedom of the editorial line of the press, become different rights—not different aspects of the *same* right. Neither aspect need be mutually exclusive, but in the polarised populist sphere, where 'the other' is understood as ill-willed, the ideas appear to oppose each other, stemming as they do from two conflicting understandings of freedom and diverging political priorities. A similar phenomenon occurs with human rights, as I discuss in the last chapter.

Distrust of the press

Venezuelan migrants share a tremendous distrust of the Venezuelan press, for reasons already exposed. Solidarity activists harbour the same distrust for the international media.

James, having met President Maduro, has strong opinions against him and his policies, but nonetheless calls himself a Chavista because, in his words, he "understood what [Chávez] was doing." In his seventies, with wonderful good nature, he tells me the long story of his involvement with Latin America, where his daughter was born and raised. He tells me switching to Spanish: "*tengo sangre latina*," [I have Latin blood] and exudes a knowledge of the continent unparalleled by any of the other solidarity activists I spoke with—no doubt fruit of the years he has spent living there. In contrast to other activists, what he learned from observing the elections was that the "place is chaotic, but the chaos is not entirely caused by the American blockade"—unlike what all my other activists want to argue. However, similarly to others, he feels that one of the biggest problems regarding Venezuela is the media's narrative:

> One thing I did look at was, where all these lies came from. And from very few sources. Writers were the main source of the lies. I found the vocabulary is exactly the same. So you'd read in *the Guardian*, and *the Observer*, exactly the same words that appeared in the American press, in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. And writing the same vocabulary. No electoral observer. Copied each other. Without any kind of journalistic integrity. Or attempt to discover what was going on. Not interested. Just spread lies. Including *the Guardian*. Very disappointing. Not the only thing *the Guardian* disappoints on nowadays. They disappoint an awful lot.

At a public event I attended where James discussed his experience of the Venezuelan elections in 2018, James referred to the *BBC* as the "central lying office." A similar rejection of the *BBC* is also expressed by Abdo (see Figure 7). Abdo, a Sudanese-British journalist in his mid-thirties, who spent a month in Venezuela during one of the longest blackouts (from the 7th to the 14th of March 2019) felt particular resistance from his friends' back in the UK who refuse to believe what he was posting:

> Here in Venezuela, online, I get a lot of opposition groups attacking me, saying that I'm paid by Maduro's regime, etc. etc. But also from back home, because obviously a lot of my friends back in the UK, they're watching the same, what I call, propaganda channels as everyone else. So they're thinking 'what's going on? How come?' They kind of disbelieve some of the things that I'm saying, that I've been brainwashed or that I'm on that line because of the channel that I work with and it took a while for me to convince them, more evidence, pictures, more, more interviews, and slowly but surely, they're starting to understand that what they're being told on the mainstream press if far, far from true. Some resistance from people back home that just think that the press can't be lying, either the press are lying or I'm lying and the more likely to be, that I'm lying as an individual, than the institution that they trust, such as the *BBC*.

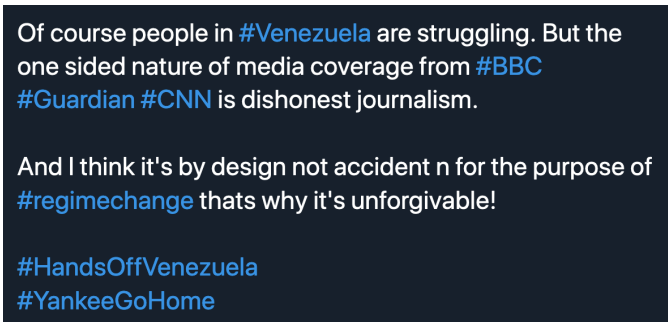

Figure 7. Screenshot of Abdo's tweet (anonymity preserved) criticising media coverage on Venezuela.

Juan, a Spanish activist in his late sixties, fighting for the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara, a disputed region on the northwest coast of Africa, got involved with Venezuelan politics because Hugo Chávez became one of the few leaders of the world that recognised the Sahara as independent from Morocco. He claims, "100 percent of the Sahrawi people support the Bolivarian Revolution for this reason." He used the memorable term 'infoxication' to refer to the role the media has played in building what he feels is the narrative of Maduro as dictator:

> The media has played an important role here, which I call infoxication. They report intoxicating. Infoxication is the term I use because most people in Spain have the criteria that Maduro is a dictator. You read this everywhere.

Mauro, the principal organiser of an anti-fascist collective, targeted specifically against the modern football field in Brazil, one of two Latin American solidarity activists I spoke with had a similar complaint. When I asked him about the difficulties his organisation faces because of its open support of the Maduro government, he explains that the difficulties are the same for everyone:

> Our right to speak about the Bolivarian process, has been denied to us for the last 20 years. For the dominant monopoly, nothing positive can be said about that country. It is, effectively, denying the right to counter-argue, leaving a one-sided version imported from the north (translation from Portuguese by the author).

Solidarity activists share the sense that Venezuela's reality—what is good—is not presented in the media. Instead, the media seeks to portray Maduro as a dictator. In tandem to their feelings of isolation, solidarity activists feel their views cannot even be debated seriously (I discuss these feelings of isolation further in chapter 8). Pedro, for instance (an important film documentarist that has spoken several times on the *BBC* on the topic of Venezuela), tells me he has a problem with my way of addressing him as an activist, given the connotations he feels this word entails:

> I just think it's the kind of lowly term that's used, quite [pause] I think it's used from one side to the other, but never from the other side. So I would argue, if I'm an activist, *the Guardian* Venezuelan correspondent is also an activist. But I'm a journalist, and I would argue that my journalism is more robust than their journalism. I don't mind. I mean I'm a journalist, who's also a film maker, if some people view [it] as 'activistic' that's fine. I'd rather discuss it on the plane of journalistic documentary in that sense, but again, I don't

> have a problem, I'm not deeply offended by it, but I find it curious that its seen kind of from one side.

Importantly Pedro understands his role as one of presenting, if not the truth, at least a more robust version of the events that unfold in Venezuela—events that are being framed, if you will, in a certain way by *The Guardian* and the *BBC*. For him activism represents a factionalism he does not identify with—a factionalism that results from Venezuela's highly polarised environment. Pedro continues to explain how debate is stifled:

> I think places like *the Guardian* should be painting a kind of informed rigorous critical discussion about what's going on in Venezuela. But I think it's so off the mark, so strikingly correlated to what the government—someone like me goes on a programme—they almost polarised the debate. I think the kind of extremist media positions on Venezuela polarised the ability for progressive rigorous debate [...] you end up just being laughed as a kind of 'Chavista' kind of activist.

Pedro paints an important image of how his ideas are ridiculed, a fact that adds to the feelings of isolation and being misunderstood that many other solidarity activists experienced, feelings that solidify their sense that power is being used 'unduly' against them. Despite how widespread it felt to interviewees, it's worth noting that this hate-speech against the far-left has not really been addressed in the literature or in Lumsden and Harmer's (2019) important book on online othering and discrimination.

Solidarity activists make the case, moreover, that the press is using Venezuela's case to tarnish the reputation of leftist leaders worldwide, as discussed in chapter 3. By associating Venezuela's crisis to leftist policies more broadly (including, for example, those of Bernie Sanders in the US), certain right-wing media feel they can trigger fear against them. A topic for an entire thesis in and of itself, here I note simply how this media rhetoric adds to the scepticism interviewees amassed of the press more broadly. For Sahas, a young British-Asian activist, in his early thirties:

> I think also, because, you know, since Jeremy Corbyn ran for leadership of the Labour Party since 2015, the media has nearly constantly compared him to Venezuela. To say that if Jeremy Corbyn comes to power, we're going to get a Venezuela kind of thing. So every anti-Corbyn person now is completely using Venezuela in that way, as well [...] You look at since the current crisis began with Guaidó and all, the media has been even more

> abysmal than they've usually been. I mean, they've been completely one-sided, completely, you know, devoid of facts and very much pushing the [British] government's line, which is obviously an anti-democratic and you know, pro-war line. And, you know, fostering these myths about what's happening in Venezuela [...] It was just yesterday that the *New York Times* published that article finally admitting that it was opposition activists in Venezuela that had burned the humanitarian aid, [...] Yeah, all the media was saying, 'Look at Venezuela, Maduro's people are burning aid' blah, blah, blah. And any activists on the left who are on the ground there who are reporting and saying this isn't the case are just utterly vilified. Or ignored.

For Sahas, the *New York Times* story is particularly emblematic of the narrative the media is trying to push: forceful regime-change is needed against President Maduro who is 'burning' humanitarian aid at the border. New evidence showed that it was the opposition who had in fact burned the aid, although not purposefully, and the *New York Times* had to rectify the information—blaming Colombian authorities for having spread misinformation. The *New York Times*, though, pushed a slightly different line from what Sahas describes here in their correction: for them it is US officials and the State Department (including Vice-President Mike Pence and John Bolton)—not the media—who are looking for regime change in Venezuela, and helped spread the lie.

Liesel, a young transgender activist about to finish University, describes how they got involved progressively with Marxism by engaging extensively with its literature. In this memorable quote, they explain how they feel capitalism is failing, and that socialism cannot be 'reformed'—in fact, they dislike Jeremy Corbyn, unlike most other solidarity activists, because they see him as a reformist. Most importantly, as a Marxist, they paint a picture of their world that is very telling:

> I read the paper, Marxist.com. And I also read the Financial Times. Which if anything can convince you that capitalism is collapsing, it will be the Financial Times, because the ruling class are much more honest to each other in the FT which is basically their internal bulletin, than to us in the Guardian.

The Financial Times is the internal bulletin of the ruling class; *The Guardian* on the other hand, is a tool for the subjugation of the working classes, where lies are spread to avoid revolt. Liesel does not avoid the press, they just feel the press that ideally would appeal to them, is not willing to defy the international media narrative on Venezuela.

Jacobin or not: a divided left

Unlike other interviewees who speak little Spanish, Ignacio, from Spain, has an ambivalent understanding of democracy in Venezuela. He in fact agrees that, to a certain extent, democracy does not exist there:

> That there isn't democracy? Well, not exactly. In Venezuela there isn't democracy because you can't have democracy without an agonism that can sustain different political options. We all know that. That there's no plurality? Plurality exists, the problem is that it is not integrated into a political system because the opposition has not wanted to participate in elections for years [...] The other day I got together with a Trotskyist friend, a dude that comes from radical militancy [...] that told me, 'we can't defend Maduro because we defend agonistic democracy [...] pluralism, we defend a non-Jacobin revolution [...] It really shows the extent of insanity to which people can succumb.

A young sociology student at a top-tier University, living in the UK, Ignacio invokes Chantal Mouffe's understanding of the term 'agonism' to describe "the existing struggle of adversaries," described in chapter 4 (Mouffe 2000, 16). Ignacio easily admits there is a non-existent democracy in Venezuela; he is agreeing to the fact that Venezuela lacks this 'agonism'—political conflict 'integrated into the political system'. Other solidarity activists, and I note with less knowledge of the system, surely disagree with him, citing the presence of Henri Falcon in the last elections. For him, this is not necessarily problematic given that he contends 'pluralism' does exist. He encounters plurality within the Chavista movement, encompassing, as it does, differing leftist undercurrents.[8] He also sees agonism in the clout that the opposition, and Juan Guaidó, have managed to galvanise from the media and other nations abroad. For Ignacio, most importantly, the opposition is not integrated to the political system because *they* do not want to participate in the electoral processes—i.e., not because the system is inherently undemocratic, but because the opposition is.

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[8] Some academics argue that the PSUV—Chávez socialist party, the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*—encompasses even the centre-right, see Hetland (2017).

Ignacio then tells the story of a Trotskyist friend who refuses to support Maduro because his friend stands for "agonistic democracy and pluralism, and a non-Jacobin revolution." For Ignacio the fact that a Trotskyist is unwilling to support Maduro demonstrates "the insanity to which people can succumb." Why someone in the far-left, a professed Trotskyist, would decide not to support the government of Maduro, is beyond him—it's 'insanity,' madness. As I've discussed previously, Trotskyists have always been uncomfortable with Maduro's reformism. But Ignacio's idea of 'the other' as 'insane,' 'evil' or 'incomprehensible' is emblematic of the radicalised populist politics I have been describing. (Venezuelan migrants display a similar reaction when confronted by solidarity activists' support for the Maduro government: that they are also *insane*.)

At a deeper level, saying others are insane—or more seriously, morally 'wrong'—is a simple way to dismiss asking difficult questions about why, in the case of Ignacio, someone with generally similar views, disagrees with him on this particular issue. In Ignacio's case, he believes those broadly on the left *ought to* share his interpretation of the conflict in Venezuela, and the need to defend it against US aggression[9]—but many in the left do not, starting with Ignacio's own president Pedro Sánchez. This split in the left seems to suggest that how we interpret and locate what is felt as 'undue' or 'just' power, our positionality, is an idiosyncratic rather than an ideological preference based on a series of lived experiences.[10]

Most solidarity activists, as Ignacio's example showed, were very frustrated with other factions of the centre-left and the centre-left press that do not support Maduro. For them, these factions of the left (including the communist party in Venezuela who is against the government) seem unable to prioritise what they see as the popular sovereignty of the Venezuelan people above US imperialism. In Andy's own words:

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[9] In chapter 3, I discussed Heyd's (2007) understanding of solidarity. He underlines the loyalty solidarity, as a moral imperative, makes on those considered to be members of the group (in this case, others in the far-left).

[10] The split is also mirrored in debates on Iraq and Afghanistan between anti-imperialists opposed to any intervention, and anti-totalitarians, who broadly accept war against any terrorism (Ryley 2013: 29). (I discuss this fragmented, or hierarchical understanding of human rights in the last chapter.)

> [T]hey were worried that some of the people on the committee were going to be split with Chavez. I mean, there was a series of doubts being voiced on the left in Britain about Chavez—particularly from the far left, you know, who are not anti-imperialist, who are workerist, and always are trying to find fault with any leader in the third world. They call it 'third worldism,' they say, like we're chasing after white knights, they say 'we should be equally critical'. This is just a trope, you know. 'We should be really critical of people who are attacking the trade unions and human rights abroad as we are in our own country.' To which my response is, well, first of all, you have to know what's going on and the countries you're attacking. And second, we live in Britain, we don't live in Venezuela. So we're not [pause] we're not responsible for the rest of the world's problems. They have to sort out their own problems.

Andy's position assumes that some people on the far left—'workerist' he calls them—are critical of Chávez's government only because it was accused of violating several human rights (see chapter 9). For Andy, then, these rights issues are 'domestic' affairs that need not be judged. Andy emphasises that his main stance is to let Venezuelans solve their own problems—this is part of the anti-imperialist struggle. Yet his stance is questioned by Venezuelans who believe his strong opinions are denying their experience of Venezuela's reality (see chapter 8). The critical position against the government assumed by certain 'workerists,' is not necessarily held exclusively by the very far left of the spectrum, as Andy wants to suggest, but rather, I would argue, by those in the left who *prioritise* human rights over maintaining an anti-imperialist, or anti-US stance. This is, again as I have just mentioned, not an ideological preference, rather one of value priorities.

Fernando, instead, derides the faction of the left that says that Maduro's government is not 'truly left':

> [*imitating others*] 'We don't want our project to be associated with [Maduro] given the bad things that are occurring in Venezuela.' [But] you don't get out of that by just saying oh, well then that's not me [*laughs*]. No, no one falls for that trick. You can't just turn around and say 'oh but Venezuela is not socialist.'

Fernando's comment shows an unrealistic desire for loyalty from all sectors of the left towards leaders such as Maduro, who proclaim themselves leftist—an aspect of solidarity highlighted by Heyd (2007). Fernando is implying that the Maduro government has upheld the values of

socialism, more than in simple discourse—even when this is debatable—and that those values are more important than those of pluralism, or agonistic democracy.

In his characterisation of activism, Tony, an Australian writer, academic and activist—expelled from his academic post—is hesitant to use the word, much like Pedro was, but for a different reason. He feels today's demonstrations of 'the left' are 'co-opted' by what he feels are 'powerful interests':

> Let's say in the US, basically, who have co-opted all these words, you know, they've really colonised all this language of activism, and what does Hillary Clinton call herself? The resistance now, or something like that [...] But anyway, that's the problem with activism these days, that activism is sort of and some of the online stuff which is pretty fake too you know [...] People don't really understand what it is. They think that if they pay some money to Greenpeace [...] or something like that, that they're being an activist [...] It was very different. I mean, I was [pause] as I was quite young, I was involved in that Vietnam war stuff. And it was very, very different then because it was quite a radical thing to go to a demonstration or to hand out a pamphlet because it was illegal, you couldn't have a pamphlet or go to a demonstration. Of course, now it's very organised, it's very easy to do [...] If you want to have a serious big demo, you contact the police, the police organize it, and get you down on the street. So it's almost part of the bureaucracy, it's part of the furniture, you know? So it's doesn't have the impact [...] All of activism I feel is very, is very controlled, very calm, co-opted and organised, basically."

As Tony explains, activism for him is not what it used to be, but more importantly, it has been co-opted. It isn't a tool for the oppressed, or of rebellion against the system: it is used to support the interests of those in power already. This idea of who moves and handles powerful interests, re-surfaces frequently, not in reference to Hillary Clinton as it does for Tony, but in reference to the US' global hegemony more broadly. It is this emphasis on the US' place in the world, and the need to fight it about other things, that differentiates solidarity activists from others on the left.

This want of disassociation from these other factions in the left is understandable: the media has used the Venezuelan case to discourage support for the left in all countries of the West, especially in Spain (against the incipient party Podemos) but also in the United Kingdom (against Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum), and more recently in the United States (against

Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren). Martín, describes it as a phantom that surrounds the Podemos project, which he had been a part of:

> The phantom that they put on you—that you want to turn Spain into the new Venezuela, the Bolivarian Red Chavistas who are going to nationalize everything and take away people's houses. Well, yes, that creates a stigma for you as a defender of a 'bloody' (*sangrienta*) dictatorship that has the country in ruins, you know, what the media typically says here.

To defend the "'bloody' dictatorship" is stigmatised in Spain, especially because, according to the media, those who defend Maduro want to "convert Spain into Venezuela." This association of the left with the government in Venezuela, specifically the idea that socialism will lead to the destruction of any nation, was touted by Juan Guaidó himself on Fox News (broadcast October 15, 2019). The defence of the Venezuelan government is, as Martín explains, stigmatised.

Conclusion

Democracy is imagined and shaped as the most legitimate way to exercise power in the modern polity by both groups. Both groups use the concept of democracy as the singular way in which political power can be enacted *morally*—but hold entirely different value priorities, or value-systems, meaning they are willing to sacrifice certain aspects of democracy for others. Because Venezuelan migrants feel they have lost their autonomy and feel that they have been *forced* to migrate (I describe this fully in chapter 8), they value individual liberties above other things. They understand democracy as that system of government which protects freedoms of speech, religion, press, protest. In part because solidarity activists feel that their (and poor Venezuelans') opportunities have been slighted by the neoliberal hegemony, they defend democracy as that system of government that increases access and participation to those traditionally marginalised because of it. Democracy is used simultaneously as an ideal to describe what is allegedly inexistent in Venezuela, and as a justification to describe what is, also allegedly, advancing opportunities, a fact that speaks to the malleability of the term.

At large, the discursive difference between the two groups corresponds to notions of 'liberal' democracy versus simply 'democracy.' I note Urbinati (2019, 11) understands this difference to

be antithetical to the concept of democracy because a democracy *requires* "that no majority is the last one, that no dissenting view is confined *ex-ante* to a position of peripheral impotence or subordination merely because it is held by the 'wrong' people." In other words, true democracy requires the "convertibility of majorities into minorities and, conversely, of minorities into majorities" (Sartori 1987, 24). Democracy is in Claude Lefort (2007) famous conception, an 'empty space' of power and for this, the liberties associated with civil and political rights—protected by universal human rights—are constitutive of, and not merely incidental, aspects of democracy, as discussed in chapter 4. This stands in contrast to a populist understanding of democracy that seeks inclusion of the 'many' by excluding what is understood as the 'few,' or the political establishment, who have abused their power by being inattentive to the needs of the many. I argued in chapter 4, that this exclusion of the elites is felt by participants as a historically and racially 'just' or a 'moral' process in which democracy and human rights are expanded, not reduced.

It is this interpretation of the political world in moral terms that determines the extent to which interviewees are willing to defend certain means above certain ends, and whether they see them as necessary evils to achieve certain ideals that they hold dearer than others.

Chapter 6. Racial understandings of the Revolution

Racial projects

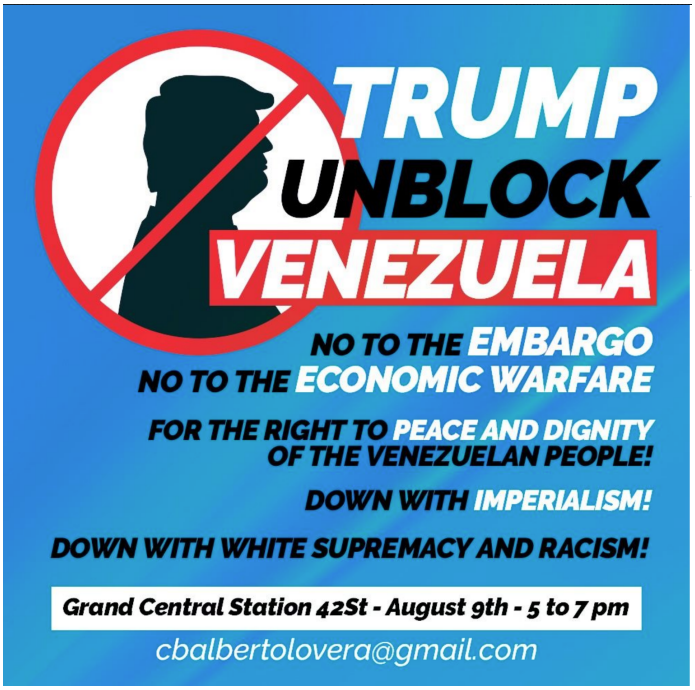

Figure 8. Social media post from "Struggle for Socialism" website, calling for protests on August 9th 2019, in New York City

A contentious Australian journalist (admired by solidarity activist) John Pilger (2019), entitles an article written in February 2019 (after Guaidó's self-proclamation) 'The war on Venezuela is built on lies.' Pilger, who met Chávez many times, aims to persuade a Western audience that the narrative on Venezuela (Venezuela as a dictatorship; Venezuela as a place of violation of human rights) is wrong, advanced by US interests, and promoted by a *racist* white upper class in Venezuela.

Pilger starts by mentioning Chávez's electoral gains: 8 elections in 8 years, and describes him as "the most popular head of state in the Western Hemisphere, probably the world." Chávez's

credentials as a popular and legitimate leader, supersedes all other arguments regarding his legitimacy. Immediately after, he writes:

> Every major Chavista reform was voted on, notably a new constitution of which 71 percent of the people approved each of the 396 articles that enshrined unheard of freedoms, such as Article 123, which for the first time recognised the human rights of mixed-race and black people, of whom Chavez was one [...] Ordinary people regarded Chavez and his government as their first champions: as theirs. This was especially true of the indigenous, mestizos and Afro-Venezuelans, who had been held in historic contempt by Chavez's immediate predecessors and by those who today live far from the barrios, in the mansions and penthouses of East Caracas, who commute to Miami where their banks are and who regard themselves as "white". They are the powerful core of what the media calls "the opposition".

In his article, Pilger only mentions article 123, which, according to him, recognises the mixed-race and black people of Venezuela—importantly for him, it seems, this racial advancement is the new constitution's most significant achievement. Unfortunately, the actual law does not make mention of either mixed-race people or black people.[11] To this day only indigenous populations (*pueblos indígenas*) are explicitly recognised in the constitution, and are specifically mentioned in this article, despite the asks of several Afro-Venezuelan organisations (see Rivas Brito and Ruette-Orihuela 2019).

I note that immediately after discussing Chávez's democratic popularity, Pilger emphasises the racial dimensions of the Venezuelan divide. In so doing, he not only explains how Venezuela's racial structures build the divisions that exist in the country today, he also paints a disturbing picture: those marginalised by the state's oil wealth and those who have benefitted from it have done so because of the colour of their skin. Subsequently he writes: "They could be white South Africans, the petite bourgeoisie of Constantia and Sandton, pillars of the cruelties of apartheid." His analysis reflects on a different racial project—that of South Africa, and one that

[11] Article 123 reads: "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and promote their own economic practices based on reciprocity, solidarity and exchange; their traditional productive activities; their participation in the national economy; and to define their priorities."

has very much influenced anti-racist (and solidarity) movements in the West.[12] By comparing it to a racial project Westerners are more acquainted with, he is strengthening the case for Chávez—although missing the context under which Venezuela's own racial project and racism operates.

Pilger assumes that what is at work in Venezuela is a crime he already *knows*, apartheid. In explaining the conflict in these terms, he is calling against a racist white opposition waging a battle against a legitimate brown government. His powerful discourse highlights the cruelty and injustice of the white upper class in Venezuela. This is a moral demand by any extent—even if ironically, the idea that Venezuelans need defence is interpreted by some Venezuelans as interventionist itself.[13]

In another example, Pulitzer Prize winner Roger Ebert, writes:

> Chávez was elected primarily by the poor. He asked a simple question: Since the oil wells have always been nationalised and the oil belongs to the state, why do the profits flow directly to the richest, whitest 20 percent of the population, while being denied to the poorer, darker 80 percent? His plan was to distribute the profits equally among all Venezuelans (Ebert 2003, n.p.).

Taking from Chávez's own discursive reasoning, as discussed in chapter 2, Ebert discloses what is for him the true heart of conflict: a darker 80 percent have been unfairly denied their rightful share of Venezuela's oil wealth.

Pilger, Ebert, and solidarity activists, see the conflict in racial terms, having been involved with the anti-colonial and anti-racist militancy central to the international left. Referencing this aspect, Andy, a British-Canadian in his late sixties, tells me:

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[12] See Hope's (2011) doctoral dissertation for an account of the Canadian solidarity movements working closely with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

[13] I discuss how Venezuelan migrants view solidarity activists as having a colonialist mindset in chapter 8.

> The whole of the history of my organisation of the British left was bound up with, on the one hand, the anti-racist struggle, which is huge in Britain. Because it dates from the earliest days from the influx of Caribbean people who came with the wind Rush and so on and then the subsequent influx of South Asian people. It's very fundamental.

I discuss the importance of anti-British imperialism sentiment in chapter 9, but here I note what Andy feels is one of the most prominent arms of his organisation and activism: anti-racism. His understanding of Britain's own imperial and unjust racial projects conditions his support for Chávez's own, that, to his eyes, is dismantling structural racism.

Similarly, Jack, the young black-British activist, (member of Jeremy Corbyn's Momentum movement), tweets:

> The US policy will harm working class Venezuelans and indigenous people, most of whom are black and brown. This is imperialism and white supremacy in action. The poor Venezuelans starve while the rich white Venezuelans in the wealthy neighbourhoods and abroad do fine.

Jack is referring to the harsh economic sanctions on Venezuela that discriminately affect poor, black and brown Venezuelans, now entirely dependent on government food-boxes for their subsistence. Here the racial element embedded in Venezuela's structural inequalities also serves to justify a moral position *against* the allegedly 'white' Venezuelan US-supported opposition.

These ideas are expressed throughout the interviews with supporters of the Chávez and Maduro governments. On the other hand, Venezuelan migrants only referenced racism as they felt it was experienced against indigenous populations in other countries (with the exception of two interviewees in the group of 32, incidentally one afro-descendant, and another with indigenous features born in Colombia). In subscribing to the idea of *mestizaje* described in chapter 2—that Venezuelans are of mixed background (Indigenous, Black and European)—Venezuelans overlook how racialisation operates in their own country and in Chavismo—a fact that makes the racial aspect of solidarity activists' discourse particularly noteworthy.

Because Chavismo stands as a government for the brown poor—a disenfranchised majority and thus the *legitimate* heirs of power—solidarity activists feel it needs to be defended from the right-wing, white interests (and American interests) that, as Jack implies, conspire to harm it.

Here, I take a closer look at how Chavismo's governance *feels* 'just' given the historical racial marginalisation and oppression these groups have endured—what I term historical-racial moral logic.

A racist opposition

Damian, a young Russian-Australian in his mid-thirties, has met and interviewed an impressive group of political leaders (including Jeremy Corbyn, Rafael Correa, Cristina Kirchner and Evo Morales) from a decade of activist work aimed at the "final end of neoliberalism across the world," as he writes on his Facebook page. Interestingly, Damian differentiates between the migrant wave that left Venezuelan during the Chávez years, white and European, and that which leaves today *en masse*:

> I think we need to talk about the nature of immigration from Venezuela to Europe, to other parts of the world, through these two different phases. Chávez era immigration and Maduro immigration. While right now we're seeing a lot of economic immigration from Venezuela, mass group of people who, yes, have to immigrate out of Venezuela in search of jobs, in search of a better life, in search of food, and basic supplies, which is real, it is a real problem. And a lot of these people are doing it purely for economic reasons. This was not the case during the Chávez era, which was largely I would say, ideological. Ideological or, the vast majority of those who immigrated from that time were from the upper classes and upper middle classes, who saw their privileges being threatened by a progressive government. And also, we see overwhelmingly white. Or European.

For Tim, a white South African journalist in his early sixties, there is more to a mere divide based on class and race: there is a genuine dislike, to an extent, *hatred* the white classes share against the indigenous and black populations:

> And [the Venezuelan middle and upper classes] look down on it, and why they used to call Chavez a *mono*, a monkey. And the idea of these 'nasty funny tinged' people. We incorporate this 'funny tinge' thing internationally. It really describes how they look at the world. So these people with the funny tinge, yeah? And it's horrifying the idea that these people could be in charge of them. I mean it's—for [the middle and upper classes] it's disgust, it's disgraceful, it's against the natural order of things.

In February 2019, when I conducted the interview with Tim, the UK member of parliament Angela Smith had just left the Labour Party to join the Independent Group, briefly known as Change UK. She referred to people from BAME backgrounds as being 'funny tinged' in a debate aired live on the *BBC* a couple of days before I spoke to Tim—a fervent supporter of Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the UK's Labour Party at the time. Tim was particularly distraught, even angry at the defection of these seven MPs from Labour and their negative views of Corbyn. As Tim describes the situation in Venezuela, he is reminded of the phrase 'funny tinged' that had just made headlines, and the systemic racism it implies. Tim uses Angela's racist faux pas to expose the underlying attitudes of the MPs that had just left Labour, and their hypocrisy, given they were accusing Corbyn of anti-Semitism. To him Angela's expression exemplifies how white middle- and upper-class people in all corners of the globe see the rest: the term she uses, 'funny tinged,' is imminently pejorative. Tim sees how the fact that Angela says this is telling of an unconscious normalising bias she seems completely unaware of. Tim understands how whites, such as himself, see themselves as 'naturally' educated, privileged, and how the rise to power of a mulatto man that breaks with this order, could be 'horrifying' to Venezuelan whites. Tim is particularly well versed in racial issues, he explains, because he married a black woman and has a black daughter. His feeling is that for white Venezuelans (and here he disengages me, a brown Venezuelan, regardless of my privileged education) it is particularly lamentable that Chávez would be in charge, because white dominated the political landscape for decades.

A radical post shared by one solidarity activist, Fernando, an Australian-Argentinean journalist in his late thirties who lived in Venezuela for more than three years, is also exemplifying of this 'white-typification,' or stereotype solidarity activists make of the opposition. Fernando re-posts a tweet that seeks to characterise the group of people that accompany Guiadó's wife—he lets his followers arrive at their own conclusions. The first response is "they are whiter than a Finnish Nazi meeting…"

Figure 9. Facebook post shared by one of my interviewees that shows a picture of the Venezuelan diaspora in New York, where it is obvious to the commentators that these migrant Venezuelans are all in a majority white.

Others suggest they are "Whities, upper class and cowards," and the last comment, which is the most offensive, applauds annihilation, an execution of all Euro-settlers by Putin.[14] The association solidarity activists make of the opposition with whiteness and privilege serves to justify deep contempt—and in this instance, even hatred—towards the opposition, but also to justify their support for Chavismo as the 'right' moral stance to have on the conflict.

As a black man supporting the government of Venezuela, Abdo's opinion on this issue is noteworthy. The British-Sudanese journalist in his mid-thirties, spent a month in Venezuela during the severe ten-day power outage, and was in Venezuela when we conducted our interview. He cheerfully tells me he is known as 'the Venezuelan guy' in his office, because of the deep interest he has developed towards the country's politics. He then adds:

[14] This desire for annihilation is a subject I return to in chapter 8.

> I've got quite a lot of racism, so 'hashtag yankee go home' (#YankeeGoHome), a lot of opposition. But to me that just supports the argument [...] 'cause you see from here, the opposition process is predominantly white [...] That naked racism comes out.

Abdo's twitter feed is primarily a forum on news about Venezuela, where he shares information he feels is not being disclosed by the international media (including photos of fully-stocked supermarkets in the wealthier areas of Caracas, and images of the marches in favour of Maduro). Abdo felt the attack against his political support of the government was racist. He felt the opposition dislikes the fact that he is black, because for him, they are predominantly white. I note that the hashtag 'Yankee go home,' is more often used by Chavistas when they want to attack US commentary on the country; it is rarely used against Chavistas. In this case, we can presume the hashtag implies a profound dislike towards Abdo, a *foreigner* supporting Chavismo, who is 'meddling' in Venezuelan affairs and negatively impacting the image of Venezuela's crisis—and the opposition—internationally.[15]

Abdo notes in his feed (see Figure 10):

> If you want to see what it looks like when working class black & brown people feel included & welcomed in society. Go to #Venezuela but please make [sic] avoid #Colombia. Photos was taken by me in West #Caracas on 9th March 2019.

[15] I discuss this feeling against pro-Chávez foreign opinion, a feeling that was very prominently replicated in the interviews with Venezuelan migrants, in chapter 8.

Figure 10. Above, below. Two photos taken by Abdo, in Caracas (posted on his Twitter account) that highlight his sense of Chavismo as a predominantly black and brown political movement.

In another tweet Abdo suggests:

> In #Bolivia like #Venezuela the right-wing elite use violence against indigenous brown + black working-class people who they assume support @NicolasMaduro or @evoespueblo. The right wing in both countries are funded + supported by Washington who have no problem with their tactics.

Abdo is using the problematic association of Chavismo and dark skin (but also indigeneity and support for Morales) in two distinct ways: 1) to suggest that Chavismo supports the previously excluded sectors, and is thus enacting racial moral justice; and 2) to suggest it helps right-wing sectors easily identify and attack their 'opponents.'

Authors of the limited articles that discuss race and Chavismo in Venezuela,[16] are generally in agreement that there are racist attitudes entrenched in the opposition. Gott (2007, 271)

[16] See Herrera 2005; Ishibashi 2007; Cannon 2008; Gottberg 2011; MacLeod 2019; Gott 2007.

describes these as "race hatred—a gut hostility towards blacks and Indians." Gottberg (2011) instead, explains how the white elites and the media have racialised Chávez's crowds of supporters, seeing them as "dark-skin mobs." MacLeod (2019) similarly notes how the press refers to them as 'thugs,' with the intent of sparking fear—fear partly responsible for the early migration wave in the 2000s that Damien has alluded to. Herrera quotes terms used against those from the popular classes more broadly 'Indian,' 'vermin,' and 'rabble.' Ishibashi confirms that the opposition referred to Chávez as 'monkey.' He also interestingly suggests that had Chávez been willing to negotiate returning some of the economic and political power they enjoyed in the *Punto Fijo* era, they would have eagerly, if hypocritically, adopted him as one of their own.

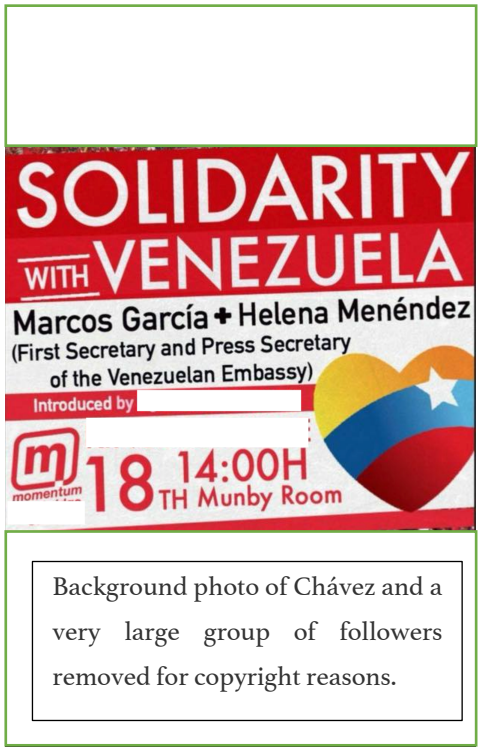
The alleged hatred is supported by the behaviour of some of the opposition politicians themselves (although it cannot be generalised to the entire opposition, as solidarity activists seem to want to suggest). Carlos Ocariz, candidate to the governorship of Miranda, and long-time mayor of the eastern municipality of Sucre in Caracas, was caught sending messages regarding a campaign visit to an afro-descendent community that read: "those sweaty negros, their smell is awful! How exasperating!" (*Noticias-Ahora* October 8 2017). Although the messages were taken up and repudiated by opposition journalist Patricia Poleo on her YouTube channel (she is currently exiled in Miami), they did not spark the debate that needed to emerge from such conduct in other media outlets that favour the opposition. The event did not lower Ocariz's standing in any way, nor did it receive any other penalisation; it did not even motivate an apology from his part. It speaks volumes of the lack of interest on the subject of race and racial discrimination (see Subbiah 2020, forthcoming).

The case of Orlando Figuera

This alleged hatred of the opposition towards the brown and black Chavistas was taken up by another young activist, Ignacio, twenty-one, from Spain, who was visiting Venezuela for the first time in September 2018. When Ignacio hears a "more moderate compatriot," complaining of the one-sidedness of an event Ignacio had organised on Venezuela at his University (see Figure 11), he responds:

> You can't put people who build hospitals where there was no access to public health facilities, or give access to water and electricity, on the same level as people who burn others alive only because of the colour of their skin.

Ignacio's presents the conflict as lying between two moral opposites: those enacting social justice, and those capable of burning black or brown 'others.' Ignacio does not necessarily solely understand the conflict in these terms, as he demonstrates further on in the interview, but he is justifying why being partial to Chavismo, and being against the opposition, is the only possible 'right' position to have. For Ignacio, the sides are not morally equivalent, so the possibility of dialogue or any rapprochement *should* be closed. The 'immoral' effectively need to be silenced. Silencing them is justified or deserved: they do not stand on equal footing. Once the conflict is framed in these terms, there is no possibility of an 'other,' perhaps brown or black and against Chávez: if there were such black and brown Venezuelans, they are either ill-informed, or turned against themselves, or taking from Du Bois, unaware of their double consciousness.



Background photo of Chávez and a very large group of followers removed for copyright reasons.

Figure 11. Poster of the event organised by Ignacio, in conjunction with the Venezuelan embassy in the UK (anonymity preserved).

Ignacio references the burning and lynching of Orlando Figuera, a 21-year-old afro-Venezuelan, one of the most atrocious examples of the height violence has reached in radicalised Venezuela. Figuera was stabbed several times, doused in gasoline and burned by a multitude when opposition protesters accused him of 'looking like' a 'Chavista,' or a 'robber'—a look tied to his dark-skin and his working-class appearance. Opposition accounts say Figuera was caught stealing in the Altamira Plaza—one of the epicentres of the (very violent) opposition protests, known as *guarimbas*, against the government's dismantling of the National Assembly in 2017. The idea of an infiltrated robber infuriated the group of protestors, fed up with systemic criminality in Caracas, who then decided to take the proverbial 'justice into their own hands' (*El Nuevo Herald* June 7 2017). The Attorney General's office stated Figuera met a man with whom he had been in a job-related fight at the protest: the man stabbed him and then accused him of stealing in front of the other protestors. Orlando worked as a parking assistant and died in the hospital from his severe wounds on the 4th of June 2017.

The lynching of Figuera was emblematic in bringing the associated risk of being black in Venezuela to the fore of the political discourse—at least for those supporters of the government. For President Maduro, Figuera's death was not simply the result of an altercation around work: he tied the crime to racial and political hatred. Figuera, he says, was lynched "because of his skin colour, because someone called him a thief, because someone said he was a Chavista infiltrator, under the effects of limitless hate" (*El Nuevo Herald* June 7 2017).

More importantly, the mother of the victim, Inés Esparragosa, agreed with President Maduro's grave assertions. According to her account in *Correo del Orinoco* (June 6 2017), the group of protestors were hitting and laughing at him, telling him he was a '*maldito negro*' (a damned negro). At the hospital, her son told her he had been asked by someone whether he was a Chavista. He said to her, "whatever I answered they were going to kill me. I said yes. I am Chavista, what's wrong?" She explains he had never been militant in a political party, but that she herself was grateful to Chavismo because she graduated from an educational mission, and lives in government housing. She poignantly adds: "my son for being black, was killed. I'm black. What do I do? Who do I blame? [...] They treated my son like an animal [...] because of the selfishness and racism they hold."

Social determinism, as developed by Durkheim and Mauss (2009 [1963]) or Bourdieu (1984) can explain how 'othering' works on perceived differences of appearances that establish hierarchies: appearances that become shortcuts for locating an 'other.' The way race, and more

particularly skin-colour, has been associated to lower-income, is part of Venezuela's colonial legacy, as discussed in the chapter 2. Amid a large, mobilised group, it is not hard to imagine how Figuera's skin colour could have been a tragic liability that associated him with Chavismo. I note that Afro-Venezuelan scholar Esther Pineda (2018) also cites Figuera's case as a prime example of the entrenched racist hatred of the "extremist sectors" of the opposition—she is careful not to equate these sectors to the whole of the opposition, as she understands how many Chavistas (some white) can be racist as well.

The fact that Figuera's lynching has been tied to hatred of his race and political identity, most especially by those close to him—his mother—is extremely telling of Venezuela's underlying structural racism. For Figuera, for Figuera's mother, for Chavista supporters, for the media that supports Chavismo (including outside of Venezuela) and for Ignacio, Figuera was killed because he was black (and poor) and therefore *looked* Chavista—he evoked Chavismo in the opposition's imaginary. His mother's pain stems from her belief that her son's skin-colour, something he cannot change, should spur such violence on the count of alleged political differences.

Figure 12. Tweet by a Chavista social-media activist with Figuera's image. It reads: 'Orlando Figuera was 21 years old and worked as a parking assistant. Because of his colour of skin and because he looked Chavista, he came under attack at a violent opposition protest in Altamira during the guarimbas of 2017. His death represents one of the most atrocious hate crimes of our country.'

There were at least three afro-descendants lynched during these deadly protests, according to pro-government media (Koerner *Venezuelanalysis,* May 29 2017). Chavismo's leaders have built a discourse that has tied these deaths to racial and class hatred. The discourse could only have permeated deeply if it resonates with part of Venezuelans' experience of exclusion on the basis of skin-colour.

Ignacio and White 'Fetishisation'

> Barrio activists detested the interrelated ideals of beauty, wealth, and whiteness—symbolized by the opposition and by the misses (contestants) of beauty pageants—that confer a certain unmerited status and legitimacy in Venezuelan society (Valencia 2015, 35).

Ignacio, white and light-eyed, openly tells me about his experience with racial and skin-colour dynamics in Venezuela and how these framed his understanding of the conflict, as well as his understanding of Figuera's death:

> You're the whitey and such. I see this affective relationship through some sort of weird fetishisation. As I say, when we got off at the protest, we thought people were approaching us because we were from Podemos. But they were approaching us because we were white. And it's true that if you've never experienced being racialised, living it for the first time feels like a caricature, from the movies, when the coloniser comes and the indigenous people come close and such. And you feel really weird because you say 'shit, I feel like a coloniser.' And you'd say, 'well yeah, that's exactly what it is.' The logics of racialisation stem from that.

Ignacio feels fetishised: he feels he is admired but not for who he understands himself to be and the values he holds, but what his appearance *represents*:

> It's really strange to feel like—because you really feel like a circus animal (*atracción de feria*)—and you know that at that moment your being is disjointed from what you are, and you become a fetish. I become a symbol, that is often based on a privilege, although there is also resentment towards things like that.

Ignacio goes on to explain that all his Chavista colleagues were racialised because none of them were '*catire*' like he was—Venezuelan Spanish for blonde. He explains he does not feel like a foreigner in Venezuela, but Chavistas feel that he is. It is not "until he discloses the fact

that he is with 'the process,' and Chavista," that "the tensions disappear," very much despite his race and privilege. The tensions seem to disappear because Chavistas feel he is a 'compatriot,' who is fighting for the Chavista cause, i.e., that he is on the 'correct' side. The underlying racialisation, however, is ever-present, as he himself admits: in his words, it is "obviously a dimension of the relationship that is always there."

In Spain, Ignacio felt he was part of the revolutionary struggle of Venezuela, he admits that he comes from a lower middle-class background, that his friends were immigrants from Latin America, that he enjoys reggaeton. He feels he is 'of the people.' In Venezuela, because he is white, and because he is from Western Europe, there is no understanding of him as even remotely part of 'the people.' It is only through his discourse and sympathy with, and knowledge of, Chavismo that he is accepted, despite being 'envied' or 'resented' (in Ignacio's words), for the interest he seemed to spark in women, as he later describes.

Ignacio rationalises all this, but is nonetheless quite surprised that racialisation plays out like this in Venezuela—a sign that race is not a debate that is openly had in Spain:

> More than skin tone, your [Venezuelans'] phenotypes are not in—I really don't understand where this rivalry comes from, but you could definitely see it was there.

Ignacio is comparing Venezuela to Bolivia, where indigenous populations are more numerous, a case where racialisation by phenotype makes more sense to him. He is unable to see how in Venezuela, more extensive admixture of black, indigenous and white populations has made skin-tone the principal marker of othering, as discussed previously. I also note that Ignacio does not feel racialised by the opposition, who he sees as white in its majority.

Rejection of Venezuelan autochthonous culture and Euro-philia

Solidarity activists also tie this alleged hatred against brown and black people to hatred of Venezuelan culture more broadly—a hate related to Ignacio's concept of 'white fetishization.' For Tim, the south-African journalist:

> All the white middle class and upper classes, they were all educated in International Schools or in Miami, and they've learned English and everything because they look to the United States for their economic opportunities. Socially and culturally, they reject indigenous Venezuelan culture and society [...] So it's a kind of [pause] it's a sort of self-hate of the ruling classes. A kind of mixture of, well they certainly hate the indigenous part of themselves, or the indigenous part of their society. As you can see at the current rallies where they put the stars and stripes up behind the stage and everything. They actually superimpose it. In screens. And the Israeli flag. So there's a kind of hatred of thinking of the white man as better. So much of this is subconscious. Buried under this concept of you know 'The Venezuelan' where we're all one. Underneath it, there's a hell of lot going on, but not too many people want to acknowledge it.

For Tim, the Venezuelan white opposition are in fact burying the indigenous parts of themselves underneath their *mestizaje* "where we're all one," discussed in chapter 2, and it was impressive to hear him speak on this particularly Latin American racial project. He was correctly informed: pro-government media, such as *TeleSur*, showed photographs of the Israeli flag and the American flag on the background of Guaidó's stage at the rally in February 2019—surrounded by dummies of Trump. In some rallies in the city of Punto Fijo, in the west of the country, the Venezuelan flag was lowered to raise the US one, this at a time when many in the opposition were hoping for US intervention (see Figure 13).

When Tim suggests the opposition "reject indigenous Venezuelan culture and society" he is, we assume, referring to what we could call 'autochthonous' Venezuelan culture. Venezuelan music is heavily influenced by afro-Caribbean rhythms, and food is influenced by indigenous produce, for example. Tim's understanding of this as 'indigenous' culture is contentious. Centuries of admixture, in rather complex ways, involved an 'amalgamation' of rituals, gastronomy, religion, symbols, and of many different cultural practices—an 'amalgamation' that has indeed also become part of Venezuela's nation-building.

A central part of President Chávez's agenda was to bring 'popular' Venezuelan culture, here understood as the symbols and practices of the popular classes, to the fore—those more often tied to their African and indigenous origins. For President Chávez, promoting the "re-foundation of national cultural policy" was a top priority (Fontes and Lessa 2019, 557), more so than for any other government in Venezuela's history. Chávez understood the importance of the "production, diffusion and consumption of symbolic objects created by a society" (Milza 1980, 362), and the deep roots it would leave on his movement—as I have argued one of the

most important marks of the movement's strength. By funding community television and radio stations, Chávez aimed to break the Venezuelan media's dependence on international production capital, but also, to disseminate a popular cultural identity (traditional dances, traditional music, traditional festivities), an identity that gave renewed value to the symbolic objects of a brown and black majority (Block 2016).

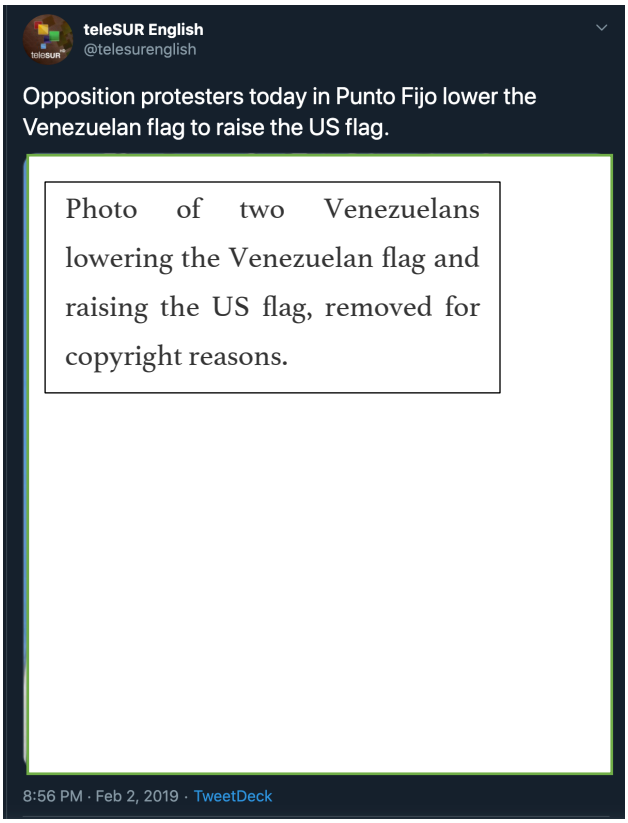


Figure 13. Screenshot @teleSUR (pro-government media) post showing Venezuelans raising the US flag, and lowering the Venezuelan one, posted February 2, 2019.

Although many solidarity activists assume that all the opposition rejects the indigenous side of themselves, which is no doubt the case with many Venezuelans who oppose the government, it is possible that in the highly politicised and antagonised environment other Venezuelans reject, instead, the bond that Chávez built between Venezuelan popular culture (that belongs to all Venezuelans) and his politico-social revolution. The Venezuelans that began the task of documenting traditional dances and music in the 1960s, for example, were mostly white—most notably the tobacco company Bigott started a foundation that "has been active in almost every area of cultural production since 1981" (Guss 2000, 22).

It is hard for solidarity activists to substantiate the claim that there is hatred of white Venezuelans towards Venezuelan popular culture. It is easier to claim that there is racial hatred, racial exclusion and through this hatred, a dislike and undermining for cultural practices (certain folk music, or certain festivities) that are traditionally associated with black and indigenous groups, but this is by no means generalisable. Venezuelan migrants in the interviews, as I discuss in the next chapter, reject certain personality traits that they associate with being part of 'the people,' (laziness, for instance) but I did not perceive a rejection towards Venezuelan popular culture. Most admitted they heartily miss their gastronomic culture, for instance.

What solidarity activists feel is white Venezuelans' rejection, or devaluation, of autochthonous Venezuelan culture, values, and symbols, is perhaps more specifically their allegiance, or love for US and Western culture. For James:

> There's no question that the right-wing elite of Venezuela is involved in doing what so many Latin Americans have done throughout history, which is to call upon the United States to get involved with the coup when they don't like the government. So this internal domestic betrayal, of the values of Latin Americans, is one of the most painful characteristics of the right-wing in Latin America. And they do it time and time and time again. It's painful to watch. I don't know when it's going to end.

Only one solidarity activist, Ignacio, points out that 'revolutionaries' (Chavistas) *also* share in this endo-racism, or 'euro-philia.' He discusses what he finds strange about two Venezuelan Chavista friends that were trying to stay illegally in Spain:

> That the ideas that they like are from Netflix, that the music they play is English music, that when they pass by a supermarket—something I never understood until I went to Venezuela—they go nuts over all the things they can find in a supermarket [...] That you can see they've really idealised capitalism.

Ignacio is unable to understand, or empathise, with Venezuelans who are fervent supporters of the Chávez and Maduro governments, but idealise capitalism. Here of course he is on point regarding Venezuelans' love for the West, which he finds self-deprecating of Venezuelan culture: importantly, that this is a phenomenon that extends transversally across the divide. This love for European and American culture can be understood as a product of white-hegemonic discourses, the influence of the foreign owned oil sector, post-colonialism more

broadly and living in the periphery. It affects all Venezuelans, indifferent of their political position.

Although the influence of the foreign-oil sector in the first half of the twentieth century on Venezuelans' admiration for European and American culture cannot be underplayed, the love for Netflix and English music also reflects a modern global preoccupation with whiteness and capital as symbols of social status that can be traced to the hegemony of the US' entertainment industry today, that exists regardless of admiration for dark-skinned Hugo Chávez. It is not a phenomenon necessarily endemic to Venezuelans.

One of my Venezuelan migrant interviewees, Cintia (the concert pianist—one of the few who was favourable to Chávez's movement initially but currently considers herself apolitical), partly agrees with Ignacio and James. When speaking of her rejection of military intervention she explains why she thinks other Venezuelans could be in favour:

> There's a part [of the population] that does not want sovereignty. That I see as something—I'm surely mistaken—but I think its part of the colonialist [*colonialista*] mentality. Let someone else do it. And like that, with whiplashes, with bombs.

Much like for James, for her, the idea that Venezuelans could support a violent removal of the government by foreign power, shows how Venezuelans denigrate their own sovereignty: what she calls their colonialist mentality, wanting to 'be something else,' to belong to the West. She also alludes to the idea of having others do the violent work. That certain Venezuelans are disloyal to their nation—and admiring of the West—is a discourse that circulates exclusively amongst Venezuelans who were at some point favourable to the government.

For Ignacio, meeting these friends in Madrid was a moment of reflection: he had expected Venezuelan Chavistas to abhor capitalism and American hegemony much like he does and other solidarity activists I interviewed do. Instead, these Venezuelan Chavistas did not see a contradiction between holding a fascination for a supermarket full of groceries, and loving and identifying with Chávez—an aspect of the division that points to ways in which the external groups can be far more intransigent than the groups on-the-ground in Venezuela. In other words, it seems the identity of those interviewed here is far more attached to the political ideals of Chavismo, than that of Chavistas in Venezuela.

From Ignacio's account, it would seem Chavistas in Venezuela have ideas about how power works *in Venezuela*; they do not extend that understanding to how power works in a global, post-colonial domain. One could also say that from their experience, these Chavistas simply do not see the relationship between the US, neoliberal hegemony, Netflix, English music, post-colonialism, racism, and an inordinate variety of products to choose from at supermarkets. They might be unconcerned with cultural vis-a-vis political and economic hegemonies—in other words, they understand power only in its "political" ascription. It could be that what they have learned from Chávez's discourse is limited to the context in Venezuela; or that they simply choose not to see the contradictions because they derive pleasure from capitalism's material benefits, status, and US' cultural output—in other words, that for historic reasons, they feel added self-value from consumption of American products or wearing branded clothes.

This is not incidentally the principal reason members of criminal gangs in the poorest sectors say they become involved in delinquent activities in Venezuela: wanting to project a specific image of themselves by wearing and possessing certain expensive (usually American) artefacts (Moreno et al. 2009; Crespo 2016). Through the entertainment industry, American cultural hegemony has been pervasive to the extent that it has naturalised the way we attach our self-worth to 'things', an opportunity that branding exploits. Neoliberalism's strongest weapon has been to impinge our self-value on the things we own, making desire for new, better, more valuable things a perpetual self-debasing circle, almost impossible to break out of. The point here is that unbridled love for consumption is not inherently a Venezuelan problem: consumerism is an existential paradigm of 'late modernity,' even when the historic social hierarchies built by foreign oil companies have produced a uniquely Venezuelan variety of this problem. Ignacio sees an incongruence in Chavista Venezuelans because he expects them to have a similar moral system to his own, or at least, expects them to have immaterial things on which to impinge their self-worth—he also expects them to abhor the role the US has played in the continent as much as he does.

Ignacio dismisses his Venezuelan Chavista friends as not true revolutionaries, but it is also possible Venezuelans are *particularly* fascinated with capitalism's dazzling products because they are restricted and largely unavailable in Venezuela— making them even more desirable. This is perhaps one of the most striking contradictions of the Bolivarian Revolution itself. If Ignacio's account of dazzled Venezuelans is generalisable, as he seems to think so, the Bolivarian Revolution might have inadvertently resulted in a reversal of what the project

intended to do in the first place: among other things diminish consumerism and foment Venezuelan ethnic and cultural values. Although they are aware of the detrimental effects to popularity that Venezuela's dire economy has on public loyalty to the Chávez movement, these are not the thoughts that confront most solidarity activists. It is also still not sufficient for them to believe that supporters of Maduro could be in a minority.

Racism on the other side of the fence

Most Venezuelans do describe instances of xenophobia against them as minor, incidental events that cannot be generalised. Jeison, a brown Venezuelan currently in Mexico starting a pop-singing career, tells me:

> It's really a minority that gets stupid regarding xenophobia. Yes, I have lived certain episodes, very short ones, but to the extent that, for example, I get to a McDonald's, and I realise that there are like giggles, because of the way I speak. I just swallow it up, because remember the average employee that works at a fast food chain, or as they say here, 'el fast food', is not really someone who has studied a lot. So in the end, I have a kind of talent for humiliating people without insulting them or using bad words, when they do something like that. So I tell them, 'what are you laughing about? My accent?' And I take it from there. I tell them, 'do you know that I know the Latin American manager of McDonalds? So, if I lift up my phone, and report this, you're out of a job.' But it's a lie, I'm taking the piss (*le estoy cayendo a cuento*). They go pale. 'But I'm not going to do that because, as a foreigner, and as a Venezuelan, I'm going to tell you something: I love your country. Your country opened its doors to me, so don't misrepresent your country, because Mexicans are welcoming, and what you're doing is bullying.'

For those living in Perú especially—the country that after Colombia has received most Venezuelan migrants—xenophobia felt more widespread. Adriana, a young chemist and a professional violinist in her late twenties, recalls the distress that meant not being able to afford anything in Venezuela. Her family was unable to cope with hyper-inflation, even though she was working two full time jobs as a violinist in an orchestra and as a chemistry teacher. After her violin was stolen, her main source of income, she chose to migrate to a country in South America because "it was closer and cheaper than any other country," she explains. A week before she was leaving, she was robbed again on a bus in her hometown of Coro, a city in the west of the country. The robber hit her on the head once he suspected she had hidden her

phone—an experience most Venezuelan migrant interviewees were familiar with. She was nonetheless one of the luckier Venezuelan migrants I spoke with; Adriana managed to save enough to buy a plane ticket to Lima, Peru, where she has lived since November 2017 (other interviewees I spoke to travelled by bus across the continent).

Adriana suggests xenophobia against Venezuelans is very common in Perú because Venezuelans are willing to work for less than minimum wage. She describes how she was belittled by Peruvians while living as a migrant, especially by her boss, who she says, "had money and believed he was some kind of a big shot." She openly confronted her boss' attitude, but she eventually had to quit. She now teaches chemistry at a school and plays for a smaller orchestra. For her, Peruvians are racists even amongst themselves—especially against those they see as 'indigenous':

> In Peru they're a bit racist amongst themselves, amongst Peruvians themselves. Racist and classist. I mean, yeah, here people are very differentiated by zones, popular [working-class] zones, and expensive zones, for example. Certain municipalities are expensive, and that's where people with more money live, and others are poorer, so those people with money denigrate a lot. In fact, they often use a term 'choclo'. It's a bit pejorative. And they say it to people that are from the *sierra*, because they are like—they come from, indigenous peoples.

Her understanding is very telling of *mestizaje*, and especially the idea Venezuelans have of their own '*Patria café con leche*' national narrative, previously discussed. In her interview, Adriana makes no mention of Venezuelans as potentially racist against indigenous and black populations, or the similar differentiation of poor and wealthy zones in Caracas. This might be because she feels she does not engage in this behaviour, or perhaps because she comes from a small-city, Coro, where class distinctions, at least in terms of housing, are not so stark as in Caracas where the city's mountainous landscape is marked by the proximity of the barrios and the taller middle- and upper-class buildings.

An Afro-Venezuelan against Chavismo

To further nuance the complexities of Venezuela's divide, I point at César's understanding, a strongly anti-Chávez afro-Venezuelan in his late thirties:

> And the truth is, if you seriously look at it, let's say, those problems in Venezuela, like racism, like whatever—we had come a long way in overcoming them, to the point that they were not really a reason—I mean, in Venezuela they are much less, it was always less strong than in other countries in Latin America, for example.

For César, a more pressing concern than the racism he 'could' feel as an afro-Venezuelan, is ridding Venezuela of "the criminal government," as he calls Maduro's government throughout the interview. César, like Adriana, points to the racism of 'other countries in Latin America.' César has only visited, and not lived in these other countries, so of course, he cannot know this from experience, but the idea that the issue would be worse in other countries is César's way of minimising the gravity with which solidarity activists see the issue, comparatively. César openly resists the idea of framing the conflict as racial. Although he does not purport to speak on behalf of all Venezuelans, or all afro-Venezuelans, he feels that the framing of the divide as racial is an integral part of the government's discourse, what the government wants people like solidarity activists (and ordinary Venezuelans) to believe, in order to garner support. This is not, he believes, because Chávez is improving anything for black and indigenous communities.

César denies, to a certain extent, the importance of fighting a battle against racism in Venezuela because he ties the racial aspect of the conflict with part of the government's discourse—and he refuses to accept it in these terms, or acknowledge even a fraction of the work the Bolivarian movement has done in this regard (by passing the Organic Law Against Racial Discrimination, for example, see Rivas Brito and Ruette-Orihuela 2019). This comes at the cost of admitting, and fighting very real racism in Venezuela. When asked about Figuera's death, for instance, Cesar simply complies with the opposition's account of the narrative, i.e. that Figuera was burned alive because he was robbing someone—not that they killed him because he was poor and afro-Venezuelan, and therefore in the eyes of the opposition crowd, both a thief and a Chavista.

César also claimed that Barlovento and other majority afro-descendant coastal towns, historically tied to cocoa plantations, have been "handed over to narco-trafficking groups." He tells me his father, who used to return to his hometown every fortnight "stopped going when he saw men with muskets on motorbikes" parading through the streets to instil fear. He then tells the story of his cousin who quit his cocoa business that produced small-scale artesian chocolate because he was continuously being robbed, in the fields, in his shop, and on the trucks.

Venezuelan cocoa is renowned around the world and is sold at a high price abroad in dollars. Because hyperinflation has made Venezuelan currency practically worthless, selling Venezuelan cocoa has become extremely lucrative for these gangs—one of the few ways of getting foreign currency (which cannot be bought and sold legally). I add that cocoa is also not subject to US sanctions, at least as of 2019 (Mersie *Reuters* June 7 2019).

According to an article published by *BBC news*, these gangs operate by trafficking drugs, extorting farmers, and kidnapping (Pardo *BBC news* July 28 2019). Pardo writes "here the logic of violence seems to have liaised itself with extreme poverty." Although the government publicly reported it had agreed to a peace treaty with the armed gangs in 2015, the director of the state of Miranda Police, where most of these gangs are based, claims the negotiations essentially handed over control of the areas to the gangs. Luis Cedeño, the director of the Observatory of Organised Crime, confirms this, adding that gangs only agreed to put down their arms if the state guaranteed that the police and the armed guard would not interfere in those areas. "The state conceded its monopoly on violence to delinquency," Cedeño concludes. According to official records 8 gangs were dismantled in Barlovento and 83 people were jailed, and yet homicide rates have only barely decreased.

From these reports, it is clear the government's gang policies have been wanting. Venezuela has the second highest rate of violent deaths in world, currently, 81.4 deaths for every 100,000 citizens. Most of these figures overwhelmingly affect the lowest income areas. I note that this important fact about Venezuela was kept out of solidarity activists' discourse, either because they feel Chávez's government has no part in this increase, or because they are not informed about this aspect of the crisis. Given most Venezuelan migrant interviewees were victims of crime (including homicide), this was a major factor of opposition to the government: what they felt was its inability to rein in crime.

Additionally, the UN Human Rights Commission report (UNHRC 2019, 14) notes how the government targets violence against indigenous leaders, specifically the Pemon community, opposed to the government and who have vowed to let humanitarian aid in through the border. Unfortunately, the report makes no mention of afro-descendant Venezuelan communities. The situation in many of the majority afro-descendant areas in Venezuela is unclear. The stories have left the media radar, so I rely on information that is about two to three years old. Nevertheless, the important question becomes: has Chavismo made a

difference for those who have been discriminated, oppressed, excluded? For the indigenous and afro-Venezuelan communities?

US sanctions have no doubt profoundly harmed working-class, brown and poor Venezuelans. The benefit government policy is having on the most vulnerable sectors of the population, and specifically the black communities of the coast, is not a question that is being asked sufficiently by solidarity activists. Whether César wants to believe that racism is merely a governmental tactic and not a problem he experiences, is a speculative endeavour. Although this thesis cannot speak to the extent of this, it would seem the government benefits from transnational solidarity activists framing the conflict in racial terms because it forces the conflict to be seen on moral terms: it signals to those with progressive sensibilities globally, that Chavistas are morally superior, and (for some) justifies a populist stifling of the debate or exclusion of the opposition entirely.

Solidarity activists' more idealist (vis-a-vis pragmatist) moral system make them less interested in critically judging whether Chávez's government has indeed helped the socio-economic outcomes of the non-white majority, in ways that supersede discourse. Solidarity activists, instead, distinguish between what I have just described, i.e. '*doing* something' for the brown majority, and *having* a 'brown majority' hold power against US-led factions of the opposition.

Conclusions

Few (non-afro-descendant) Venezuelan scholars accept Venezuela's racism, as discussed in chapter 2. Some do, however, suggest more specifically that racism was ubiquitous, not only from the rich towards the poor. In an interview with Cecily Hilleary (2014), for example, academic Carolina Acosta-Alzuru speaks of the latent racism Venezuelan soap-operas and beauty pageants embrace, and points to the existing skin-colour and class correlation. However, she adds emphatically that Chávez "didn't put it [racism] on the table to raise consciousness. No, no. He wanted to use it to his own advantage."

The ill-intention this comment assumes about Chávez's motives for supporting anti-racist measures—whether one supports his movement or not—is a conjecture meant to question Chávez's moral standing. It is the same 'moral logic' some solidarity activists like Ignacio use

to derive moral superiority from supporting Chavismo because they, rather unquestioningly, suppose that all of those opposed to Chávez and Maduro are racist.

As I have argued in a forthcoming paper (Subbiah 2020), the fact is that the government is able to frame the divide in racial terms, regardless of whether subjects feel racism is a 'problem' or not in Venezuela—and the data on the correlation of socio-economic groups and skin-colour, (among many other things) show that it is. Chávez's discourse on race resonates with sectors of Venezuela's population. It points to the latent racism that associates dark-skin and under-privilege. Even if we were to assume, like César does, that Figuera's death had nothing to do with his skin colour, the structural inequalities embedded in Venezuelan society, inherited from colonial times, hold that a majority of lower income groups are brown, indigenous and black. This meant Figuera was assumed to be a 'Chavista' or a 'robber'; either way these are characteristics that relate to his skin. It becomes simplistic to say that the government discourse on race is fabricated because it stagnates a debate on race that desperately needs to be had.

It is also dangerous, on the other hand, to associate the violent factions of the opposition with all opposition to the government because the idea that one faction is morally superior to the other, silences any criticism that can be made of that government. It assumes, rather than seeks to confirm, whether and if afro-Venezuelan communities and indigenous communities are indeed being protected by the state.

Chapter 7. The discursive '*pueblo*'

> [It was] rewarding just seeing how, you know, we're told that ordinary people, they're the reason why are things bad, you know, everyone's just lazy or reactionary or whatever. But Venezuela, to me, showed the complete opposite: where the most politicised people were, in what you could deem ordinary, in inverted commas, people. I don't like the term 'ordinary people.' I think for me they were the most extraordinary people in Venezuela [Fernando, personal interview March 2019].

Here I try to answer who 'the people' stands for in each group to point at the moral assumptions embedded in their respective imaginaries, what Laura Grattan (2016) has pithily called the act of 'peopling' that stands at the centre of populist logic. For solidarity activists, fighting—or speaking on the behalf of the disenfranchised in Venezuela—is inherently 'good,' or more fundamentally what it *means* to stand in solidarity. In broad terms, solidarity activists seek to show their love and admiration for a politically conscious, "extraordinary people" in Fernando's words—in a bid to strengthen the validity of their opinions on the country. As I have noted in chapter 4, social justice demands not merely that 'the people' live better or are given maximal opportunities: for many solidarity activists, the only way to guarantee success on these fronts is by dispelling the elite.

Venezuelan migrants, on the other hand, seek to distance themselves from 'the people,' a majority whom they see as 'lazy' or 'cunning.' They often use the notion of '*viveza criolla*' to describe this cunning and to explain some of the reasons they plan on never returning. Simultaneously, though, their discourse takes that same 'people' as a majority of Venezuelans, to validate their claim against Maduro's legitimacy. For them, 'the people' stand overwhelmingly against a government who has harmed them, and who they feel is responsible for the crisis.

The political consciousness of 'the people'

Socialism would appear to be the motor guiding solidarity activism. But a closer look at the most 'gratifying' or 'rewarding' aspects of solidarity, according to the interviewees, reveals that underlying this commitment is the ultimate goal of putting the brown working class, 'the people,' rather than the white privileged, *first*. In other words, it is a moral retribution of initially misplaced power.

For Ricardo, a Spanish activist in his early forties who travelled for six months around South America with his partner Victoria (whom I also interviewed), the strength of the Bolivarian revolution is itself the discursive *pueblo*:

> First [it] provides dignity, right? And then it provides organisational capacity, that I believed soared in the Chávez period, the organisational capacity of the people, not waiting for the state to give you everything, to do everything for you, but organise you in your own communities, the issue of the communal councils. [...] I think [the project's] strength is the people, who demonstrate it because they go out to support it, so we have to trust in that people [...] for me, the strength of the process is not so much what comes from above, but what has been built from below.

It comes as no surprise that solidarity activists who defend the Chávez and Maduro governments, are drawn to and admire the social movements, the trade unions, workers, the women's groups, that formed the bases of Chávez's popularity. For them, the 'people' are the strength of the movement, not "what comes from above," i.e. the leaders of that movement (although these are no doubt important and legitimate as I discuss in a later section). Again, Ricardo underlines that 'the people' go out on the streets to support Maduro—suggesting President Maduro is popular—and hints that this is because the Bolivarian process empowers, gives dignity, and awakens self-organisation and mobilisation. Importantly, that 'the people' could be dependent on the state for food is seen, by *both* groups, as negative. Venezuelan migrant interviewees often suggested that 'the people' *wanted* the government to give them everything, that they are conformists, or passive receptors of aid, as I explore in the last section of this chapter. Interestingly, Ricardo suggests that the government has, on the contrary, helped 'the people' overcome this dependency—"*que el estado te dé todo*" [that the state gives you everything].

Mack, a young American in his late thirties who, for a time, worked for *TeleSUR* (the international media outlet, in English, financed by the Venezuelan government) conducted in-depth interviews in the slums and working-class areas of Caracas for a month. From that experience, Mack describes his deep admiration for the consciousness he felt the poor of Venezuela had acquired with the Bolivarian Revolution:

> Even people that you meet that have an amount of discontent, were still supportive of the process, and were really conscious of the role of the US in all of this and the right-wing's role in all of it [...] everyone there has a feeling that they have been a part of the political process in the beginning and still are now. There's the opposition that want a coup, that's one side, but then there's the people who are critical but they understand that they, for the first time, have an actual way to resolve things internally, and through different democratic processes. [...] there is just such a high level of participation, where people who had really hard working lives, and whatever, were taking time out of there day to like go and gather and like debate and discuss and really understand, all of these new things that were happening [...] It really showed me that there is just a completely different level of political consciousness.

If as Mack argues above, those inside Chavismo have internal mechanisms through which they channel demands, then democracy is alive and well in Venezuela. Although *what* those mechanisms of internal criticism are, is unclear from his statement, Mack implies that the government has put in place a grassroots machinery that channels popular and working class demands and concerns to community leaders—it is this consciousness and interest in politics that he contrasts with his own American 'people,' to highlight how special he feels it actually is.

Abdo, the Sudanese-British journalist, makes a similar comparison, pointing to Venezuelans' 'political knowledge':

> I mean our cameraman today, who I was filming with, was more knowledgeable than most journalists back in the UK. Like when I go out with a cameraman in the UK, and I ask them what their thoughts are, they say they 'I don't do politics,' I get that a lot. But here, everyone is deeply, deeply embedded in the political knowledge of what's going on.

Evidently many demands are not being channelled: among them those of the opposition. Solidarity activists dismiss the opposition as coup-mongering and therefore profoundly undemocratic. But this is because, for them, the truly democratic debate happens amongst 'the

people'—as Mack adds, "who have really hard-working lives." The argument seems to imply that the opposition do not want democracy, so why should they get to have a say in it? That the people's debate should be prioritised over the debate of the country in its entirety—the *Demos* rather than just the *Populus*—sees in the empowerment of the Chavista governments (and the disempowerment of the elite) a way to enact 'justice,' i.e., a way to empower those who have not held power before.

Chase, another white American activist, in his mid-sixties, who had been very involved in Nicaragua solidarity during the Iran-Contra scandal in the US (and flaunts a shirt that says "We will not be silent") tells me about his favourite memory from his only trip to Venezuela in 2010:[17]

> I remember one area we went to; we had a meeting with somebody in the schoolhouse. They had had their communal council meeting the night before. And so up on the board was their list of priorities—what they wanted to do with the money that they were going to get. And the number of votes for each thing. And their top priority was to put a fence around the school yard so the cows didn't get into the school yard, and you know, leave their business for these kids to step in [laughs]. You don't get any purer democracy than that.

Again, it is the idea that 'the people'—for him, members of the communal councils—are so highly invested in the political decisions of their communities, that fascinates Chase. A particularly colourful, even trivial example of what these democratic decisions can amount to, was profoundly moving to him.

Perla, one of my few female solidarity activists, from Argentina, explains her admiration for the Bolivarian revolution as the first popular movement in Latin America that came to power through the existing mechanisms of "bourgeois democracy" (rather than through violence):

> The Bolivarian revolution takes place in the conditions of our time. Not in the ideal conditions of books, but the real conditions that we inherited. This is how history is built,

[17] Chase believes it could also have been in 2009, he is not entirely certain.

> with the sacrifices of now, that demand change. In challenging the privilege of the powerful, there will always be trying and difficult conditions [...] but these are being overcome. So we need to defend flesh and blood revolutions, balancing whether they are defending the people, or the powerful.

Perla exposes a binary understanding of the political world, that *both* groups in fact share: 'the people' versus 'the powerful,' a reasoning that implies many things, among which, is a sense that the powerful could never, for example, work *for* 'the people'—it suggests each group's interests necessarily collide. For Urbinati (2019, 57) this discourse proposes a paradox where 'the people' can never ultimately "directly rule." Perla is assuming Chávez and Maduro are still part of the people, and *not* the powerful: for her, the traditional business elite allied with the US (although she does concede this should be checked). Perla's conception of the politically powerful refers only to sectors that have been privileged *historically and racially*—that 'the people' have gained political power in the Bolivarian Revolution, in Perla's view, does not mean they are now 'powerful'; even if Chavistas have *de facto* become the political elite. (Belonging to the political elite is what Urbinati and the opposition would consider 'powerful,' this being evidently one of the major points of contention between the groups.)

Solidarity activists' admiration for the working class and their understanding that they should rule over their lives is entirely legitimate. Chavismo has made this possible in their eyes: it has given the marginalised an opportunity to do what is truly important to them. However, this understanding of democracy and of Chavismo's legitimacy as representative of 'the people' presents two issues. First, it assumes that only the ruling classes oppose Maduro. It justifies contempt towards the opposition sector of the Venezuelan population, but it also disregards those who are not members of the ruling class, have also been disenfranchised, but are against the government for a number of reasons—including the fact that they depend on food baskets, but are many times forced to pledge political allegiance to receive them regularly. It also assumes that wealthy and business sectors of Venezuelan society always oppose Maduro. There are sectors within Chavismo that have amassed fortunes under the auspices of the government by various legal and illegal means; they are known ostensibly as the "*boliburgueses*"—a neologism that comes from the words Bolivarian and bourgeoisie. Many of these '*boliburgueses*' are being investigated around the world, some were part of the Panamá Papers (*Deutsche Welle* September 17 2019). They have been criticised from within Chavismo as early as 2007, in the online pro-government forum *Aporrea*, as sectors inside the government that only pretend to be "*rojo-rojito*", ('really, really red,' meaning very Chavista), and socialist

but have continued the highly corrupt and clientelistic practices of all the past governments (see Evans *Aporrea* October 25 2007; Duque *Aporrea* October 2 2014).

Knowledge, identity and positionality

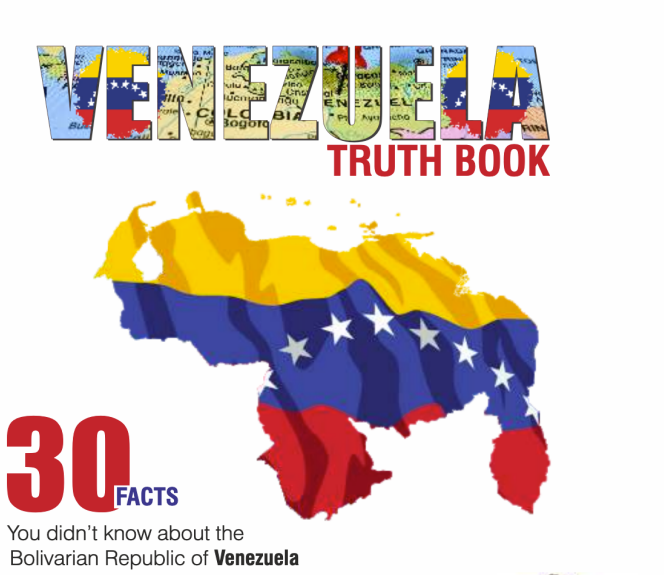


Figure 14. The Hugo Chávez People's Defense Front (HCPDF) in Canada showcase this report entitled "30 Facts." I note that all gains mentioned in the report have unfortunately been reversed, as discussed in chapter 2.

Solidarity activists, that are mostly white and European,[18] are not, by their own understanding of the Venezuelan people and their sovereignty, part of this 'people.' And yet, solidarity activists feel that their passionately strong opinions on Venezuela are not entirely justified if they are not somehow part of 'the people' they argue for. This was clearly a complex disjunctive all solidarity activists felt they needed to address: their racial understanding of 'the people' of Venezuela meant they—as white Europeans, Americans, Australians, Canadians, Spaniards, with few exceptions—have no place in that 'people.' There are several ways activists deal with this: they either 1) try to show that their knowledge is superior to that other

[18] As I have discussed in chapter 1, I had two young black activists participate, one female Latin American academic (Argentinean) and one male activist from Brazil.

Venezuelans; 2) imply that white upper- and middle-class opposition Venezuelans do not have their nation's interest at heart—and they do; or 3) dispose of the notion of ethnic and racial belonging altogether, and underline a global class-socialist struggle that transcends national boundaries (which, some argued, was more worthy than 'petty' identity politics). In this sense, traditional national belonging is both *affirmed* in the support for sovereignty against US imperialism and afro-indigeneity as the principal character uniting a Venezuelan 'people'; and *questioned* in the idea of a 'global' and 'universal' working class, to which they feel they do belong.

Additionally, they feel the need to justify how and why their opinions are valid despite the fact some of them have never even visited Venezuela. Generally, activists older than fifty justified their opinions by demonstrating certain knowledge about Venezuela (see Figure 14). For example, by demonstrating knowledge of specific historic events like the riots of 'El Caracazo,' or knowledge of Venezuela's geography, as well as by demonstrating specific knowledge of the social progress accrued in the Chávez era. Tim (the white South African-British journalist) goes so far as to suggest that he has a better understanding of the country than white middle- and upper-class Venezuelans:

> Yeah, they all live in a bubble. And they don't mix. The middle classes they don't go into barrios, they've never been into them. You have a ludicrous situation where somebody like me knows more about, with bad Spanish, knows more about their own country than quite large numbers of the people who live in it. I mean that's jaw dropping when you think about it. Have no idea. Absolutely no idea, this sort of faceless mob, as far as they're concerned out there who are going to.

Tim here is justifying his ability to form an opinion about the country and the way it is governed—were it to be questioned by Venezuelans (which it very often is). Here he is implying he knows more about the country than middle (not even just upper) class Venezuelans because he has gone into the barrios—suggesting he is more aligned with the people's interests than the white-settler class. This alignment to 'the people'—the dispossessed—is key because it presumes that his interest in Venezuela is well-intentioned. Whereas for him, the middle- and upper- classes abide by the interests of whiteness, the US, capitalism, and the rich (again a moral argument).

Moreover, Tim, James, and Ignacio argue that Venezuelans themselves reject their belonging to the nation when they reject the part of themselves that is black and indigenous, as described

in chapter 6. The opposition's narrative, aligned with US interests, is treasonous (as Mack also suggested in the section above). Because alignment with the US goes against national sovereignty, the opposition *deserves* (in a populist understanding) to be excluded, or at least not considered.

To form an opinion on Venezuela, knowledge of the country and allegiance to its 'people,' are more important requisites than national-belonging or having been born there or having lived there—an idea contrary to what Venezuelan migrants feel. I discuss how this 'battle' plays out in chapter 9; for now, I note that for some of the younger activists, a commitment to the 'global working class' fight and the socialist project (as well as the fact that some of their governments were involved in freezing Venezuela's assets abroad), was enough to justify their support for Maduro's presidency. To these activists, being invested in a global socialist project necessarily meant being invested in the narrative that surrounds Venezuela, given that for them Venezuela is fighting against capitalism, and any country attempting that fight needs to be supported. The global working-class struggle is irrespective of national, ethnic or racial identity and belonging. In the words of the black-British young solidarity activist, Jack:

> So that's sort of where the passion for Venezuela came from, because it corresponded with the history of our struggle. And to be a socialist is not just to care about what's happening in your own country, it's to care about the working class of every country and what they're struggling for.

In a different part of the interview, stressing this idea of his allegiance to a global 'people', Jack adds:

> Obviously, our idea when it comes to socialism – it's a mass movement, it's a movement of the working class, it's a movement which is rooted among the people, it's a movement that should be organised among the people, work among the people. We have to be part of the people. And in practice I think Chávez realises that he makes it a reality because he is raised up from the people, he is speaking to them, he is not coming from the outside. He is speaking as one of them, as sort of them, while realising their own passions, their own visions for their country. And that love doesn't come from people who have said 'oh you must love Chávez,' 'you must love this guy.' It's come because he's actually done what he's promised. His deeds, his words have been validated by deeds, so his practice has proven his theory and that is sort of where the affection and passion come from.

By sharing in their struggle, Jack makes himself a part of 'the people'—the disenfranchised—of Venezuela. In a sense, this is essentially what many scholars would say 'populist' politicians are able to manoeuvre effectively: they construct a discourse that empathises authentically with the struggles of a large majority, making themselves a 'true' representative of that majority (usually the working class or poor) even when they themselves were brought up in the upper- or middle-classes.[19]

Here, young solidarity activists *feel* that they are part of the global working class, although most of them are educated middle-class. All solidarity activists managed to get into and complete university, for example. Their commitment and empathy towards the working-class in their own countries stems, in part, from having been part of a working-class family, or for some, from having been educated in a struggling state school. This is Liesel's case, a top-tier university student, transgender activist, who feels that the argument that their support of Venezuela is 'invalid because they are not Venezuelan,' comes from 'identity politics':

> And Venezuela fits into that, because it's not enough for Marxists just to parade around changing society, we have to have an understanding of politics. We have to participate in struggles, with other people, and working people. We have to be serious about politics and that involves our position on Venezuela and campaigning on Venezuela [...] A lot of what I get is actually from the identity politics crowd. The opposition, the right-wing is never afraid to use identity politics. But because the British left is so weak on it, the right wing tends to think, if you say, 'this offends me as a Venezuelan, stop doing it,' everyone will stop doing it. And they get quite shocked and upset when it doesn't happen.

Liesel's point here, as explained further on in the interview, is that those that believe they shouldn't be involved with defending Venezuela's government, "equate identity with politics." Without entering a theoretical discussion on identity politics, which is as convoluted as a discussion on populism, I note simply what this politics means for Liesel: a politics that constructs divisions based on gender, race, ethnicity, and national belonging, i.e., a politics that

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[19] Some leftists would label the centrality of the working-class in Jack's discourse as 'workerist'— in other words, as an excessive preoccupation with the working class, and its centrality in the struggle against capitalism.

precludes discussion or debate. Affinity with Marxism is not seen as a part of these identity constructions in Liesel's conception—a potential problem given they fail to see how an ideological identity can work in an equally emotionally powerful way.

> Because it's not just about the fact that I'm doing it because I'm Marxist, I'm a socialist. It's also because all of the people who are expressing solidarity with Venezuela, none of them are doing it because of identity politics. Or maybe a few, but can you think of any? Because it represents an idea.

Liesel's solidarity with Venezuela is 'noble' or 'moral' in their eyes precisely because it represents an *idea* (what we might normally understand as an *ideal*) and not an identity. Liesel's point, much like the solidarity Butler envisioned discussed in chapter 3, is that people can be united in solidarity for Venezuela despite their different identities: solidarity work de facto transcends these boundaries.

Ignacio, on the other hand, who has spent considerable time thinking about the Bolivarian project and its ideals and possesses a deep knowledge of the country's political culture—unusual for being such a young activist—thinks of himself as a Chavista, and as a Venezuelan (although he is Spanish). He is no doubt one of the most committed solidarity activists I met. It is precisely this feeling of thinking of his identity as Chavista, and his deep knowledge of Chavismo, that he feels justifies his deep involvement with the country's politics. For him the most rewarding aspect of his solidarity work is how he feels a part of the 'people' and the Revolution:

> Seventeen-year-old boys who knew perfectly well how to defend their city, their village, were there to be an imperialist invasion, because they had been given military training (*entrenamiento militar*). That's what's so rewarding. That's what you don't forget. Because then you connect it with—you walk past Chavez's grave and you see it. It's having felt Venezuela. That's why I always carry this [he shows me a medal with the sign 4F, signalling February 4th 1992, the day Chavez organised a coup against President Pérez]. And there's not one day when you don't reference Venezuela, or feel Chavista. There you will always be the little Spaniard. But that's ok. You're the little Spaniard who is a Chavista, but you are a Chavista, which is more important. That's the most gratifying thing.

Love for Chávez and Maduro

> Whatever happens they will never beat Chávez, because I am not Chávez, Chávez is an unbeaten people... You too are Chávez (2012 campaign slogan).

Admiration for the leader at the head of it all, Hugo Chávez, was not the basis of solidarity activists' support for his and Maduro's government—in slight contrast to my initial expectation. Part of my statistical content analysis (see Appendix C) in fact, suggested that the phrase 'trade union' appeared more frequently than 'Hugo Chávez,' in pro-government solidarity English media. Admiration for Chávez comes from solidarity activists' understanding of Chávez as a very charismatic president, but more importantly from what his relationship to 'the people' was.

Mack explains this complex relationship between his feelings of admiration for Chávez, Chavismo as a political ideology, and 'the people':

> I think that what made me really passionate about the project and I think what made—and for the people I met in Venezuela it was the same thing—it was, on the surface you know, Chávez he's so charismatic, he's lovable, he's just like as a figure you're drawn to him, which is why I was initially drawn to him, right? I was drawn to who he was, that he was brave and what he believed in, the philosophy of equality, and the poor being able to be the makers of history and all of those things. So it was the morality, the ideals, and the personality that drives you into it, but then the most amazing thing about it, is the movement.

I note both the feeling that circulates around Mack's admiration for the Venezuelan people who support Chávez, what he describes as 'movement'; and his love for the idea of the poor as 'makers of history'—a moral feeling of supporting something inherently 'good.' Much in line with what Block (2016) argues, it seems that for Mack it is Chávez's unique 'mimetisation'—coming from and becoming— 'the people' that *legitimises* his leadership. This also applies to Maduro (originally a bus driver) even when some solidarity activists were critical of his administration.

For Perla, the Argentinean activist and academic, Chávez's humble origins are fundamental in making him who he is, this "fount of love" she describes:

> Hugo Chávez was a man that enjoyed extraordinary capacities, with a sensibility—love. Genuine love for others, love that was evident in every one of the pats he gave each boy or girl that came near him, for the humblest of his *pueblo*. They carry their humble origin, like that of Evo Morales, in their heart. It's burned on them (*lo tienen marcado a fuego*) and it leads them to love their people profoundly, because that is where they came from.

Perla also reflects this understanding that Chávez's legitimacy comes from his humble—afro-indigenous—origins. These origins, in a sense, guarantee true sensibility and care for those that are most in need. Although this is no doubt a loose guarantee, Chávez's discourse—his racial discourse in particular—speaks to the humblest segment of Venezuela's population, which Perla admires deeply.

Damien, the Australian-Russian journalist who has interviewed several very high-profile leaders, also underlines Chávez's origins:

> There are two ways in which I saw President Chávez. One way, I saw him as a revolutionary anti-imperialist leader who actually cared for the ordinary and working-class people of Venezuela. You could feel it. You could really feel it during those 13 years that he was in power, that direct connection which he felt with the ordinary people of Venezuela, and a lot of this was influenced by his own upbringing. His parents were teachers in a working-class family, not impoverished, but still. He learned from a very young age what the life was like for the ordinary people of Venezuela and of course his grandmother was a huge influence on him. So I believe because of that he developed this direct consciousness with the people of the barrios, and the workers, campesinos, everyone. And you could always see it, in his addresses, in the nature of his reforms, and in his vision, his political vision.

Damien points to Chávez's 'authenticity' when he describes the way Chávez *cared*. As Canovan (2005) asserts in *The People*, this push for transparency is also central to the populist message. I discuss the importance of care in justifying interviewees political positions in the last chapter, specifically how each side argues that the other side 'does not care.' Here I underline how both Damien and Perla feel that Chávez cares, and how this is a central aspect of their admiration for him. I note authenticity has been discussed extensively by journalists as *the* quality for the politician of the 21st century, in the era of social media (especially as it related to Hillary Clinton's supposed deficiencies in the elections of 2016). As Julia Azari (2015) insightfully suggests in a short article for *Vox* magazine, "the implicit argument is that by virtue of the realness of their personalities and convictions, 'authentic' politicians like Donald Trump and

Bernie Sanders will change the political system." For Damien, Chávez's working-class origins gave him the ability to connect—and represent— 'ordinary people', a representation seen as the only way to be an 'authentic' (and legitimate) politician.

Some of my solidarity activists also felt the need to defend Maduro against those who criticise him. When I asked Perla about Maduro more specifically, she again underlines where he comes from, and the importance of defending him because he is the 'face' of the 'popular subject':

> What's at stake here is a people: a historic project, a popular subject that become a historic subject with Chavismo, and today Maduro is the face of that project. I think he's a leader that, similarly to Chávez and Evo Morales, is tied at the core to his origins, to his popular origins. He always reclaims this, and he highlights that he is a workers' president. He has experience in the student movement, in the labour movement, and he comes from there. Of the barrio assemblies, in the factories, the workshops, and he never forgets that, and that gives him enormous sensitivity.

In another quote, Victoria one of the three female solidarity activists, explains why she feels Maduro deeply deserves her support, and explains how Chávez's posthumous magnification has exempted him from the strong criticism that now befalls Maduro:

> Chávez has now been aggrandised—even the opposition has aggrandised him, because he's not there anymore. If he were, they would surely treat him like they treat Maduro—that's a fact [...] I give a major vote for Maduro, yes. Of course, seeing contradictions, and seeing very good things. But for me, for example—I think it's very difficult to find a leader, at the world level, I'm not talking only about Latin America, but around the world, that can sit in front of any person that grants him an interview, or in front of his people, and that can talk as Maduro talks: looking in the eyes, feeling, thrilling. When he goes out and talks in front of the population, when he does it in front of a Spanish interviewer, and he's going to be on television. That is, he is able to look in the eye, and feel. I don't think that's fake. It's very hard to fake. Very hard.

Jack, the young black-British activist, tells me he admires Maduro's humble origins, again, seeing him as a true representative of the working-class of Venezuela:

> I'm very, very happy to stand in solidarity with Maduro, because firstly, I like to think, where has Maduro come from? He used to be a bus driver, or something like that. This is

> someone who now is the president of this country, now has been raised by the party, by the working class, by the movement of socialism, to now be the person who is at the forefront of this fight. And I think it goes back again to the point, you can't support Venezuela without supporting who the Venezuelan people themselves have chosen to be the president. You can't just say I'm in solidarity with Venezuela and Chávez, without being in solidarity with the person that system has made president now. He was chosen by the party, and made up of people and this has been legitimised by election, there is no good reason not to support Maduro without relying on typically lazy tropes and liberal sentiments.

Jack contrasts 'liberal sentiments,' with an understanding of *true* representation—again prioritising having what he considers to be 'the people' in charge, over any criticisms that can be made regarding individual, civil and political, rights.

Critiquing the people's government

This is not to say Jack avoids criticising Maduro entirely. In explaining the importance of his support for the Maduro government, Jack explains:

> I'm not saying he's done everything perfect, maybe they have made mistakes, but we can't just write them off, and write off the entire system because we don't like one leader. We have to say, actually the system still works, the system is still there, he hasn't gone back on the fundamental promise of the system, he hasn't gone back on the fundamental basis of the system.

I found it significant that Jack accepts that both the Chávez and Maduro governments have committed mistakes. Importantly this does not change the moral prerogative: it cannot deter support for the 'system,' because commitment towards 'the people' is still being 'upheld.' It is enough, in a sense, for these governments to try because they represent 'the people.' External circumstances are mostly responsible for the dire situation; mistakes are forgivable because they are seen as *unintentional*, following Cushman's (2015) moral theory described in chapter 4.

For Sahas, the British-Asian young activist, also a Corbynite, the mistakes involve not having gone *far enough* in the anti-revisionist path:

> I think there's a couple of things that I think that he [Chávez] made a mistake on. One was not confronting private capital, which I think we're seeing the effects of today, really, because I think that the Venezuelan economy is still dominated by private enterprise, which is able to collude with the United States and participate in economic sabotage.

Yet despite this strong ideological, if you will *policy* related disagreement—a disagreement shared by the Communist party in Venezuela (PCV), for instance—Sahas also avowedly continues to support Maduro's presidency (unlike the PCV). Sahas adds he is ultimately "confronting his own government always pushing for war in the Middle East and Latin America and elsewhere."

A starker example comes from José, principal organiser of one of the large UK Venezuela solidarity organisations, and part of the Trotskyist IMT:

> There have been many cases in recent months of the national guard, local judges, local officials of Venezuela's land institute that go and evict peasants from land that these peasants had property titles for, for at least 5 or 10 years. So that's why I say, for example when the *guarimbas* last year, in 2014, we're not in favour of the opposition, guided by those guys, taking power, because we think it would be a mess—as has happened in Argentina with Macri's arrival. So we defend the government against that offensive. But that does not me that we agree with the government's policies. For us, the economy policies that the government is applying right now are headed for disaster.

José knows many of the new policies under President Maduro (towards whom he has reservations) have acted *against* landless peasants. But despite how disastrous José believes Maduro's administration is, he feels the need to defend it against the opposition's 'offensive.' José uses the word 'disaster' to describe them *both*, but the thought that the opposition will be friendly to US interests and neoliberalism, means he needs to defend Maduro—even if he felt Maduro was not really defending 'the people.' Liesel, and those who identify with the Trotskyist left, had similar complaints about Maduro: that he is a reformist and has not taken enough steps to confront capitalism and the bourgeoisie directly. Ultimately, they prefer him to US-backed Guaidó.

Solidarity activists often made mention of *co-gestión* (co-ownership and workers' control) as one of the policies they most admire from the Chávez era. These policies showed a commitment to the empowerment of the working-class—even if Chávez's relationship to

organised labour was fraught (Venezuela's main union federation was strongly tied to AD, one of the two parties of Venezuela's *Punto Fijo* period, see Azzellini 2017). Although these initiatives have largely been dismantled, for José, *co-gestión* continues to be at the centre of what he finds most rewarding about his solidarity work, regardless:

> The possibility we've had to send a delegation from here to get to know Venezuela's experience, particularly, I would say, of workers' control, that was perhaps the most important experience [...] Most of these experiences don't exist anymore, have been crushed by bureaucracy in general, but the one in Gocha, for example, is still running. It's a textile factory in Aragua that is taken by workers and is functioning under workers' control, and I think it has been the campaign's most gratifying experience. To be able to see that live. A revolution. Workers' control. Something that only happens very few times in history, when workers' take their destiny into their own hands [...] There's a workers' assembly where all the important decisions are made and they are producing, despite all the legal, and bureaucratic problems. But what I saw there was a really strong feeling, that the company is now theirs, that they fought for it, that they have managed to bring it back, are producing, and that they don't need patrons and they won't let anyone take that away from them.

The image of the worker 'taking charge of his own destiny' is obviously very powerful for José. José contends the failures of all attempts at workers' control are a product of bureaucracy, and nothing to do with the policy itself. For Fernando, the Australian-Argentinean journalist who lived in Venezuela for three years, and also witnessed some of these policies in action, *co-gestión* is, instead, easy to romanticise:

> Researching things like *co-gestión*, work in co-management and things like that, seeing that in practice was to me really rewarding [...] I helped to edit a newspaper for the Electrical Workers Union, which was one of the sectors where *co-gestión* was first introduced. It was also one where it was ultimately rolled back as well. So they obviously had a really important story to tell about both of their really positive experiences under *co-gestión* but also their strong criticisms about why that had been, you know, been rolled back internally within the company. Obviously, these things can be romanticised very, very easily and very quickly. And when you go there and see, first day, and you see the real big challenges that they are facing, you get to better understand the debates, the pros and cons of this process of workers' control. And I say that as someone who comes from a position of supporting that push for workers' control. I've also learned that it's not that simple to just say, you know, let's just hand over everything to workers and everything will be resolved.

> For every positive example, like every 10 positive examples, I could talk about five negative examples as well.

He continues to explain how what the workers really wanted was adequate pay and basic benefits for the work they were trained to do. According to Fernando, the load of having to run the company was not something they were keen to add to their duties, unless the consequence of them not taking over was that the factory halted production. Although Fernando is more critical of the experience, both him and José value the opportunity to experiment with workers' control; they very much wish they could emulate some of these policies in their respective countries. Their admiration for *co-gestión* has not stopped these activists from questioning its efficiency, but the idea that it seems more inherently 'just' or 'moral,' does trump a more, say, 'utilitarian' concern with its efficacy—as is the case with the government's performance as a whole.

Abdo's criticism goes even further:

> If you want to empower the working class you've got to have a confrontation with the bourgeoisie class. And it feels like Chavez and Maduro never really wanted to do that. They use a lot of slogans about socialism, but they never really implemented a socialist system. So I think I read somewhere, there are more industries in France that are under state control, than there are in Venezuela. And no one would describe France as a socialist state, so yeah, that's probably my biggest criticism, is that they didn't go far enough. And they kind of, in some ways, they kind of let the working classes down by that. Because they've talked all the good stuff but haven't delivered and then now the working classes are suffering because of the high inflation, because of the water shortages because all of these various things, which obviously my opinion is exacerbated by external forces, but you allowed the state to be so vulnerable that these things could happen.

Even James, who admired the voting system (discussed in chapter 5), admits:

> I did see people taking apart rubbish bins, and bags full of rubbish looking for something to eat or sell. And that is very distressing. It's very distressing. Including actually some people near the hotel, in Chacao, one of the most expensive areas. So I think there is a lot of denial by the Maduro government. And I think that's not helpful at all. You know to pretend they're all revolutionaries. It's not revolutionary to behave like this.

The idea that the Bolivarian governments contest capitalism, in other words, that they are a true alternative to neoliberal hegemony, can be and *is* questioned by many activists. They especially see President Maduro as a revisionist, in broad terms, willing to make concessions with the bourgeoisie, and pulling back on some of Chávez's principles (for example, the aggressive use of special action forces FAES, originally created to combat crime and allegedly responsible for many extrajudicial executions, see UNCHR 2019, 7). As I have argued previously, this seems to respond to the idea that the government should be defended solely on the grounds that it purports to fight for 'good'—for economic and social justice, as well as for its unwillingness to negotiate with the US—whether it is on track to achieving economic and social justice, is of less concern.

Viveza criolla

> The tendency is to see middle-class participation to decentralize state structures as legitimate, and poor-class participation for inclusion in the state as nongenuine or unsophisticated. In these cases, the poor are not only defined by their class position but also through their lack of legitimate political participation and their dependent relationship to the state. They become the stigmatized popular masses (Valencia 2015, 43).

Beliefs about Venezuelans that have remained in Venezuela, i.e. that have decided to stay or are unable to migrate, are tied to ideas about who 'the people' of Venezuela are, from the perspective of the Venezuelan migrants I interviewed. Here I discuss their belief in the inherent 'corrupt' and 'lazy' nature of their compatriots. This 'peopling' Venezuelans and other South Americans share of their fellow citizens, in fact colours their understanding of systemic issues in Latin America and their respective countries.

Nelson's reading of Chavismo, of Venezuela's present crisis, and of Venezuela's future, hinges on the idea that 'the people' in Venezuela are 'cunning'—what Venezuelans term '*viveza criolla*'—a very negative form of self-interest. Nelson comes from a lower-middle class background, and calls himself 'negro,' because he is dark-skinned and has afro hair (although does not self-categorise as afro-descendent). He has never identified with Chavismo or its tenets as an adult, he explains, but admits having been amiable towards Chavez's leftist bent when he was around 13 or 14 (right at the beginning of Chavez's presidency). Despite holding a college degree as a physical education teacher—one that he earned at a public university in

Venezuela (public universities in Venezuela have been practically free, even before the Chávez era)—economic stagnation had him working at a supermarket in his hometown of Coro, a small city in the West of the country. Although supermarket management was less lucrative than teaching, it helped him find products largely unavailable due to the shortages—he insists there is nothing he hates more than having to stand in a long queue to buy food (which continues to be the norm in Venezuela). Nelson lost his job in mid-2017, when hyperinflation began, and he was left unemployed for six months—he lived off money a friend was sending from Spain. He left Venezuela at the end of 2017, by bus, across the continent to Chile. He was homeless for more than two months after his arrival and depended on the kindness of a group of priests in Santiago, until he found work as a security guard in the daytime and as bouncer at a club at night.

Nelson's 'folk sociology' describes how he explains the enduring popularity of Chavismo in Venezuela—even when he is not from a privileged background himself:

> When I was in the supermarket, I was forced to see the reality of the society that Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías created. I don't even call it socialism, or the Left. No. Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, the true culprit of all the situation Venezuela is living through. And Venezuelan society was degraded to such levels that an elderly person is not worth anything. Not respecting an elderly man for a pack of flour, not respecting a child for a pack of flour, insulting and hitting each other, just to be first in line. Cheating, the *viveza criolla*' that seems to live in the genes of Venezuelans, to the point where I don't have faith in the country today. Because Guaidó can come, Leopoldo López [another opposition leader] can come, but if this doesn't change [...] Venezuela is not going to come up [*salir de abajo*]. Trump himself can come govern, and that's not going to change. How can that change? [...] those who have remained are the conformists, the ones who like getting free stuff, the population Chávez wanted to stay.

Nelson's distinction between Chávez and socialism, or the left more broadly, shows he sees a difference between Chávez's twenty-first century socialism and Chávez's actual policies. More fundamentally, for Nelson, Hugo Chávez created a society that thrives on Venezuelans' natural '*viveza criolla*,' a stereotypical understanding of Venezuelans as sly or cunning.

Wikipedia translates *viveza criolla* as "creole's cunning," an expression that describes a "way of life in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia and Venezuela [...] a philosophy of progress along the line of least resistance and ignoring rules, a lack of sense of responsibility and

considerations for others, and it extends to all social groups and throughout the whole country." In his op-ed entitled *Viveza Criolla*, Reinaldo Rojas (*El Universal* May 27 2019) refers to it as "Venezuela's recurrent problem wherein 100 years of unproductive oil riches, has generated a social conduct that conspires against long-term solutions." The concept belongs to a narrative surrounding 'the people' of Venezuela of all standings. Among the first twenty entries of a simple Twitter search of 'viveza criolla Venezuela,' you find:

> Every time I hear that Venezuela is a rich country I think, rich in 'viveza criolla', rich in corruption and rich in robbery (*malandreo*) [February 20 2020].

> You can dolarise Venezuela, but how do you stop hyperinflation, delinquency, viveza criolla, speculation and everything else? [February 25 2020].

> I am dark today. Wanting to have power so that I can return all those f***ers to Venezuela who think they can do what they did there, here: taking advantage, making fun, tricking, viveza criolla, bullying (he writes this word in English) and more. If I left, it was also so that I would stop having to deal with people like that [February 19 2020].

What the third tweet is implying, much like Nelson, is that the author finds the need to take distance from Venezuela, but especially from 'the people,' whom they associate with this cunning attitude. As I have come to understand it, *viveza criolla* suggests that Venezuelans are easily willing to by-pass institutions and procedures for maximising and expediting personal, vis-a-vis collective, benefit. This can be via unconventional means ('creatively') but it can also be via illegal means ('corruptly'); both make a generalisation of 'the people' as 'wrong,' or immoral.

Nelson insists that it matters not *who* governs: things will not change unless this corrupted nature he describes is dealt with. His mention of Trump hints at the idea of foreign intervention—indeed later in the interview he explains that foreign military intervention is the only way forward. At this point of the conversation Nelson uses it as an exaggeration ('*hasta el mismo Trump*,' even Trump himself). It's hard to say if this exaggeration implies foreign rule could be justified, were it somehow able to curb Venezuelans' 'cunning,' or if he is simply questioning whether intervention will, in the long term, solve Venezuelans' problems. I highlight Nelson's feeling that change, and a bright future are impossible: an elimination of hope that justifies his migration and explains why he feels he cannot return. He then sincerely asks, quite helplessly in his tone of voice, "how does one change this?" For him, the generalised

immoral character of Venezuelans is deterministic of Venezuelan society, meaning it is an incredibly difficult trait to subvert—even 'strongman' Trump cannot help.

Similarly, Marcos, a young brown Venezuelan in his late thirties, who now lives in Colombia,[20] describes those that have remained, and by extension, those who have left Venezuela:

> And the problem is that the people that remain in Venezuela—not to discredit or be prejudiced—are people with social and cultural levels that are, well, very low, because it is the lowest level of society, because those who more or less were able to leave given their intellect, or their work, their training, have left. The vast majority. So those who remain well, the ones Chávez called 'the new citizen' are people who never worked, never studied, never trained. People who have nothing else to think about except Chavismo, and sadly it's not their fault, it is the fault of the system that shaped them that way. And so, they are people who get to other countries, and are a burden to other countries [...] And I don't blame them, because the system is designed for people to become cannibals, so people annihilate other human beings.

Marcos mentions 'those who stay,' but he means to say 'those who have stayed *thus far*, given he is trying to explain how these people have become a burden to other countries. Exactly what he means by the low 'cultural' level of 'the people' he refers to is unclear, but we can presume he is alluding to an alleged propensity for crime 'the people' share, linked again to the idea of '*viveza criolla.'* The Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, in April 2019, affirms that every 24 hours at least 13 Venezuelans are arrested for stealing in Bogotá, a fact that has evidently created a series of tensions with Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia. Marcos is trying to explain why Colombians might feel Venezuelans are a burden—simultaneously distancing himself from them. Although he insists he does not mean to be prejudiced, or to discredit other Venezuelans, his first characterisation of these people are those "who have never worked." This assumes somehow that they did not even try—not that this was in many ways out of reach for them. Still, their low 'social' and 'cultural' level is not their fault: this is Chavismo's fault, in his view. Chavismo has de-incentivised them from work. In another part of the interview, Marcos more explicitly suggests that the food boxes given by the government system have

[20] See chapter 8 for a more detailed description of Marcos' story.

made the poor fight against each other for the little '*cajita*' (box) on which they are entirely dependent.

Similarly, Ibrahim, in his forties, who has been selling SIM cards in the streets of Perú (but worked in the oil refineries when he lived in Venezuela), tells me:

> It's not that I want to humiliate, or speak ill of people, but the government started to accustom people, lazy people, people who idle, 'I'll give you a house, I'll give you food, I'll give you the opportunity of owning a car,' you get me? In order to get people to support them. 'I'll feed you, I'll give you money, I'll give you a bonus.' That is to support the unashamed façade of the government. It's a narco government that can move so much money that it can afford to give scraps (*una miseria*) to the people.

In a bid to counter the swiping generalisations that are been made about Venezuelans and their links to delinquency in other Venezuelan countries—which we can presume, men need to grapple with more than women—Nelson, Marcos and Ibrahim seek distance from the *viveza criolla* trait. They see their own hard work as enabling their migration. What Ibrahim implies is that the government gives 'the people' scraps to legitimise its "unashamed façade"—scraps compared to what it garners with oil—but scraps that, nonetheless, attract 'lazy people' (incidentally laziness is also a theme that crops up very often in the US right, as discussed by Hochschild 2016).

For Pablo, a white middle-class Venezuelan who left for the Netherlands in the early 1990's (and then decided to return to Venezuela in 2000 to help the well-known cost-free Venezuelan system for musical orchestras), Chávez, moreover, sowed resentment:

> [When I returned] I found the new government of Hugo Chávez, a socialist doctrine, an inflammatory discourse and a social emancipation charged with hatred and social rage towards the normal population. Sadly, I had—there was a terrible political environment, and my wife and I are artists. He starts to breed a social resentment against those who have, those who had, the business owner, against those who have something, who have earned something. And he starts to ignite and create a hatred and a rebelliousness, and incites hate to take from those who have. Because basically, to the poor, I remember him saying: "let's take from he who has, take the shoes of those who have because you don't have, and now it's your time, of the poor, of us to take the reins of this country."

I note how Pablo's ideas reflect a certain fear of the middle-classes towards the 'resentful' people (even an 'aporophobia,' fear of the poor) that became engrained as criminal activity, and impunity, skyrocketed. In the year 2000, the year Pablo returned, there was a 31 percent increase in homicide violence. I do note, however, that as far as I have been able to gather, President Chávez never openly suggested people should steal if they were hungry, although many opposition politicians have declared he did.[21] At an important discourse given in 1999 (the year he was sworn in) Chávez explained how he met a young man, 25 years of age, whose children were dying of starvation. He told the audience that he knew his opponents would say that he was inciting delinquency, but he acknowledged that like that man, he would do anything to save his daughter from the grave; he felt anyone would be able to understand that prerogative. Did he say that stealing was pardonable under such circumstances? The question has led to two distinct narratives.

It is interesting to see how the story of Chávez and the young man has lived in the imaginary of those who oppose the government. President Chávez indeed declared many times that being rich was wrong and inhumane—although his cabinet was criticised for hypocritically wearing ostentatiously expensive watches and amassing fortunes abroad (Lansberg-Rodriguez 2016). Pablo felt Chávez's inflammatory discourse pitted the middle class (and not just the corrupt rich elite) against the impoverished majority.[22] Venezuelans like Pablo felt this bred resentment against those 'who have something' or who 'have earned something,' and are easier prey than the rich, who have expensive guards and electrical fences. Pablo unconsciously calls them the 'normal' population, unaware of its privileges—at the same time suggesting he is not part of the elite either. Pablo is taking a moral stance against the kind of 'justice' he feels Chavismo was advancing: stealing from the middle, and not really upper, class.

Viveza criolla is, in Venezuelan migrants' minds, associated with Chavismo's political strength in Venezuela. Migrants seem to have sought distance from this 'laziness' and Venezuela itself as its breeding-ground. For them, 'the people's lazy nature' easily falls for Chavismo's material clientelism—and not Chavismo's ideological discourse of 'brownness,' nationalism, or

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[21] This has been what many opposition politicians feel was the crux of 'Venezuela's moral crisis'.

[22] See Domínguez 2008 for a complete analysis of Chávez's presidential discourse on poverty.

working-class morale. They suggest therefore, no doubt controversially, that the poor hold a certain moral vacuousness for utilitarian reasons. They extend this (mis)understanding to the solidarity activists that I interviewed who are not Venezuelans: they believe solidarity activists either receive some monetary benefit for their support, or are being deceived. By characterising those that are left in Venezuela this way, Venezuelan migrants more importantly explain what they feel is the underlying corruption that holds the system in place, despite Chavismo's poor governmental performance over the years.

The idea that Chavismo has made Venezuelans in Venezuela dependent of the government is pervasive among Venezuelan interviewees. Chavismo is 'immoral' in the way it bolsters Venezuelans' laziness to garner electoral advantage; these are notions that colour the disillusion concerning Venezuela's future and dignity as a country, and justifies migrants' search abroad. This type of clientelistic policy has never been exclusively "Chavista," as I discussed in chapter 2. Venezuela's rentier state, or the 'Magical State' in the words of Fernando Coronil (1997), pushes governments to engage with short-term policy, and Chavez's government was never the exception. Although food boxes are in some ways degrading, previous policies, such as the educational missions, show that other policies of the Chávez government have been dignifying, and therefore perhaps more central to Chávez's long-standing popularity. This aligns with studies on wellbeing in the Global South, that suggest work is an integral part of feelings of ontological security and self-fulfilment, i.e., that people do not *want* to be given things. Today most policies are indeed clientelistic as the UNHRC (2019) report confirms, and this does not help in challenging the problematic way in which some Venezuelan migrants understand true structural needs.

Populo and Demos

Both groups of interviewees—both Venezuelan migrants and solidarity activists—underline the centrality of 'the people' in their ideas of politics, but diverged greatly in terms of who they understood 'the people' to represent. Previously I have suggested that solidarity activists gain their understanding of democracy, and of Venezuela's democracy in particular, from what they feel are the opportunities the Chavista government has awarded 'the people'—those disenfranchised from structural racism, the political system, and global capitalism. For solidarity activists in particular, ideas of 'the people' stand for the 'ordinary' working-class brown as a majority *represented* in Chavismo—a constructed collective subject that is the

legitimate heir to power, given the unjust historical-racial disenfranchisement it has suffered. The sense solidarity activists have of pertaining to a global working class can be seen both as an intent to overcome national boundaries, and as a means to put ideological narratives above national ones.

Venezuelan migrants, on the other hand, share a more 'heterogenous,' but also ambivalent, understanding of 'the people.' Their imagined community is an economically diverse, highly repressed majority, that stands against the Chavista government. Yet in their imaginary 'the people' are also a 'lazy' or 'conformist,' prone to *viveza criolla*. This is a widespread cultural notion that understands Venezuelans as innately 'cunning,' a cunning that the government has profited from. This understanding of Venezuelans as naturally inclined to their own self-interest and opposed to their community, supports migrants' belief that Venezuela is 'irredeemable'—it is 'inherently' or 'essentially' corrupt and hence, impossible to return to.

Chapter 8. Moral-emotional rationales

The viscerality of 'narrative appropriation'

An online (English) newspaper for Venezuelans abroad, *Caracas Chronicles*, has a store where they sell Venezuelan related paraphernalia. In March 2019, the website boasted a section of their merchandise dedicated to the hashtag #AskAVenezuelan. Their blurb read: "Tired of people marxplaining Venezuela to you? Join us in this campaign to educate foreign folk about the situation in Venezuela" (see Figure 15). The verb 'marxplaining' obviously takes from 'mansplaining': it characterises conversations between Venezuelans and non-Venezuelan leftists as condescending and patronising, and based on, they feel, a blind and narrow understanding of a particular ideology, Marxism. It describes the frustration—and contempt—Venezuelans feel towards those who speak to them in favour of the Chavista government from outside Venezuela.[23]

The premise of the campaign is based on the idea that 'foreign folk' cannot *know* what is truly happening in Venezuela—they need to be 'educated.' Only those that have lived experience of Venezuela can 'knowingly' speak about it, hence why only Venezuelans should be asked about the situation there. The campaign reflects an underlying theme that appeared in the interviews with Venezuelan migrants: that non-Venezuelans *should not* speak about Venezuela because they have not experienced living under Chávez's and Maduro's governments.

This is in fact, among other things, an epistemological conflict. From the perspective of Venezuelans, it is felt as an immoral appropriation of their 'right' to narrate Venezuela's story by those that live in the 'privilege' of the Global North. It is deeply felt by Venezuelan migrants as a violation committed against them by those who do not know, really 'know,' about Venezuela. It is felt as a wrong 'done' to them: a denial of their lived experience—not a denial

[23] The hashtag has been removed, as of March 2020. The site now sells merchandise with the slogan "Keep Calm and ask a Venezuelan."

of their understanding of the crisis—one that I term 'narrative appropriation.' Venezuelan migrants argue opinions on political systems can only come from experiencing the policies, and living under the authority of those political systems—i.e. by having *lived* through the crisis. Yet this appropriation seems to apply only to those non-Venezuelans that have contrary ideas to theirs: 'foreign folk' who do not disagree with their narrative (Marco Rubio, or Donald Trump for example) are not seen as appropriating; they are not *felt* as unjust or immoral, because they are not challenging Venezuelan migrants' lived experience.

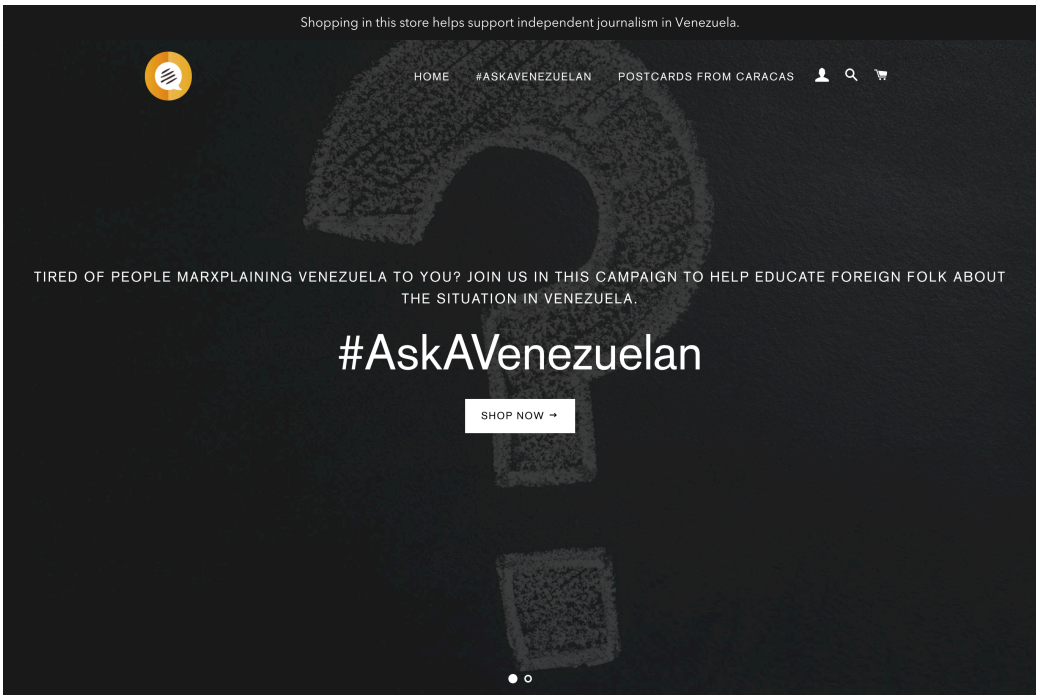

Figure 15. #AskAVenezuelan Campaign promoted by online newspaper and blog CaracasChronicles.

In the words of César, the afro-Venezuelan interviewee in his late thirties:

> And obviously it's really enraging that from the comfort of tourists, that can enter and leave as they please, and live in the comfort of a modern society, where they have certain guarantees, certain freedoms—where they're not afraid that a police, as we say here, 'falls in love with you' and sends you to jail, or disappears you, just because—that they come and tell us that what is happening here is good [...] So I feel that they're completely blinded by ideology—like they saw, you know, El Dorado.

For Venezuelan migrants, solidarity activists' approval of Maduro's administration ensues a particularly visceral reaction that was replicated across the interviews. For César, what is

especially enraging is that those who support the government from abroad have freedom of movement—if what is happening in Venezuela fails to suit them, they need not bear it; they remain 'untied' to Chavismo's authority. This is ultimately how César experiences a type of oppression: solidarity activists are free to leave and return to their privilege; Cesar, an afro-Venezuelan, with no European ancestry or double citizenship like other Venezuelans, as he underlines, is forced to endure the systemic food and medicine shortages, hyper-inflation, incessant power cuts, and rampant criminality in Caracas that he attributes to the Chavista governments. César ends his remark by referencing 'El Dorado' to make a point on how the activists' ideology is disengaged from reality. For him, activists are 'blinded' by their belief in the Venezuelan 'socialist dream,' a dream that prevents them from seeing how the 'on-the-ground' project has failed.

What makes the discourse of solidarity activists particularly abhorrent to César is the felt privilege from where it is uttered. Their discourse comes from what he calls 'modern society'—a society with 'certain freedoms and guarantees.' There is a latent anger in that they cannot justifiably speak *for* him, in place of his experience of Venezuela's crisis—specially not when their own states have in fact met their basic needs and ontological security. César is trying to describe what he as an afro-Venezuelan anti-Chavista (in the process of preparing his departure from the country) sees as renewed colonialism: an attempt to overthrow his right to narrate his own story. This point is particularly scathing because 'colonialism' is what solidarity activists intend to stand against—albeit *US* colonialism.[24]

As Venezuelan migrants understand it, the 'right' to narrate Venezuela's story, is not only about where they are born—their race, or nationality—but a claim to their personal experience: how they believe the government's undue enactment of power has impacted their life. A 'right' that solidarity activists, by virtue of supporting President Maduro, deny. I note that the experiential knowledge acquired from travelling to Venezuelan territory is not lost to solidarity activists. It was an argument those who had been to Venezuela used to explain why they have a 'deeper' sense of what is going on than, say, the international media— experiential '*posteriori*' knowledge simply feels harder to contradict. The problem in the eyes of

[24] I address their anti-imperialist stance more explicitly in the last chapter.

Venezuelans, as César explains, is that visits, even long ones, are insufficient: they do not represent *enough* lived experience of a country to narrate its story. Their argument is not based on the experience of Venezuela's *space*, but the experience of living under the—as he has it, illegitimate—authority of the state, its *governmentality*, as I have underlined. (Only one of my interviewees met this condition fully: a Basque solidarity activist who has been living in Venezuela since 2007, that I discuss in the last chapter.)

Most Venezuelan migrants described a visceral feeling in the stomach when I mentioned I had spoken to non-Venezuelan admirers of Presidents Chávez and Maduro. It elicited a deep displeasure they were unable to hide. Many told stories of Chavista friends that they had stopped contacting. Some were genuinely in disbelief that anyone abroad could lend support to the government given what is shown in the international news on Venezuela—a disbelief that was soon turned to either anger or disgust (two strong moral emotions):

> That surprises me really. That there are people outside, observing Venezuela's reality that continue to support this kind of process. Because of course, I repeat, watching the movie is very different: sitting there with your popcorn and drinks, and then to say 'it's marvellous' is very different from being inside.

Jaime, a young gay actor in his early thirties, was working three jobs and the weekends. He crossed the border to Colombia by foot in 2017: "you could not do anything," he adds desperately, "it was impossible to aspire to a future there." He admits he earned much more than many given he was working so much, and yet was not able to buy food. One day he told his partner, "Look, I'm leaving. With or without you, but I'm leaving. Because this is above and beyond me, I can't cope." They both managed to migrate to Colombia, where his partner was from and where they could get married. (In Venezuela same-sex marriage is still not legal, despite the government's discourse alleges support for the LGBT+ community.)

Again, Jaime takes this idea that solidarity activists are observing from 'outside,' even when he himself has left—because for him solidarity activism is disembodied, imagined. He is simultaneously describing the luxury of idleness and the safety of being in an audience; in the case of solidarity activists, the safety of the Global North. For Jaime, Venezuela's movie—made a spectacle, imagined and admired by those who share socialist ideals—is completely detached from the reality 'inside' that can only be lived and embodied.

Solidarity activists coming from what César and Jaime feel are privileged backgrounds, impose a narrative about their experiences that tries to invalidate their decisions to leave Venezuela. If what the government is doing is not only legitimate but desirable, Venezuelan migrants have no reason to ask for asylum or even migrate. Their experience of suffering at the hands of the government, as they see it, is being denied.

On another level, the feeling that these Venezuelans convey of 'appropriation' by those who live 'in privilege,' shows the extent to which both groups understand how power is being used to subvert them. Solidarity activists, middle-class and educated in the Global North, see power in terms of US' neoliberal world hegemony and its arguably despicable behaviour in the region. Some of these Venezuelan migrants, also educated but in the Global South,[25] understand power in broader post-colonial terms: for them simply living in the Global North is a form of privilege, and so their story of Venezuela's Bolivarian project as a wonderful idea is an appropriation of their experience of the crisis.

Women and the need to respect

Venezuelan migrant women were, in general, less willing to directly attack solidarity activists; they very rarely if at all used swear words, unlike the Venezuelan migrant men I interviewed. I do not necessarily see this as supporting the idea that women were somehow more polite,[26] rather that they more instinctively felt tolerance is a moral prerogative, which meant they the felt a stronger need to be pluralist, or tolerant of different viewpoints. This supports Carol Gilligan's (1982) famous study that showed women's propensity to take the standpoint of an 'other' and their ability to show empathy. Ultimately, these Venezuelan women justify how they are *unable* to be tolerant because they feel 'the other'—solidarity activists—are defending what they feel is 'unforgivable.'

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[25] Not all the Venezuelan migrants I interviewed had a college education, although most had finished high school.

[26] See Mills (2003) for a discussion on how she views this as a simplistic conclusion more generally.

The viscerality of these moral feelings, in other words, the strong physical emotion that accompanies this denial of narrative, is felt as appropriating, moreover, defamatory. These feelings were particularly explicit in part of my interview with Camila, a young white Venezuelan in her late twenties, orphaned at 13 when her father, a taxi driver, was killed in an attempt to steal his car and his night's earnings—an unfortunate yet common occurrence in crime-ridden Caracas. She is quick to tell me that she started to work very early on as a children's clown (*payasita*) as she felt the need to help her mother and family: "From a young age, I have been very responsible," she adds.

Her trusting positivity faded when I asked her what she thought about non-Venezuelan supporters of the government. To counter them, she lists a series of commonplace hardships she has endured: having a family member shot at a protest, ensuing impunity, 12-hour queues for food, getting scratched fighting over chicken, lack of basic services and being permanently exposed to criminal activity—things that can only be experienced *in situ*. She continues: "When someone who has not lived in Venezuela tells me they love the idea, and Chávez, and this and that, I get a little something in [pause] my heart is going to sort of [pause]." She stops and she just exclaims in a high pitched shrill '*ay Dios!*' (oh, God). Visibly fighting her rage and clenching her fists, she turns to me and says "I want to…" but hesitates to utter any violent verb. After a deep, long breath she says "I try to understand their point of view […] but I remain in disagreement. I disagree because I think that you have to live it to be able to then say whether you like it or not." She uses a common Spanish expression '*tienes que vivirlo en carne propia*'—which literally translates to 'you need to live it in your own flesh.'

During the interview, Camila explains that her father, who was a working-class man, voted for Chávez because "he felt that what Chávez was saying made sense to him."[27] She tells me both her mother and her felt the need to respect her father's opinion, despite garnering deep distrust for Chávez. With this, she discloses what she feels is a fundamental moral quality: the respect of another's opinion. However, from the emotion that the support of Chavismo stirred in her,

[27] This is incidentally the same phrase one of the solidarity activists I interviewed, James, used to explain his affinity to Chávez.

it seems she sees Chavismo's failure to deal with the exponential gun violence and judicial impunity already described, as somehow intrinsically responsible for her father's death:[28]

> And he died because of delinquency which is so rampant there. And never, well, we never found out who the killers were, because there's no impunity in Venezuela [she means to say that there is]. The number of families that have been left without a paternal or maternal figure, without brothers or sisters, because they have been murdered by the mobs (*hampa*). And the government has not taken charge.

Camila's position though, and that of other Venezuelan migrants, mistakenly assumes that if you live in Venezuela 1) you will experience the crisis *and* necessarily blame the government for it; and 2) that no Venezuelans in the country continue to support President Maduro. It is a position that reflects both an optimistic idea that people that undergo similar experiences necessarily share the same point of view—or at least rationalise them in the same way. Also, that no middle ground is possible, i.e., that people cannot like some aspects of the government and dislike its role in the crisis at the same time.

Alicia also shares this understanding of the value of respecting other points of view. She is a Colombian-born Venezuelan in her forties, with some indigenous features, that came to the UK in 2005—several years before the crisis. Alicia modestly admits that in her Jehovah's witness family only the bible was read; she had no furniture as her family could not afford it. She believes she has a limited understanding of politics because according to her family's religious values voting was considered a sin. Now that she has abandoned her family's beliefs, she raises money for charities that send medicines to Venezuela, and organises her city's Venezuelan community.[29]

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[28] As discussed in chapter 2, I note that the numbers show that during Chavismo crime homicides have gone up an astounding 484 percent. Additionally, when Chávez was elected in 1998, for every 100 deaths there were 110 people arrested for suspicion. In 2018, there were only 9 people arrested for every 100 deaths.

[29] As part as may fieldwork, I attended the meetings organised by this community group, who were actively trying to raise consciousness on the issues facing Venezuela.

Alicia's expression of anger is somewhat restrained to a deep frustration that she describes as 'loss of respect' for those in the left who support the government, a feeling that stems from the belief that they are morally wrong. This is different from the full-on hate I saw in some Venezuelan migrant men (a hate I discuss in the next section):

> What upsets me is when people start defending something that in this case in particular, ignores the humanitarian aspect, the humanitarian problem in Venezuela. So in that sense they lose my respect, when they begin—when they don't care about that. Because I can, I really can try to respect someone who feels leftist, but that admits that what is being done in Venezuela is wrong. That they would want to keep that government simply because of ideology, that's not ok. From that point of view, I cannot accept that they would think that way.

Alicia goes on to name one of the most important solidarity organisations in the UK, 'Hands off Venezuela' (HOV) telling me that if they protest in favour of the Maduro government it is even worse, given they have never even been to Venezuela. Because she can only respect someone feeling leftist, *if* they accept that 'what is being done' in Venezuela is wrong, she is implying there is essentially only one 'right' position that can be held. There is a sense of 'injury' that calls on a set of specific actors who have 'harmed' the nation—Chavistas. In seeing that it is 'wrong' of solidarity activists to support the government simply because they share in its ideology, she is expressing her understanding that the government is unpopular and therefore illegitimate and undemocratic.[30]

Similarly, Eva, a young, light-brown Venezuelan in her early thirties who moved to Madrid only ten months before I interviewed her, in mid 2019, starts by underlining how important it is for her to respect every person's opinion:

> I think that I have always very much respected the opinion of every person. Everyone has their own way of looking at things. But now seeing what people are going through, what I feel like is 'beeeep' [she makes a long beeping noise, as if the television were censoring her words and then laughs]. I mean, I get angry (*me molesta*). I get angry because I cannot

[30] See chapter 5.

> believe that there are people who think that everything is going well, and that the ways of the government, if you can call them that, *work*, I mean I don't know [...] You would have to be "wetting your hands" [getting money from it] or I don't know. Because I'm not going to say they're crazy, or not. But they have a different way of looking at things? To not call them crazy? [she laughs] They're so closed-minded [...] They think Chávez was from the left, but there's nothing 'left' about our government. Very pretty and all, but it's not socialist [...] There's no equality because the government is increasingly getting richer [...] Very pretty on paper.

Eva's rhetorical questions and dialogue with herself were telling of how she struggles with feeling anger at support for the government—and how she tries to keep her wonderful sense of humour throughout. She concludes that those who continue to support the government are either crazy, or benefitting from it monetarily. She can think of no other possible reasons they might support the current government. When she suggests monetary benefit, she is extrapolating from what she knows about some Venezuelan Chavistas, who are not ideologically oriented but (much like the *boliburgueses* mentioned previously) have benefitted economically from Chavismo. She then suggests they might be deceived into thinking Chávez, or his policies, were socialist. What is interesting about her phrasing is that she understands, even supports, the moral argument behind socialism: that we should all be equal is a 'good' thing. She is not what solidarity activists would think of as a 'right-wing fascist,' and although she lives in Spain, is not white. For her it would be 'nice' to have actual socialism, but this is not what exists in Venezuela given the government's corruption, a theme I discuss more broadly in the next chapter.

What is unique about women's responses to solidarity activists is that they admit to the importance (or 'rightness') of understanding another's point of view. They *feel* obliged to justify why they are unable to give solidarity activists the respect they believe every person deserves. Venezuelan migrants' argument about validity of knowledge wants to counter-deny solidarity activists' narrative by emphasising the importance of lived experience versus imagined or disembodied experience (a kind of *a priori* knowledge). Venezuelan migrants assume that it is not possible to blame the government for some aspects of the crisis, *and* still support it more broadly, as I argue, because they have a totalising understanding of the government: the government has acted 'wrongfully' and therefore *is* wrong (evil) in a moral sense, an idea I return to in chapter 9.

Injury and the desire to annihilate

A survey that looked at negative emotions, specifically anger, '*rabia*,' or ire '*ira*,' conducted by pollster *Datanálisis* in March 2019 showed that at the beginning of the crisis (in 2014) those that reflected these emotions (they use the phrase 'negative but activating' emotions) accounted for 4 to 8 per cent of the population.[31] At the time of the survey in 2019, these emotions were expressed by at least 25 percent of Venezuelans (*Informe21* March 25 2019).

Rage and ire, as I have been describing, are underlying and sustaining the 'radicality' of Venezuela's divide. Francisco, a white businessman in his mid-fifties, initially optimistic about Chávez's project, came to the UK in 2014 with his family through an entrepreneurial visa. He tells me of a 'small something' in his stomach—a gut wrench—when he speaks to friends of his that are still supportive of Chávez:

> F: Yeah, I have Chavista friends in the embassies, for example. They tell me: 'That's going forward, bro' (*va pa'lante 'mano*). It hasn't materialised for exogenous reasons, but that's the way.' How much of that is personal and how much of it is pure ideology, I don't know.
>
> P: Have you stopped speaking to them?
>
> F: Not me. I get a thing (*una cosita*) in my stomach. But then, I auto-examine myself. If my business went down, and I'm not in the country I want to be in, and my children won't be speaking Spanish anymore, well, I get something (*una cosita*) in my stomach. But then I say, well, I'm actually just fighting against something that I can't—that's bigger than me, so I calm down, because what the hell.

Most others spoke instead of the distance they had taken from friends that supported the government; others about the tensions that had arisen amongst family members, where conversations about politics were prohibited to avoid confrontation. Not Francisco. He even watches Chavista news "to get their version." Speaking to his optimistic Chavista friends

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[31] No specific date is given for the first time this question was asked, i.e, they simply mention at the beginning of the crisis, which we suppose is the 2014 oil crash.

(whom he compares to solidarity activists) prompts a realisation about what he has lost—what he believes he has lost *because* people like his friends continue to support Chavismo. In the end, Francisco dismisses his gut wrench and resigns: it is a system he feels he cannot actually fight. He goes on to say that these Chavista friends would not risk leaving their parents in Venezuela if they encountered health issues—such hypocrisy: "If they want, we can have a chat about ideology over coffee, ideology with whiskey. But that's it," he says.

Marcos is a particularly striking example of how this visceral anger at Chavismo can be taken to its extreme. Marcos, a 27-year-old brown Venezuelan arts graduate from Caracas, worked 4 jobs before he left to Colombia in January 2017. One of those jobs was outsourced from the US, so he managed to earn in coveted US dollars although he tells me: "it wasn't the salary of a lifetime, not at all. But it was a salary that allowed me to cover my basic needs." Given other interviewees had mentioned they had faced difficulties in terms of xenophobia, I asked how he felt there. He insists:

> You'll always have one or two people that are very closed minded, that stain a general vision of society. One or two xenophobes, one or another person that tries to trip you over, but it's really not generalised, and it's not the majority [...] There are people who will say negative things so that you don't get a certain job [...] but it's not because I'm Venezuelan, but because those people are bad people.

Marcos does differentiate between a few isolated episodes and Colombians' broader treatment of Venezuelans. Yet he easily stereotypes when I ask him about solidarity activists:

> Well... they are, look, they are so amoral, better—no. Because an amoral person is someone who does not know morality. They are *immoral*, because they understand morality and deny it. They are so immoral that on the 4th of February, a coup, where tons of people died. Where a minuscule little group of the armed forces decided to break the constitutional order of a country, perfectly able to campaign politically and run for the presidency (as he did do later on) [...] For less, look, the country was not even in the tenth of the situation it is in now, and Chávez organised a coup. Then it was justifiable? Because he was from the left? Because he was a communist? No, come on. Really, don't f**k me communists. Really. That is when you truly understand why Pérez Jiménez went around killing communists. Then came Human Rights and 'oh well, no.' But really, I can be really drastic, but after what has happened to Venezuela, you say, I get it. I get why people used to kill communists [...] Its a plague. A disease. They are garbage, I mean they really must be eradicated. Whatever they touch they destroy. Look at Mexico, it hasn't been six

> months since López Obrador, and the economic indicators are decreasing, investment is decreasing, they have an oil crisis, a border crisis.

Here Marcos is essentially explaining why he feels killing communists is justifiable. He's infuriated by the double standards that solidarity activists show by pardoning Chávez's coup but condemning one from the opposition—an act Marcos understands to immoral, as he describes it.

His anger at these double standards leads him to suggest that killing all communists would be permissible. By sympathising with others who enacted these actions in the past, in this case Marcos Pérez Jiménez (although the dictator was known for torturing and killing opposition in general, not only communists), he is deferring responsibility of his thoughts to the past and to others, but in the process condoning and justifying his own thinking.

Marcos' 'oh well, no' (*ay, bueno, no*) suggests that there is a genuine choice there, that is, that we (in the name of human rights) decide to spare people's lives out of *kindness*—not because killing communists is not *justified*.[32] His tone is condescending of this kindness, purposefully. It shows a hint of regret at the fact that wanting to kill communists is seen as morally condemnable today. By highlighting the anachronism, he questions the current moral and human rights standards that have he believes, implicitly, failed to stop Venezuela's destruction.

Because he knows his thoughts are considered inappropriate, he admits to knowing "he can be very drastic." But communists who have violated Venezuela's national body, of which Marcos is a part (and here he includes me) need to be destroyed. 'We' are in Ahmed's (2004, 2) words, "a group of subjects who can identify themselves with the injured nation in this performance of personal injury." What has happened to Venezuela justifies the extirpation of what he considers to be the underlying disease: communists. It is, then, a 'moral' duty to get rid of them; in other words, it 'ought' to be done because the pain of Venezuela's economic decay and humanitarian crisis should not be tolerated, and should not spread. The appeal to 'eradication'

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[32] I will return to this idea of human rights as hierarchical, useful for justifying violations of some in prejudice of others, in the next chapter.

for 'universal good' is not incidentally a central theme for philosophers who see its potential for violence, from Nietzsche to Adorno to Schmitt and Butler.

Moreover, Marcos wants to eradicate communists, not communism. Eliminating the circulation of communist ideas in the first place is not considered: Marcos' ire is directed at bodies, not ideas. The thought that eradication, mass global genocide, is impossible logistically, even if justifiable in his mind, is not considered in practical terms: it is a reaction to the pain felt, not by what has happened in Venezuela, but what 'has been done' to Venezuela.

What Marcos is proposing is essentialising or to use Gramsci's nomenclature, 'hegemonising': for Marcos, those who subscribe to communism are instantly unworthy of life—a dangerous logic that (of all people) Carl Schmitt recognised. Marcos' own analogy of the 'disease' of communism, how it infects bodies, points to this. To an extent, these feelings parallel the contempt and hatred present in Islamophobia, ideas seen as diseases—contained in bodies—as responsible for the suffering of entire body politics and other 'healthy' bodies.

The consequences of war against, if not all of communism, at least Chavismo in Venezuela, would be an armed conflict with foreign intervention, given the opposition is not armed and the military have stood by President Maduro. Even if the government were to be annihilated physically, it is impossible to eradicate the ideas that sustain those who support Chavismo. In the best-case scenario, Venezuela would still have a parallel militia that would feel they have been robbed of their government. A state of semi-permanent civil unrest would ensue, even outright civil war, if the military *were* to split (although some of the interviewees felt that the current levels of homicide violence due to criminal activity, made it seem like they were already in a war). Marcos' proposed elimination of communist bodies, for him the 'source' of Venezuela's pain, justifies violence and partially alleviates his pain, while avoiding the cognitive load of thinking through what this would cost and its plausibility.

This desire for annihilation is evidently an important aspect of the escalation of social conflict, and was luckily rare amongst interviewees, although the contempt that stems from a sense of injury, was not. Despite hesitation and varying ideas about foreign intervention, most were convinced of the inevitability of armed conflict to solve the country's problems.

In chapter 6, Figure 9 showed a Facebook post that one interviewee, Fernando (the Australian-Argentinean journalist), published in early in 2019. The commentary scoffs at the idea that the entire Venezuelan diaspora in New York looks white and upper-class. The last comment reads: "I've lost faith in Putin during recent years, but I'll start supporting him if those Russian troops will start executing these Euro-settler m***r f*****s." The comment was not, I stress, written by Fernando, it was part of the commentary on his post. I make note of it to show that this extreme annihilation discourse is not unique to Venezuelans that oppose the government, it lives in other side as well.

A discourse of normalcy

Venezuelan migrants claim living 'normally' has been made impossible in Venezuela—the implied causality is important, as it references the damage Chavismo has enacted on the nation—it's part of their claim to its illegitimacy.[33] Migrants felt they are either trapped in the normalised 'abnormal' or forced to leave. A nostalgia for what seemed 'normal' before the crisis, prompted the phrase 'not normal' to describe the situation that they left behind, the evidence of their claim to migrate.

Eva, the thirty-year old brown Venezuelan in Madrid, admits that she was not struggling "too hard" living alone in Maracaibo (Venezuela's second largest city, famous for its oil fields), before coming to Spain. Eva's parents were, however, worried that she would get assaulted. It eventually happened one night when she was driving back to her home at 1:30 in the morning: she was stopped at gunpoint by a man who wanted her phone. She explains the garage door took more time than usual to open. She guessed: "that's ok. It happened to me. I need to be more careful. I shouldn't come back home so late [...] Maybe I didn't pay enough attention to [the robbery] because I didn't want to leave," she tells me. For her, the progressive realisation that none of this was 'normal' changed her mind:

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33 See chapter 4 and Raz's (1986) conception of legitimacy as service.

> What's normal, you go to the supermarket, its 7, you get soap and get back home. No. It was going to one, and another, and another, and another, and another until you found it. And it was like, is it worth it? [...] Because I might have had the money to live ok, but it was also that my parents were always worried. I wasn't super badly off. But there were things—it was something more personal. I wanted to be able to have—a tranquil, normal life.

Most interviewees had in fact been mugged *at least* once. Francisco, who I mentioned has important Chavista friends, was even kidnapped. In recounting his experience of traveling back to visit Venezuela in mid 2019, he tells me:

> It's not normal. So if I've got the option of being, what I'm going to say sounds harsh, but if I can be away from all this, I choose to be away. Yes, I can be judged. Yes. Sure. But it's my choice. I want to walk. I want to be peaceful [...] 'Look, go, there's everything, go to the supermarket and you'll find everything.' You're lying to me. I'm not an idiot. My brother lives there, and he calls me every day, says there's no toner to send me a letter. No ink. It's not normal [...] And if you lose your card? You're f****d because there's no plastic. I went to get mine because it was expired. [imitating a lady] 'Sorry sir, no! We haven't had plastic since 2017!' [laughs] So it's not normal. Economic war or not, it's not normal. It's *not* normal.

Francisco repeats the phrase 'not normal' thirty-five times throughout the interview. For him leaving Venezuela is not really a choice: if you have an option you take it.[34]

Cintia, a well-known Venezuelan concert pianist, left Venezuela as a teenager, thirty years ago, to pursue her musical career. She uses 'normal' instead to describe what is not 'normal' but has become part of Venezuela's day to day: "I've just seen a friend who lost 9 kilos in one year. That's quite normal. Losing 9 kilos at that time, was normal." Venezuelans were in fact losing weight considerably in 2017, as described in chapter 2.

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[34] Unable to sustain his livelihood in the UK, Francisco was forced to return to Venezuela a couple of months after our interview.

Jeison, a brown Venezuelan in his late thirties, in Mexico, trying to make it as a pop singer, describes it succinctly:

> You can watch them on YouTube, guys that went there, calculated the minimum wage, ate under those circumstances. They were robbed, some got sick, and demonstrated that it is impossible, unless you rummage through like a thousand things, to have a normal life in Venezuela.

Forced migration

> It's a forced migration. It's not that we emigrate because when I was a boy I wanted to live in England, or I wanted to live in Japan. No. You're migrating because you're country, sadly, threw you out [imitating others speaking] 'As a professional, I tell you, what you can earn here is enough for buying a pack of peanuts, so you decide, if you stay or…' [returning to his voice] And well, you had to leave because you have another kind of—you want to grow as a person.

Hector, a gynaecologist in his mid-thirties, now living in Chile (and working as a nurse because he has been unable to validate his medical degree) explains what he feels is a 'forceful' dismemberment—a feeling he uses to explain and justify his exile, and a feeling that underlines his sense of disempowerment. The idea that his *aspirations* are to blame is related to other interviewees' want for normalcy. While others underline the impossibility of living Venezuela, Hector underlines how he feels wanting to improve his life chances is being criminalised in Venezuela. It also reflects an idea of other Venezuelans that is not immediately apparent: that those who stay have no aspirations, or are conformists and happy "to earn more than a box of peanuts"—a theme I referenced in the last chapter. Hector understands aspirations as a 'right'—part of his human dignity. The possibility that other Venezuelans *cannot* develop, is not readily admitted or problematised. Because Hector is a gynaecologist, a profession understood as sacrificing in many respects, there is a sense of guilt he conveys from having 'wanted more' from his life, having left behind many in need. In this sense the idea that he has been 'forced' is perhaps a device that helps him cope with this guilt.

Similarly, Pablo, a baroque violinist in his late fifties who has been living in Japan for the past 20 years, explains why he feels he has not been able to return, and how he 'has been made' to stay in Japan (where his wife is from):

> So I've been in Japan now exactly 20 years [...] I had to stay here in Japan given the level of genocide and death of a country. Annihilated, trampled on, sequestered by the malign forces of a government, an absurd, cynical and bad regime basically.

Pablo would have wanted to return to Venezuela, had it not been for the damage carried out by the 'cynical and bad regime'—something out of his control. In a literal sense, had he wanted to, he could have of coursed returned, but it is the belief that he would be significantly worse off in Venezuela that 'forces' him to stay in Japan.

Wilson, instead, underlines how he did not want to leave Venezuela 'to beg.' A professor of music at one of Venezuela's important universities in the state of Carabobo, William completed both his bachelor's and master's degree in the US and returned to Venezuela to sing opera and teach classical singing. He finished his master's at the prestigious New England Conservatory and was an eminence in the operatic world of Venezuela. He felt forced to leave to Perú where he was offered a post as a vocal coach, a bare two months before our interview in March 2019. Yet as he himself explains, his studies did not 'save' him from the road many Venezuelans, educated or not, decide to take: migration to another country in Latin America. He tells me:

> The disillusion that comes from knowing you have completed a number of degrees, have many years of experience, and have to beg, is a very depressing thing. I told my wife in December, it's the first time I have to leave the country, not to my liking. Not to my liking or fancy, I'm leaving obliged to do so. Not because I want to. Not because I have a plan, a beautiful life abroad, but because it's what I have to do, I can't continue being here. I *can't* continue being here.

For Wilson, his degrees and experience, make begging (*pidiendo limosma*) profoundly depressing—almost shameful in his tone. His feelings reveal the extent to which Venezuelans admire studies abroad (especially in the Global North), tied to Wilson's own idea of success. Now they are part of his sense of an even deeper failure, a downfall from what was a 'higher' place, compared to many. There is deep sadness inherent in the way he understands 'having to' leave versus 'wanting to' leave.

We can relate Wilson's and Héctor's feelings as a loss of a second basic psychological need, what self-determination theorists understand as *competence*: "experiencing opportunities to exercise, expand and express one's capacities" (Ryan and Sapp 2009: 76). Because President Maduro and Chavismo control the state machinery, and there is an excessive use of force against protestors in demonstrations (UNHRC 2019) those who are against the government become disenfranchised from political power to the extent that they see leaving as the only way out of the government's authority. Those that do not see themselves as part of Chávez's people, have no place in the nation. The idea of being forced out is complementary to the feeling of being forced to stay inside—for César in the first quote of this chapter, the metaphor is being *trapped*. These feelings reflect a sense of impotence, what can even be interpreted as perceived oppression, experienced as a lack of opportunities and channels through which to voice demands. Again, taking from Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) we could also say Venezuelan migrants have lost a second of their fundamental psychological needs, *autonomy*, defined as self-endorsement of one's actions.[35]

Frustration with opposition leaders

Tied to this sense of forced migration and lack of autonomy and competence, is the idea that there is no coherent—or politically successful—opposition to Chavismo, able to hold Maduro's power to account. Save for the international media's ferocious campaign the opposition have no 'real' or 'positive' political power in Venezuela, or a place where their views are represented and acted on.

Eva is tired of reading about Venezuela because it is "more of the same," she says. She references the support Guaidó received from the international community in early 2019, but is nonetheless invaded by a sense of 'terrible hopelessness', a hopelessness most interviewees shared:

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35 For a further discussion on STD see Ryan and Sapp (2009).

> I think the fact is I'm sick of reading. Because it's always more of the same. So now we're advancing. Call me whatever you want, but I get—I have a feeling of terrible hopelessness. Because it's just always the same. Everyone says—well this girl that I mention who is deputy for VP, this guy's [Guaidó's] party, she's always saying 'don't lose hope it's proven that after I don't know how much time—the third month of protests everything crumbles' and blah blah blah. But after seeing this guy with all the other politicians that have done exactly the same, it's like, am I going to follow him? I have lost, really—I don't have a lot of confidence. I thought he had a good language or something. But after seeing everything—then I saw him in a picture with Manuel Rosales [ex-governor of her home state], please! Manuel Rosales. No! With all those old politicians. For me it was like, really. [...] Yeah, I don't trust any of them. I think the opposition in Venezuela now is just marred (*viciada*) and in the end it's going to be the same. Everyone pushes their own interests.

For César, the afro-Venezuelan interviewee, exiled opposition leaders actually *help* corrupt sectors from within the government launder their money (sanctioned abroad):

> Chavistas [in Venezuela] make a mess, but how do they take that money out of the country? They need to go through—get it out taking advantage of frontmen. The old rich kids [...] There are a lot of people benefitting from the government [*enchufados*] that are *mantuano* [white-colonialist]. The people that have always been rich. They are the ones that set up financial structures for Chavistas abroad, because they are the ones that know the bankers, they are the ones who know the financial engineers that know how to handle these things abroad.

The idea that part of the opposition wants President Maduro to stay because it has been lucrative for them, was insinuated by former Chavista and retired General Clíver Alcalá a year after the interview with César, when he was indicted by the Department of Justice for his involvement with what the US government terms 'narco-terrorism' (Manetto *El País* Marzo 30 2020). As a young lecturer at Venezuela's most important business school, the IESA, César taught some of the leaders of the companies involved in those scandals. In October 2018, news outlets were already publishing information on family members of exiled opposition leaders laundering at least one billion euros harnessed by corrupt means from Chavistas in charge of *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA)—Venezuela's State oil company (Placer *Economía Digital* October 22 2018). The news was confirmed on the *BBC* more than a year later and some months after the interview with César (*BBC News*, December 2 2019).

In a serious tone, César confesses:

> Look, I'll tell you something. You put me in a room or a hall and you give me permission to kill. I'm the executioner, and you give me a gun with two bullets, and you place Nicolás Maduro and Henry Ramos Allup [an opposition leader, former president of the National Assembly] in front of me, and I would shoot Henry Ramos Allup twice. Just like that. The people who have allowed this government and oxygenated this government to get to where it has, are the opposition, ok?

César's repugnance for opposition actors was not surprising. But the notion that he would shoot the opposition leader twice, was extremely revealing of the extent of his anger. Similarly, for Alicia, being opposed to the government does not mean she is convinced by a leader of the opposition:

> I don't feel identified with, in fact, the traditional political parties AD, COPEI, all that, died. We don't even remember them. And this new wave of parties, say *Voluntad Popular* [Guaidó's party], *Avancemos*. We don't even remember them, we're not conscious of them. I'm not aware of them. I only see faces, I see options. And of course, seeing they're always suppressed by the government, the situation makes me become opposed. I do feel I'm of the opposition, but I'm not identified with anyone in particular. Not even when Capriles was really popular [opposition presidential candidate in 2013 against Maduro]. But no. I never felt like I was of Capriles or anything like that.

Alicia's sides with those opposed to the government in seeing how "they're always suppressed by the government"—here we presume she's referring to the banning of opposition leaders, and broader protest repression. In effect, nothing about the opposition excites her, or is meaningful to her, even when, as I've noted in chapter 2, a lot of their discourse is in fact shared.

Wilson points instead at Guaidó's lack of 'real' power, and the opposition's inability to grasp the armed forces loyalty to Chavismo:

> Having about 50 odd countries recognise this man, Guaidó, is not that useful, right? Because yes, he is recognised, but what's happening in the country? The armed forces—that was the hope of the 23 of February [2019], that the armed forces would stand up because he proposed an amnesty for the military. I guess they thought that many would turn their back on the government, but it ended up being only a few and of lesser rank.

Once opposition leaders are accused of corruption, but what is worse, of *assisting* Chavistas in their pilfering of the state's coffers, they have lost all moral ground—perhaps why most

interviewees are entirely disenchanted with the opposition as a political faction. The 'position' that unites migrants is a stance against the undemocratic and authoritarian practices of the government, hence why I feel it is important to define their unity on their belief in Maduro's illegitimacy, and not as a 'political identity' tied to a set of policies or politicians. Migrants were opposed to the government but have no one they felt represents them, or someone they admire—the way solidarity activists admire Chávez—although they did circulate ideas about intervention that are strongly tied to the discourse of opposition politicians (as discussed in chapter 2).

It is difficult to gauge how migrants' positions towards political actors relates to that of Venezuelans in Venezuela, but we know more polls conducted in 2021 have shown that 45 percent would prefer a candidate that is neither Guaidó nor Maduro. The fact that street discontent, and protests have decreased since 2017, also hints at this widespread political apathy.

Hope in the Alternative to Neoliberalism: Learning from Venezuela

In writing about his reasons for joining the Abraham Lincoln Brigades to fight in 1930s Spain, as a young black communist, James Yates writes in 1989:

> There, the poor, the peasants, the workers and the unions, the socialists and the communists, together had won an election against the big landowners, the monarchy and the right wingers in the military. It was the kind of victory that would have brought Black people to the top levels of government if such an election had been won in the USA (Yates 1989: 112).

Solidarity activists' discourse about how the world 'ought to be' shares a striking resemblance to the passion with which Yates, a young black man from Quitman, Mississippi, writes about the justice inherent in defeating those who are—he feels, wrongfully—powerful.

Solidarity activists see in the Chávez and Maduro governments an alternative to the global hegemony of neoliberal doctrine against which they themselves feel 'powerless.' Many activists spoke specifically of the hope the country elicited after the fall of the Soviet Union:

> For many of us who are militant in the political left, Chávez offered hope—more than anything because he was coming at a time when neoliberalism was absolutely hegemonic, it had no ideological contestation in the world, save for small societies, such as Zapatismo, for instance. So the Bolivarian Revolution was the tipping point, that came to tell us that there are alternatives, that you can take power, and use it in a different way, and resist neoliberalism and build another alternative coming from social movements, popular power, and helping the people. Above all, I was drawn to the idea of how the figure of Chávez brought into Venezuelan politics and society thousands of people who had been alienated throughout the twentieth century.

Here Martín, a young Spanish activist in his mid-thirties, local leader in Podemos, describes a very powerful hope. Again, the idea that Chávez was constructing an alternative with 'the people' as its central political subject, an inclusive project formed of those marginalised by Venezuela's *ancien régime*, resurfaces as his moral ideal.

Similarly, Victoria, a Spanish activist in her late thirties (who travelled on foot through South America), explains her version of this new alternative:

> We were coming from a period, after the fall of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, where the dominant propaganda was, well, socialism already failed. Capitalism can be better or worse, but there's no alternative. That the leader of the political movement in a country, that was also the president, and who had been re-elected god knows how many times, could say that we needed to head towards socialism, really caught our attention in Europe. Well, all these things established a really deep connection in our movement, activists and others, towards the figure of Chávez. Although we obviously always insisted that our solidarity was not with the government—in fact, even then we criticised some of the government's decisions—our solidarity was with the Bolivarian movement, and Chávez was an important part of that but not the only one.

The fact that Chávez emerges from this picture as an elected official—many times victorious elected official—calling for socialism (although I note this was much later in 2006), is something Victoria feels caught the eyes of Europe.

For José, more specifically, Venezuela stood in contrast to the austerity that was taking place in Europe:

> A country that invests a ton of money in health, education, extending university education, whilst what we had here was in fact the opposite: educational spending cuts, the introduction of university fees for the time, health spending cuts, all that. And then the workers' control movement caught our attention. It was not a government that was simply applying a series of progressive politics, and that in Europe we were in fact applying the opposite ones, but also that this was a really large grassroots based social movement, of workers taking factories, farmers taking land, and taking the lead from below.

I note that health spending in particular, was inexplicably low in Venezuela, almost 10 percent of GDP *less* than Cuba, as described in chapter 2—José seems to be moved by Chavismo's *will* to act for an expansion of well-being, what Coronil (2011) feels is the defining feature of the 'Left,' and by the broad bottom-up coalitions that sustain Chavismo.

In passionate language, Perla—an Argentinean academic and activist in her mid-forties—describes how she sees Chávez's Bolivarian project inaugurating Latin America's turn towards the left—what scholars have dubbed 'the pink tide':

> More than anything once the brutal offensive of the coup of 2002 and the bosses' lockout of PDVSA is over, we could say that starting 2002, 2003, the revolutionary process deepens. It turns towards the post-capitalist horizon, with socialism at its horizon, and it opens a process of hope, a vocation of power for the political and social processes of resistance. It opens that road to say, well, we have to dispute, there are possibilities to dispute, even with elections, the power of government [...] It open an impressive perspective in Latin America.

Perla's 'process of hope' sees Chavismo as an opportunity for resistance movements, those oppressed, to dispute, and take over, the power of government—this being a more just (and moral) way in which power should be enacted, that, as I described in the last chapter.

Sahas underlines his admiration for the 'semblance of equality' he feels Venezuela has achieved:

> I often, get told about all the—'where has socialism ever worked?' And they point to Venezuela as a kind of failed project. But, you know, when you look at the things that it

> has achieved, just in terms of bringing some semblance of equality to society, I think it's so important. And sometimes I give the example of the 1917 revolution in Russia and things they achieved immediately in the aftermath of the revolution. But, you know, we don't even need to look that far, we can look at Venezuela. And despite the criticisms I mentioned earlier, in terms of what Chávez could have done better, they did have a massive impact. And it tells you the kind of effects we can have in society, you know, with socialist ideas and with organising.

Sahas' ideas are in line with Bobbio (1994) (but also Lukes 2003) widespread understanding of the Left as defined by the importance it places on equality. As Lakoff (1996) notes, and as I hope to argue on the basis of this research, this understanding tends to overlook the fact that equality is a *moral* value. "Bringing some semblance of equality" is fundamental in Sahas' understanding of politics, and it is why he values Chavismo. Sahas presents Chavismo's push for equality—broadly understood as social and economic justice—as his ideal, or what many might see as a utopian vision of what *ought* to be.

That Western countries could learn from Venezuela's 'experiments' is a related idea that was also prevalent. As Fernando in Australia tells me:

> Venezuela as different as it is to Australia, always provided us when we were doing solidarity work here with some concrete examples of how things could be done differently[...] But there's no reason why some of their very simple policies like, you know, nationalising oil or redistributing oil wealth can't be useful for other countries, or at the very minimum show that these are a possibility. Whereas in Australia the discourse is like, I think in most of the world, the discourse is that there is just no alternative to the free market.

Similarly, Chase, a white American Sandinista in his late sixties:

> In the 1990s the Sandinistas lost the election in Nicaragua. And of course, a couple of years before that, the Soviet Union collapsed. So, the US was the only superpower, and everything seemed to be going its way. And then we had this really interesting guy coming to our consciousness and Venezuela starting these really interesting experiments in popular democracy and economic justice. So yeah, Venezuela took on an important—as an inspiration to those of us who were working on the movement, including me.

What Fernando and other solidarity activists seem to love about 'Venezuela' (although they really mean Chavismo, as I have explained) is its discursive, very open, contestation of neoliberalism against the presumed inescapability of free-market capitalism. As other activists have noted, Chavismo's timing is important: it came at a moment when the world seemed determined to crush any 'idealised' aspirations towards what solidarity activists understand as a more just, and moral, political system.

I note Nordic countries never surface in their imaginaries, the way Cuba does. *The Guardian* in 2014, suggested a majority of us (rather naïvely) believe them to be 'utopia' in terms of their social indicators, and of how we know they rate their happiness levels (Booth *The Guardian* January 27 2014). Solidarity activists, it seems, simply dismiss these countries ideologically: although heavily regulated and very well unionised, Nordic countries are still controlled by private investment. I note this is a bit different for Norway and its oil industry (and the companies *Equinor*, its state oil firm, run), but most solidarity activists see these countries as 'reformist' or social democratic, not truly socialist (or more explicitly Marxist). I have pointed previously that solidarity activists seem less interested in the pragmatisms that surround *achieving* equality. They are more concerned with the discursive elements of combatting imperialism and broader geopolitical inequality. Venezuela's and Cuba's anti-imperialist fight against the US, and Chávez's policies confronting domestic elites, are at the centre of their proverbial 'fight against injustice.' Nordic countries *perform* very well by all accounts, yet they are not engaged in practices of *radically* overturning power (so central to populism) which makes them 'uninteresting' in solidarity activists' eyes—although we could argue they are of course heavily invested in climate change.

Fearing the downfall of Chavismo

The hope for the survival of Venezuela's socialist project, also shares a fear of its dismemberment. For Abdo (the British-Sudanese journalist whose father, an academic and opposition figure in Sudan, was once detained for his affiliation to communism) Venezuela's success is pressing:

> I always felt that if they don't allow Venezuela to succeed, then they'll do the same to the socialist system in Sudan.

For solidarity activists, there is a sense that all peoples in the process of combatting privilege, will be attacked—if Venezuela loses that struggle, sustaining socialism will again be undermined historically. Jack sees his passion for 'defending Venezuela' as stemming from this:

> What I say to people is, if you want socialism, you have to fight for it. [...] That's why I say we have to defend Venezuela, not because we've been to Venezuela, we think the people are very nice, but because have to defend it on the very same principals of what we're fighting for. Because how can we justify fighting for what we say is socialism, when we're not prepared to actually stand up when it gets tough [...] And it is in that struggle in which I find my passion for defending Venezuela, because one day that could very well be us. That could be us, isolated, under threat, an economy under siege because we said we want to take it into our own hands. [...] One of us could be labelled as a Maduro if we get into power, when we actually start saying, 'we're going to take back from the ruling class what they have taken from us.' [...] He is still upholding his end of the bargain. We have to uphold our end. Because if we don't, we leave him to be the victim of, he could be in many ways, another Salvador Allende, like in Chile, or you know, Granada, Nicaragua, if we don't actually stand in solidarity with these people.

The ghost of the Chilean case looms large for solidarity activists around the world who underline the parallels of Chávez's fate with the hatred the US felt towards Allende's Chile (see Figure 16). As I have noted in chapter 3, many Venezuela solidarity activists were involved with Chile solidarity in the sixties or are Chilean exiles themselves. For Perla, as an Argentinean, there is a broader fear of a return of genocidal right-wing dictatorships:

> So here we are, defending her [Venezuela], and it is the strategic battle of our time. If Venezuela falls, the dark night will be upon us in Latin America, of the hand the Bolsonaros, the Macris, the Piñeras, I was going to say Uribe, because we all know that the person who governs Colombia is a puppet, all the heirs of the worst of our history, the heirs of the genocidal dictatorships of the seventies.

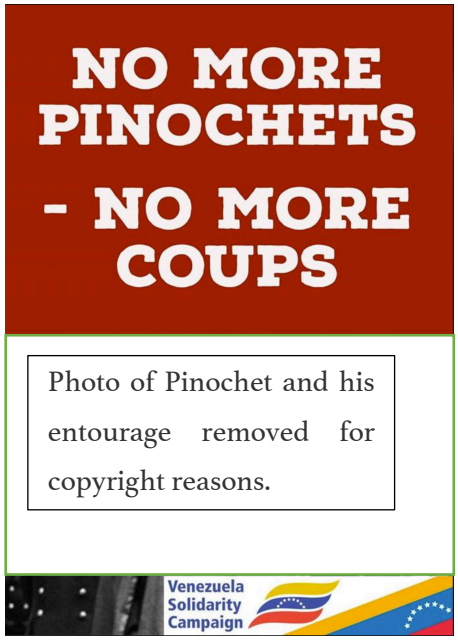

Figure 16. Post by VSC on their Facebook profile, stressing their position against both US and Venezuelan military intervention.

Living at the fringe of the international order

Already at the turn of this century, sixteen years before Trumpism and Brexit, Chantal Mouffe (2000) was speaking of the disaffection towards democratic institutions, and the disenchantment with traditional political parties. This as she suggests, has seen the advance of many extreme right-wing parties, and "a marked cynicism about politics and politicians [that] has a very corrosive effect on popular adhesion to democratic values." She begins her short book, *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism* with a phrase that would resonate with most solidarity activists in this research: "As this turbulent century draws to a close, liberal democracy seems to be recognised as the only legitimate form of government. But does that indicate its final victory over its adversaries, as some would have it?" (Mouffe 2000, 1). For Mouffe (2000), liberalism is wary of popular participation. She admits very few dare to openly challenge the 'liberal' democratic model, suggesting that part of the reason for this is the deeply seated idea that individuals are motivated by individual interests and not a moral belief that they should do 'what is best for the community.'

As activists for the Venezuelan government, the stance solidarity activists take forces them to feel they live at the margins of the international order of this liberal democratic model,

standing for their own moral beliefs. There is a sense they are isolated and misunderstood—a feeling I argue is akin to Venezuelans' forced migration, experienced as reduced political voice and autonomy.

My purpose here is descriptive, in other words to show how interviewees view themselves as global outliers because of their rejection of the 'liberal'—that for them has resulted in elite-governed—democracy model. As I have discussed in chapter 4, Urbinati (2019) and Bobbio (1987) convincingly argue that such a distinction between 'liberal' democracy and democracy is false. I argue such distinction is indeed false, but only in a *theoretical* sense; it exists in the way interviewees dismiss violations of civil and political rights, and prioritise what they feel is a more legitimate manner of enacting policy: for them, through the empowerment of 'the people' more directly.

Victoria, a Spanish documentarist and filmmaker in her late thirties, who spent six months with different indigenous communities in South America, backpacking all the way from Chile to Venezuela, describes a sense of under-appreciation of her work. Her support of the leftist governments of Latin America—and more specifically the Venezuelan government, internationally seen as a dictatorship—has meant her filmmaking, her experiences with indigenous communities, and her desire to document their struggles, are not taken seriously:

> People around us know what we do, and know that we are attached to certain voices, and that we have, well, direct information about the places. And when they ask us, specifically about Venezuela, they ask without an interest in learning. So, they maintain their position, regardless of what you say to them, or tell them. I feel that this is also somewhat of an aggression, because when human beings stop learning, or do not open themselves to what others can say, we stunt the opportunity for growth. In that sense, I find that we are sometimes—they don't tell us directly, but people close to us, obviously we have a lot of family members that are not on our—on the shore that we have decided to be on, and from there, although they love us, there is a certain 'you're wasting your time' [...] To be frank, those of us who support and are in solidarity with other struggles, above all struggles that are stigmatised, in some way our work is belittled. It is true that there is an undermining of our ideas.

For Victoria, her family and friends' unwillingness to change their views (in light of her personal experience of the continent and Venezuela) is a form of aggression. Victoria then tells me she does not mind constructive criticism that opens debate, but what she receives online

(commentary on her blog, for example) is vitriol: insults that attack her and her partner *personally*.

Solidarity activists have often been attacked for their views on Venezuela, either on social media, or when organising a protest in solidarity with President Maduro or Chávez—no doubt in response to how the Venezuelan government is presented in the international media. In one case, anti-Chavista Venezuelan migrants attended an event one of the interviewees had organised and started talking over his panel. And yet, most solidarity activists did not feel that these types of attacks were the main difficulty involved in organising campaigns or defending the revolution. For José at least, the principal difficulty was finding the funds necessary to support the work of the campaign:

> We organised an event around May, June perhaps [...] [Venezuelans] came into the event and tried to stop it from happening. Some were seated in the first row, and I was there talking, and they were quite violent, filming, and well, it didn't amount to more [...] but I would not say that's the principal difficulty we've faced. The principal difficulty has been precisely that of organising a movement that does not have financial means and stuff, only the support of a few activists.

When I ask Fernando, our Australian-Argentinean journalist, if he has been a victim of aggression from Venezuelans more specifically, he tells me that for him it is harder to deal with those in his own continent:

> The hardest thing for us is most of the time explaining to people where Venezuela is, and then when, you know, it really erupts in Venezuela, having to, then all of a sudden, everyone who a week before didn't know where Venezuela was, is now an expert wanting to tell us 'ah but how can you support what's going on in Venezuela?' And it's like, well, because we've been following it for the last decade, you know, you didn't know where it was last week—you thought it was a piece of fruit. And now you're on my Facebook page telling me you know why I'm wrong on Venezuela. So that's, I think that's really been the hardest thing that we face.

Fernando is again suggesting that he *knows* more about Venezuela than the others who criticise his views. In saying they thought it was a piece of fruit, he is questioning the validity of claims he feels are parroted from the international media's narrative on Venezuela.

For Mack, the American *TeleSUR* journalist, anti-communist sentiment in the US has been particularly problematic for him and his work:

> Any identification with socialism in general, or any existing socialist project or movement somewhere, it's definitely like a black mark on you. Within the movement and within just general work. But you know, that's really changed in the past—really the Bernie Sanders phenomenon, socialism can be talked about in an open way. It really is a dramatic shift from everything that I'm used to. So, I think there are different sides of it. Of course, there is the 'within the movement' type thing, but in general in the media, it definitely has, in terms of as a journalist, you're less likely to be touched or respected, supposedly, if you are supporting governments that the rest of the media is calling dictatorships. [...] And then there's been, within a progressive media landscape and things like that, it's like harder to get on the big platform, or have your work respected. It's more like people are scared to touch the issue, right? There's a lot of self-censorship in the United States and so there's less people that are like, it's great to say, 'yeah I support this revolution,' 'I support this government because people don't want to.' You feel that there are things that are not going to come from that, so there's few of us that aren't scared to do that. So, it brings all these other—you get kind of cast-off certain things because of it.

Mack portrays how supporting the revolution requires a certain courage. Others that are also a part of the progressive landscape in the US, are not willing to be cast-off from the main media outlets simply because they hold a particularly controversial political position on Venezuela.[36] Like Victoria, and Martín, Mack speaks of a resulting career-wise stigmatisation. He sees his support for the Chávez and Maduro governments as a 'black mark' that casts him off certain work, but more importantly, makes it hard to have his work *respected*.

Another important film documentarist, which most solidarity activists admire, Pedro, describes how, in practice, this relegates him to the fringes of the media:

> I mean obviously I think there is a price you pay professionally for not holding the line on Venezuela, and I'll tell you there was sort of the possibility of making that first film in 2009

[36] I come back to this feeling of 'doing good' or fighting 'for good' in the next chapter. See also chapter 3 and the last section on the deontology of solidarity.

> with a major broadcaster[...] to make a kind of, what I would consider a kind of really shoddy two dimensional piece, investigating Chavez's link to Hezbolla, and the kind of sensationalist kind of stuff that Venezuela has—the kind of stuff that's given regularly on Venezuela [...] I think I've definitely given up financial rewards. I think if I had a much more hostile opinion on the government, I think I would be able to get commissions much more easily with a major broadcaster.

Most of Pedro's films are accessible to a wide audience online, at no charge. It is the sense his work is refuted by major broadcasters that makes him and these solidarity activists, journalists and filmmakers, harbour great distrust of the press. They see themselves as outliers fighting against the international narrative from a very fringe-corner of the world, which makes their work immensely more meaningful to them.

By listing the 'small groups' present at Maduro's inauguration, Andy in his early seventies, also spells out the fringe nature of his political position:

> And I was in Venezuela for the inauguration of Maduro. Sinn Féin was the only other major European Party which was present at the inauguration. There was no—there were some people from Mélenchon, *France Insoumise*. And there were some people from the Basque Country. But no other major party. Yeah, there was an Italian communist, I mean, there were small groups.

For one young male activist, this had an impact on his political career—I refrain from providing his pseudonym to preserve his anonymity. He was made to step down from his placement on the party's candidate list because, according to him, his Instagram was a liability: other party members were afraid the media would use the way he openly vouched for Maduro's government to discourage votes for the party.

Ignacio, the young Spanish activist who spoke of the way he was racialised in Venezuela, explains how this ideological isolation can be 'attractive' to some on the left:

> You realise that the revolution, as an organic system, is capable of transforming the concerns and curiosities that you have had to nurture isolating yourself from people, reading rambling (*farragosos*) PDFs written by Enver Hoxha at 4 in the morning, arguing with really marginal people, that in the end only adopt a leftist stance, to be different from other people, but not really by revolutionary virtue.

For Ignacio, Chávez's revolution transformed what is generally seen as very niche leftist intellectual thought, into open popular debate. He mentions reading the little-known twentieth-century Albanian Marxist-Leninist head of state, Enver Hoxha, and uses the word *farragoso* to denote the thorny, controversial, but also stale nature of the texts he would be forced to read to quench his thirst for revolutionary literature. Turning to the left in order to seek distance from the 'pack' is inauthentic to him. What constitutes 'revolutionary virtue' is unclear, but we can presume it stands for the will to turn an underclass majority into protagonists of the political system.[37] It is clear Ignacio feels (or wants to feel) even more isolated than he supposes he would be if he were simply from the extreme left.

Even if Ignacio disregards those that want to differentiate themselves for the sake of it, their pull to the extremes is, in fact, fighting what we can understand as 'sterile politics.' It stems from a sense of dissatisfaction with the current Western political system, and counters a politics that lacks Schmitt's impelling friend-enemy precept. It is in openly antagonising the 'norm' that their position acquires meaning and significance—a point that highlights the appeal of moral populist politics (from both the extreme right and left) too often overlooked.

Conclusions

Venezuelan migrants feel that the opinions of solidarity activists directly negate their lived experiences of the governments of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. They argue non-Venezuelans cannot really 'know' what is happening because they have not lived through the crisis. But for Venezuelan migrants it is not simply national or ethnic belonging that grants the 'right' to form an opinion on the country: it is being directly affected by the decision-making of the state, and living under its authority. Support for Maduro from non-Venezuelans is, for them, invalid, but what is more, it is 'wrong' because it is condescending, an international apologia of sorts, of the government's crimes against humanity.

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[37] See Brewer's (1999) "optimal distinctiveness model of social identity" discussed in chapter 4, that explains the allure of setting oneself, or the group we belong to, apart.

This 'narrative appropriation' is seen as immoral, in part, because it is uttered from the privilege of the Global North. However, those from the Global North that *share* Venezuelan migrants' opinions (Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, among others), are praised, not questioned. This contradiction suggests that what Venezuelans find egregious is not the fact that solidarity activists hold an opinion without having experienced the crisis, as they want to argue; it is the fact that supporting Maduro's government challenges and overtly denies their experience and understanding. It is only *therefore* 'wrong.'

Denouncing solidarity activists and saying that they have no claim to an opinion, responds to a moral logic that serves to position their own group above Chavismo. This is parallel to how solidarity activists are not averse to the idea of Cuban, Russian or Chinese intervention, to help protect the government of Maduro, even though they are viscerally against *American* intervention. Or how they support Chávez's coup in 1992, even though they vehemently condemn the opposition for being anti-democratic. These are *parochial*, not true moral claims as discussed in chapter 4.

The chapter shows, moreover, that both groups display a loss of political voice, or what taking from Self-Determination Theory, psychologists understand as a loss of *autonomy* (Nietzsche's 'powerlessness'). Solidarity activists feel that the media narrative (and the neoliberal order) is completely slighted against them, and that this has consequences for their careers; Venezuelan migrants feel they have been denied participation in their country's political system, which leads to migration, or self-exile—feelings that again contribute to an understanding of undue power being exerted on them, and harbour Nietzsche's *ressentiment*. The conception of 'the powerful' remains. For Venezuelan migrants, it is Chavismo as the political elite; for solidarity activists it is the international media, the US and the global neoliberal hegemony.

Chapter 9. Battling for 'good'

The moral work of solidarity

Solidarity activists support the government of Maduro when they stand to gain nothing political or monetary from their support, and even despite the fact they are ostracised online because of it. They feel it is their duty to defend or speak for those that seem especially vulnerable in Venezuelan society and for the government that seems to represent them. Most solidarity activists referred to this metaphoric battle—this fighting for Venezuela, although again I note, they mean Chavismo). The idea of fighting for "what is 'right'" is a *moral* quest that grants meaning to their work.

Damien, Russian-Australian journalist in his mid-thirties, is not deterred by the vitriol he receives online—on the contrary:

> I sometimes wish I did more, because you know, I kind of like that—how to say—how do I put this nicely? The more of my opponents I anger, the more I feel like I'm doing the right thing.

Damien is encouraged by the anger of those he purports to be battling against. His words touch on the increased self-confidence (or 'ego-boost') that comes from feeling 'morally superior' to his 'opponents,' or put differently, from upholding his sense of dignity against the way his ideals are undermined by the mainstream.

Andy, on the other hand, in his early seventies (who had done more than 15 interviews for Argentinean television after the media erroneously suggested he had predicted the devaluation of the peso in the early 2000s) seems far less attracted to the fight:

> Oh, I'm not driven by reward. No, no, no. I'm *driven* by guilt. I'm driven by guilt. I just feel something has to be done. It's moral. Yeah, I'd rather be on the beach. It's not rewarding at all. It's [pause] it's scary. Because you feel individually responsible [...] What is great, you know, the unexpected rewards, are the friendship and the friendships you form because you're fighting for a common cause.

Sahas also refers to meeting "people standing up for what's right"—this common cause:

> First, is that it's always great to see people standing up for what's right, basically, and through—I mean, more recently, obviously—through participating in demonstrations around what's going on in Venezuela right now. And opposing our governments' push forward, I've met some really inspiring activists. And yeah, I think generally, when people seeing people connecting the dots between what our government is doing abroad, what they're doing domestically—you know, questions of imperialism—I think that's very important.

Again, the nature of this deontology is *felt* as actively supporting and speaking for the government of Maduro abroad, in other words, trying to counteract the prevailing media narrative regarding what is happening in Venezuela on social media, or as I suggested in chapter 3, granting that 'external validation.' Sahas conveys a naïveté about the power of networking Keck and Sikkink (1998) suggest is characteristic of transnational activists. Embedded in this deontology of solidarity, is a converse idea of standing against what is 'wrong.' Ignacio mentioned racism, as I discussed in chapter 6; Sahas mentions imperialism.

For many solidarity activists this will to 'fight for good' is intricately sown to their lived experiences, i.e. the experiences that they feel have shaped their understanding and interpretation of politics—what Hochschild (2016) terms their 'deep stories.' Liesel, the young member of the transgender community, tells me:

> I got really stuck in because I wanted something to fight for, and I became convinced—I wasn't convinced of the ideas of Marxism at the beginning—because I don't think anyone is, you can only convince yourself through study. And then events will also educate you. You know, so I read the theory, I was convinced of it.

Liesel then describes their former high-school's situation, as part of the fundamental events of their life that educated them:

> We live in this era where it's obvious that something is going really, really horribly wrong. Well, capitalism hasn't been progressive for 100 years now. [...] There's this like a terminal crisis, and its being reflected in the way that capitalists don't let that crisis bite into their own profits—they sell it back to workers, they sell it back as a gig economy, they sell it back as precarious work. And austerity. I was also going to school when I was 17, that had a 60 percent budget cut [...] One of the teachers was sacked halfway through the year and we

> didn't have a replacement teacher, so I finished my sociology A level through self-study. I think this is important because I want to outline why a young 17-year-old would choose to dedicate hours and hours of their life to socialism. On a very, very serious basis [...] At my school we had, I think it was the highest suicide rate in the country. These are all reflections of the crisis. There was an awful lot of LGBT people in my school, including me, there were 5 homeless LGBT people in my year. [...] And there was no money to do anything about it [...] They went into a student meeting with our head of student support, and our head of student support said, 'What do you want me to do? Magic you a house? Because there's nothing that can be done'.

Like other activists, Liesel references the very real impact austerity has had on their life—and their sense of its injustice. Liesel explicitly underlines this as the reason for why a 17-year-old in high school would commit so fervently to socialism. That capitalism was not working for everyone seems to follow from the severe lack of funding and the very inability to afford basic housing experienced by fellow LGBT classmates. These events shaped Liesel's understanding of the political world—and of what *ought* to be, Liesel's own moral systems and priorities, in very powerful ways.

For Mack, a young white American journalist for *TeleSUR* (having just returned from fighting in the Iraq war) it was Chávez's speech in the UN that deeply resonated with him. Chávez expressed something inside him that he was not able to articulate himself:

> So, I got out of the army 2005. I had been in the Iraq war, the invasion of Iraq—this had been under the Bush administration. So, I was someone who thought I was going to be in the military my whole life. And then the Iraq war and the Bush era sort of blew that all up in smoke. And so I got out of the army really angry at Bush, at the government, at the military, and all this stuff for, you know, starting that war, and having all these bad things happen to people I knew, and the Iraqi people. And I was young, like 22, so I had all this rage and anger particularly at George W. Bush because he was the idiot that sent us and all that stuff. And I just like see this speech, at the UN, of this guy Chávez calling Bush the devil, and I was like, who is this guy? This is awesome. And it just resonated with me so much and I was like so mad that no one was even confronting Bush and all that. So it really just began as that: it was like I saw Chávez standing up to Bush saying what I believed to be the truth, and he was expressing it in a way that I couldn't at the time.

Mack's experience gave him deep reason to question how US foreign policy is enacted: who he feels benefits from it, and who suffers at expense of its reach. The rage he felt at G. W. Bush

was expressed by Chávez's bold speech—not incidentally, one of the most memorable (or crazy, depending on the source) United Nations speeches in history (Keating 2009; *The Telegraph* September 29 2015). This deep impression of Chávez coloured Mack's understanding of the Venezuelan conflict. More broadly, Mack's personal experience in Iraq, and his anger at Bush at being sent there, conditioned the way he understood politics and power (both domestic and foreign) and shaped the meaning he gives his current support for the Bolivarian government. It seems only natural that Chavismo's political project would resonate with his ideals. To extricate himself from this position becomes increasingly difficult (as described by Bourdieu): it starts to determine the way he views the opposing sides—in terms of 'bad' (racist, undemocratic, allied with US interests) and 'good' (focused on 'the people', brave).

In trying to explain one of the things that he admires most about the Bolivarian Revolution, Tim mentions the '*Barrio Adentro*' missions: ambulatories, headed by Cuban doctors, installed in the hardest to reach areas of the Venezuelan barrios, discussed in chapter 2. He had come to Venezuela to investigate them when he visited for the first time in 2002 (Tim has been such a number of times, he cannot remember how many altogether):

> So we stopped off, we saw one of these Cuban clinics and it was part of the *Barrio Adentro* program [...] And I stopped and I went in, and because my Spanish isn't very good, talked to the guy, he was called Dr. Brito, and he was a young guy, mid-twenties, very young. And I went in, and I said, I'd like to talk, I'm from Britain, I just wanted to know whether it was possible to have a chat with a doctor. '*Oh*, *enfermo*! *setea setea*' [Tim means they told him to sit down, '*siéntese*']. I said 'ok', and literally within—and you know how long it takes to wait in Britain. I phone up can't get a doctor's appointment here for like three weeks. So like what's the point? I've either cured myself or I'm dead. Or I've gotta phone an ambulance. Walked in. Literally within seconds Dr. Brito appears, and says, 'Hi! I'm Dr. Brito, what's wrong with you?' So I said, 'No, I want to talk to you and ask you a few questions' [...] So I said, 'ok, my first question is I've just walked in off the streets. I'm a tourist, I'm just a visitor, yeah. I've got dollars, in my hand. How much would this cost, for a consultation if I did one?' He said 'no, it's absolutely free.' I said, 'free for me as a tourist?' He said, 'here in Venezuela, the only qualification for treatment is that you're a human being.' And I was so moved by that. Here was this guy who was going to give this western tourist a free consultation, without me having to produce any proof documentation, insurance, and the only qualification for this treatment was that I was a human being.

Tim was deeply moved by the fact that he was going to receive, as a western tourist, a free medical consultation. He is painfully aware that in his own (much wealthier) nation, Britain,

he would not be granted such a consultation—a Venezuelan tourist in his country would not be able to access medical care without incurring in costs. In the case of *Barrio Adentro*, Tim points at a society should all aspire to, where everyone should be treated medically, regardless of who they are and where they are from. We should be seen given our shared humanity. Tim was not needing emergency medical treatment, this would be reason enough to receive medical attention in many places (depending on the country, this would be free of charge elsewhere too). But in the case of *Barrio Adentro*, medical assistance, of any nature, is given to all. Treatment will depend on the equipment and medicine available at the ambulatory, but you will be seen in a very short time frame, because the ambulatory serves a small locale.

It is no doubt challenging to question the moral value of the *Barrio Adentro* programme. In principle, it aspires to place human wellbeing above any cost to the doctor, the state, or other Venezuelans. Although some might consider this to be idealistic to a fault, it is hard to argue against the idea that this is how the medical system *ought* to function, and this ideal constitutes the central tenet of Tim's justification. Tim does not allude to the problems that *Barrio Adentro* has encountered more recently: for example, doctor and severe medicine shortages, even abandonment of thousands of facilities, according to the Venezuelan press, who quote the president of the Venezuelan Medical Federation (*La Patilla* December 8 2014). Critics of *Barrio Adentro* were concerned it reduced the spending available to the mainstream public health system in Venezuela (which is also free and available to all—something Tim might not be aware of), and responsible for fragmenting the system (R. Jones 2008). More striking is perhaps the fact that Cuban doctors themselves recently denounced the treatment they receive from their own, and other governments for whom they have worked for (including Venezuela), as "modern slavery" before the International Criminal Court in May 2019. The *New York Times* in fact published an interview with one of these Cuban doctors, Yansnier Arias, who left the programme at the end of 2018, and denounced that "his Cuban and Venezuelan supervisors told him that oxygen should be used as a political tool: not for everyday medical emergencies, but for when the elections were closer" (Casey *The New York Times* March 17 2019).

Although I do not doubt the veracity of Tim's account, it is possible that 15 years into the programme, the inclusiveness he heralds here, has steadily eroded—together with many of Venezuela's institutions. Tim is not uncritical of the Maduro government, and neither are most solidarity activists. But the government's failings are not, in their eyes, sufficient to deter from the predominance of *who* the government's discourse, and these missions, uphold; nothing can justify any kind of intervention from the US or the West more broadly.

This is perhaps the central point of contention between solidarity activists and migrants that I hope to highlight. Many Venezuelans are convinced these activists are either misled by the Venezuelan government, or ill-informed, or simply ignorant or obtuse. What I have found instead, is that solidarity activists are willing to 'forgive' and 'forgo' the Chavez and Maduro governments' mistakes, because they see those governments as fighting the US, and as governments committed to defending the poor and socialism. They understand the inadequacies as just that, 'mistakes'—not incompetence—and easily find blame in the US sanctions.

Criticising Imperialism

As I explained in chapter 3, fighting imperialism (in its American, British and Spanish manifestations), was of primary concern for solidarity activists. Trying to defend Venezuela's government from the 'evils' of US aggression and their economic mandates, largely constituted the 'battle' most activists affirmed they were trying to combat.

Sahas, the young British-Asian in his early thirties, first engaged in politics when Gaza was bombed in 2009. For him, this was his first protest, and the first time he had heard of Palestine. He tells me it changed him: he got involved in anti-war organising, struck by what he understood as modern imperialism. He read up on Chávez, in his eyes, "a great friend of the Palestinians, a kind of anti-imperialist hero standing up to the US." Sahas (like Jack, the black-British young activist involved in Momentum), considers himself a socialist—Venezuela he says is "very inspiring [...] an example of what can happen with collective solidarity and organising." When I ask Sahas what he makes of critics who defy activists' strong opinions on Venezuela, given many of them (including him) have never been to the country, he tells me:

> There is, you know, this kind of, 'oh, you can only speak if you have some personal connection with it.' But I think that's absolutely false. And I think, for one, generally, anyone can have the right to comment on something that's happening anywhere. As long as you're not kind of appropriating it as your experience, which, you know, no one is. But I think more importantly, obviously, I think it's important to point out that our government is playing a damaging role in what's happening. And so, we not only have a right, we have a duty to be talking about what our government is doing. And, you know, resisting the push for war.

Sahas points at the Bank of England who, in late January 2019, blocked an attempt by the Maduro government to withdraw 1.2 billion dollars' worth of Venezuelan gold—an action of the British government that offended him deeply. According to *CNN.com* (January 26 2019) top US officials urged the British government to restrict Maduro's access to these assets, steering them towards opposition leader Juan Guaidó, who had just declared himself president. For Sahas, his open opinion on Venezuela is justified (and is, moreover, a "*duty*") because he is defying his *own* government—for him a "junior partner of American imperialism." Ironically, he mentions that he does not feel he is appropriating Venezuelans' experience—although this is exactly what Venezuelan migrants feel he is doing, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Sahas' feelings are, to a degree, different from those of solidarity activists in their fifties, sixties and seventies, who have a broader experience of Latin America, either from living there or from having travelled there extensively. James, for example, in his seventies, criticises the idea he feels many British people hold of Britain's role in the world, using the example of London's Canning House:

> They think they're the centre of Latin America here. You know Canning house? Victor Canning was the foreign minister in the 19th century when Latin American independence was achieved. That's why it's called Canning. Because it's 'I brought' typical British arrogance.

Tim, the white South African, criticised how certain British people aggrandise their knowledge of a place, in other words, how they hold an insidious imperialist mindset, despite being on the left (a view he shares, ironically, with other Venezuelans who resent this attitude profoundly):

> I'm not sure why British people think they're authorities on other people's revolutions. And the further left they go, the more they think they're an authority. And the least knowledge of the countries they're talking about the more certain they are that their templates and prescriptions are correct. So I'm very reluctant to do this. So I always ask. If they want, and that it's an opinion, and it's an opinion that's based on far less knowledge of what's actually going on than they have. But sometimes you're able to see the wood for the trees because you're not so caught up in the detail.

Tim is discussing the extent to which he stands against appropriation: templates and prescriptions that are imposed on "other people's revolutions" by those on the left—ironically as I have said, very much on a par with what Venezuelan migrants think about solidarity

activists themselves. He is surprisingly critical of the British left more specifically, perhaps as a white South African (although he has lived in the UK for most of his life—he grew up in working-class London, he mentioned). Tim admits to having limited knowledge of 'what's actually going on' when compared to Venezuelans—a point I underline because it admits to the instinctive importance of lived experience that Venezuelan migrants also underline. Tim, though, is referring to the lived experience of the people in the barrios that he is visiting (not the experience of the middle- or upper-class Venezuelans). He ends by affirming his position: there *is* in fact something to gain from his perspective as an outsider.

For Andy, the British-Canadian in his late sixties, British imperialism, more specifically against the Irish, was paramount:

> Above all anti-British imperialism. Because the Irish struggle was an extremely important part of British politics. And this is an armed struggle going on next door to you. This is—basically Ireland was at that time, a third world country and has many aspects of being a third world country. It has one of the most advanced political movements in Europe. I mean, Sinn Féin [...] So we were anti-imperialist against our own imperialism as much [pause] In fact, the USA was quite distant place.

Andy underlines how imperialism was happening right 'next door.' It was not, in his view, solely a battle between the Global North and South, or against the US as 'senior' culprit, in Sahas' terms.

Many (white) solidarity activists sought distance from this imperial/racist part of themselves which they see as immoral—in a similar way Venezuelans want to distance themselves from *viveza criolla.* Victoria, from the centre of Spain, speaks of deconstructing her 'arrogant' Western mindset:

> I felt, for example when I got to Chile, that the European rationale, or Western rationale, weighed heavily. And I had to dismantle everything, a kind of educational arrogance, or colonial arrogance, let's say. I had to decolonise the education I had received in order to open up to and listen to the ideas of native peoples, of another reality. And I think it is necessary to do this, to always question the idea that we know everything about a different reality.

Victoria's particular sensitivity to the injustices of her own colonial state and her privilege shapes her understanding of the Venezuelan conflict in a particular historical-moral way, that has allowed her to empathise, but more importantly, learn from the realities and experiences of native peoples.

In speaking of his support of Chavismo, Alberto, underlines his Basque nationality instead, "that is important," he tells me:

> I'm a Basque independentist. For generations we are Basque, and for generations we don't feel Spanish, and that's the issue. It has to do with the position that someone can have facing injustice. I am a person who does not like abuse, I don't like—I say things that seem noble to me, regardless of whether that is shared by a majority. And regardless of whether there is someone very big, with a big stick, threatening you. And us Basques, well we can't go back. And so it's cost us a lot of disappointments. Like it's costing Venezuela right now. If Venezuela would kneel before the Yankees, well it surely wouldn't have any problem. No problems with the outside, it would have all its domestic problems.

Alberto's feeling of his subjection to Spanish imperialism, makes him especially sensitive to what he sees as an analogous anti-imperialist struggle in Venezuela—I note most other Basque independence political groups are equally, and very openly supportive of Chavismo (see Figures 17 and 18).

As a non-Venezuelan supporter of the government, living in Venezuela since 2007, Alberto's case is unique. Although he explains his as 'any person's position when faced with an injustice,' it is easy to see how Venezuelan migrants would argue that they are suffering injustices at the hands of Chavismo. This is where blame attribution comes to hold an important key to the divide. Alberto prioritises imperialism in his moral system, given his experience of oppression, and his understanding of the conflict in a geopolitical versus domestic field. He does not claim that Venezuela does not have serious internal issues, but when choosing his overall position towards the Venezuelan government, the issue that looms largest from his 'positionality,' is imperialism.

Figure 17. A poster in support of Chávez, written in Basque, produced by the organisation ERNAI. Reads: 'Because you have always been vigilant...Goodbye and honour comandante.'

Anti-imperialism was a particularly powerful sentiment central to the way these interviewees felt they could atone for what their countries had done in the past (and were doing at present). Tamara, one of the few female activists, leader of one of the largest US Venezuelan Solidarity organisations in Illinois tells me:

> I have been traveling Latin America since the mid 1980s when I graduated college. My interest and inspiration began when I was in the sixth grade. I was exposed to meso-American anthropology and archaeology at that time. Also, at that time, I was exposed to US military incursions in Latin America via the evening news on television (something my generation watched before sitting down to dinner). I have been keenly aware, from a young age, as to the European and US role in the Americas for the past 500 years. Although I never met him, Chavez' vision for his country, his people and much of Latin America was a relief, in a way, to hear and follow. It was also inspiring to listen to him describe US foreign policy in a manner few US citizens understand and a policy others of us have protested [...] Also, impressive to me, was Chavez's creation of the Bolivarian constitution;

> Venezuela's fifth I believe. The purpose, need and process for creating a modern democratic constitution spoke volumes as to the antiquity of the US constitution and how it was created.

Chase, a white American activist in his late sixties, who started organising against the Vietnam war in high school, views solidarity with Latin America more broadly as "a way of life":

> So you know, 1990s the Sandinistas lost the election in Nicaragua. And of course, a couple of years before that, the Soviet Union collapsed. So, the US was the only superpower, and everything seemed to be going its way. And then we had this really interesting guy coming to our consciousness and Venezuela starting these really interesting experiments in popular democracy and economic justice. So, Venezuela took on an important—as an inspiration to those of us who were working on the movement, including me [...] And then the really inspiring thing about Venezuela was that they were doing things that we could actually benefit from here. The direct popular democracy, the communes, the cooperatives, those kinds of things provided a way forward, a different kind of social organisation, social, socio-political organisation, than the neoliberal capitalism. Whereas like in the Middle East, although we opposed US intervention, there weren't really models that we wanted to emulate.

Chase's story is representative of other activists who became involved with solidarity through the Cuba and Nicaragua campaigns, as described in chapter 3. I note Chase's emphasis on his admiration for the Venezuelan political model as something he was inspired by and how it plays a major role in motivating his support.

Figure 18. Twitter post of the football match between Venezuela and the Basque country in October 2018. The banner, with Chávez's eyes, reads (in Basque): "Overcoming Imperalism, forward Venezuela!" The banner provoked such a virulent social media war, it was covered on national Spanish television.

Care and justification

Transnational solidarity work, by definition, involves sustained efforts that include protests, marches, even recollecting funds for another's nation. In Victoria's own words, who spent considerable time with indigenous peoples around South America:

> I think that the most rewarding—it's a complicated question, but there isn't what is more, there are things. And one of them is, well, looking, having the ability to gaze into someone's eyes and empathise with the pains and the loves of others, which is something that, even now, is really hard, even when you are a journalist or reporter, right? The other is a story, there are always barriers and shields that are placed before you, and they don't let you embrace the essence or the soul.

Victoria's deeply emotional language shows how fundamental empathy is as a moral value, at least for her. I have previously discussed how Lakoff (1996) sees 'Morality as empathy' as the principal tenet of US 'liberal' morality: here evinced in the words of Victoria. The centrality of

‘care’ as a prime expression of empathy, and conversely ‘no care’ as a sign of an ‘evil-nature,’ was central to the arguments of both groups.

A tweet by Jack, the twenty-two-year-old, highly optimistic black British activist involved in *Momentum* (the grass-roots organisation supportive of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK), summarises this accusation:

> This so-called ‘democratic’ opposition in Venezuela, with the US puppet Guaidó at the head, is a gang of snakes with no care for the Venezuelan people. They just want to steal all the wealth and natural resources of the country to sell to their US masters.

Jack points to the vile and uncaring nature of the Venezuelan opposition towards ‘the people,’ as a way to evince their ill-intention. This moral manoeuvre was prevalent on *both* sides and is central to the radical nature of Venezuela’s populist divide, open to violent conflict.

It is no different on the Venezuelan side. In describing the commentary he gets on his pro-Maduro posts, Sahas, the young British-Asian, tells me:

> I got a few comments, ‘you're blind to what's happening in Venezuela.’ Or, even worse, ‘you're complicit in the hardships being faced by Venezuelans.’ In much more colourful language.

The accusation of ‘being blind’ is related to that of ‘not caring’ for the Venezuelan people, being negligent. Specifically, they are accusing Sahas of caring *more* for ideology, or wealth than for ‘the people’—here referring to a majority who are struggling to feed themselves through the crisis. These are instinctual claims that Venezuelans make against him, and other solidarity activists, from their understanding that the government is responsible for the crisis. From Sahas’ quote, we can tell his detractors also feel he is ‘complicit’—in other words, *also* to blame, in his lack of condemnation of what is happening in the country. I would say there is evidence to suggest that Sahas and all solidarity activists indeed care for those with little resources in Venezuela; they simply care less, or not at all, for upper and middle-class Venezuelans who have (at least until very recently) had the financial means to leave the country.

Marcos very explicitly denounces solidarity activists’ immorality given their support of Chávez’s coup in 1992: “They’re immoral because they know of morality and reject it,” he tells

me, as I mentioned in the previous chapter. He continues explaining how they only 'care' about being anti-US:

> The communist doesn't reason. The communist is a dogma. Who cares, I mean who cares that people there are getting f***ed (*jodiéndose*), the important thing is to be anti-imperialist, anti-US, because that is the only thing that will give you value as a human being.

Carlos, a young Venezuelan surgeon now in Canada, tells me he never really understood he was from a privileged conservative background: "I used to say, yeah I grew up in a normal family," then adds, "No. I grew up in a very privileged family." It was not until he spent two years living in the poor barrios of a smaller city in the West of Venezuela, and another two years living in La Pastora (another poor barrio of Caracas), while studying to become a priest, that he came to experience poverty in Venezuela. Again, his complaint is 'blindness' and 'not caring':

> My strongest criticism against the non-Venezuelan left is the blindness towards anti-Americanism. They don't care what is happening with people there.

Carlos' story contests solidarity activists' account of the opposition: Carlos is a white upper-middle class Venezuelan that spent considerable time living in the shanty towns of Venezuela. He tells me of the mornings he spent sweeping bullets in the backyard of the church—a normal Tuesday morning—and how living amongst communities permanently under gang violence changed him. Incidentally, this feeling of the other side not caring for those struggling in Venezuela, i.e., blaming solidarity activists for a lack of empathy caused by ideological blindness (an accusation of psychopathy in its most elemental definition) is a remark that has been made in the context of other pervasive divides. It was, for instance, part of Jeremy Corbyn's statement after the prorogation of parliament was deemed unlawful (in 2019).[38]

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[38] "There we have it, Mr Speaker: a simple warning, a simple truth, that a Tory Government are continuing to follow a policy they know will hit the poorest people in our country the hardest. They simply do not care," Jeremy Corbyn (House of Commons Hansard for 25th September 2019).

Particularly unnerving to Venezuelans is the fact that solidarity activists tout anti-imperialism but accept 'meddling' by other countries. Lorena, in her late sixties, asks:

> Why don't they speak of the fact that Russians, Chinese and Cubans are involved? Why don't they speak of them? How is that not imperialism also?

Lorena, who works as a cleaner in Costa Rica, asked for asylum in 2017 after she was unable to find her hypertension medicine in Venezuela. Although Lorena is fair skinned, she comes from a humble background. Lorena mentions she resents the behaviour of Mexico and Uruguay towards Venezuela, whom she compares to solidarity activists' because, she claims, they also admire Venezuela's anti-American stance, the only thing they care about.

Solidarity activists indeed feel hostility towards the US, seen as omnipotent (and therefore corrupt)—vis-a-vis China and Russia, seen as 'new' players fighting for a multipolar world. Again, this interpretation of the political world is different to that of Venezuelan migrants—more domestically minded—who see power in Chavismo's repression of the opposition, and Chávez's own intents to construct a southern geopolitical block and 'hegemony' using Venezuela's vast oil resources to stay at its head.

César, also alludes to solidarity activists' 'blindness,' but he invokes something slightly more sinister:

> They come here to the new world to experiment, and I tell you, they wouldn't fuc—freaking dare try them in their own societies, and they are happy that we are the ones who suffer the consequences of those experiments. They hope, I presume, to see those experiments to the end, because they don't suffer the consequences. They don't care. They don't care about us. They care more about their ideological triumph than the suffering of people.

Interestingly, solidarity activists define Venezuelan sovereignty against American imperialism and the threat of military intervention; Cesar, afro-Venezuelan anti-Chavista, defines it against those citizens from western nations trying to promote specific ideological experiments in other poorer nations—an accusation that we can relate to the hashtag 'Yankee go home' (#YankeeGoHome) that Abdo received.

Because solidarity activists are not tied to the authority of the Venezuelan state, they avoid the negative consequences of these experiments'—they could 'care less' about the people affected by those policies. For César, their love for experiments with socialist policy, 'without care for the experimented on,' is colonial—also immoral. Later in the interview, César uses a particularly memorable, albeit vulgar phrase, citing the controversial Argentinian libertarian economist Jaime Milei, "*Con el culo ajeno, todos somos putos*" (with a foreign ass, we are all—male—prostitutes), although the word choice in Spanish sounds considerably more explicit. Cesar takes the phrase out of its original context (Milei was commenting on the idea of redistributing other people's wealth and not our own) and relates it to promiscuity with ideas. As I discussed in the last chapter, solidarity activists indeed see Venezuela as a place from which to learn from. But for César, this is not just about experimenting on someone else's territory and learning from it, it is experimenting on the territory of Global South countries, those who are less powerful.

Similarly, for Alicia:

> But if there are people that continue to support this, then I say, well I'm sorry, my respect is not for them. I mean, I cannot respect their ideology because you are by-passing what I imagine that same person expects of their own government.

Venezuelans underline how they feel solidarity activists care more about their ideas than people's suffering—something that is easily, or they expect, universally, understood as wrong. By believing that solidarity activists do not care about the Venezuelan people, but do about their ideology, Venezuelan migrants put solidarity activists on a lower moral plane: solidarity activists have no empathy towards the Venezuelan people, they are therefore misguided—even psychopathic, and their views are irrelevant.

Jeison, a young pop-singer and former Chavista, now in Mexico, felt slightly differently. Yet again, he emphasises the importance of care:

> Maybe there's support for Maduro because they have a very broad sense of what no-intervention means in a sovereign state—according to Chávez's discourse on socialism. A real socialism where you care (*te duela*) about your community. But that's not what Venezuela lives today.

Caring and more specifically not caring for 'the people' is made an integral part of assigning fault or blame on 'the other.' It is interesting that caring, generally associated with the family and subsequently with notions of the state, becomes a requisite for having political opinions that are 'valid' and 'just'—an argument somewhat different from the argument of holding 'valid' *knowledge*, explored in the last chapter. Care, affection, love for 'a people,' is presented as an important moral quality needed to justify an opinion about an other's issue because at a more basic level, a positive intention towards a group of 'others' is *felt* as requisite for confidence in that opinion. By the same token, disregard, ill-will or apathy towards suffering is, for both groups, de-legitimising of that opinion. I note, taking from Tronto (1989), that the *object* of care is crucial for moral judgement. Solidarity activists accuse the middle- and upper-classes of not caring of 'the people', or caring more for their wealth; Venezuelan migrants, that solidarity activists care more for 'ideology' than 'the people.' It is this lack of care that makes each of their opinions invalid. It also makes 'the other' immoral: by defending or arguing against Chavismo, 'the other' perpetuates an alleged damage.

The Mafia State

Wilson also admits he voted for Chávez the first time he ran for president, and then remarks:

> Power corrupts. No matter how good your intentions were in the first place. And well, then of course came the cannibalism of all his — of all his [Chávez's] entourage.

Wilson's comment is in line with Machiavelli's prime assumption: that exercising power is in tandem with developing negative moral qualities. Yet in the case of Chavismo, Venezuelan migrants more often sought to stress the *criminal* nature of the government, which for them went beyond mere susceptibility to corruption, or general '*viveza criolla*':

> It's no longer a political issue, it's an issue about a group of organised crime that owns a country, that holds it hostage, and yes, it tries to find a series of excuses and lies to convince, to make you believe that the kidnapping is fair, but no kidnapping is fair. [...] It's not a coincidence that Russia is Venezuela's principal ally—it's practically the same thing as Venezuela. What do I mean by this? It's not a country that has a mafia, it's a mafia that has a country. It's also a criminal organisation that controls a state.

Here César highlights how Venezuela's issue is not a mere divergence of political ideas. Which is why a negotiated, *political* solution is unviable: how can you negotiate with organised crime? For him the answer is clearly you cannot, and you *should* not.

Alicia actively organises events that raise funds for sending medicines over to Venezuela, through her community group. Similarly, her desire to 'fight' or 'do something'—not dissimilar to solidarity activists' 'fight for good'—is framed by what she understands as a 'humanitarian' and not 'political' concern:

> It will take many years for Venezuela to recover, but if you try to—the little things (*granitos de arena*) you do here, are only because you feel you can't keep your arms crossed. Because that's what I feel, that you have to try to do something, but not from a political point of view, it is more from the humanitarian point of view.

The idea that Chavismo and Nicolás Maduro's government are a criminal organisation—or at least, that they enact serious human rights violations—is not new, nor restricted to Maduro's government vis-à-vis Chávez's government, as discussed in chapter 2. For Venezuelan migrants, the indictments on Venezuelan officials and the repeated allegations of human rights violations in the context of the severe crisis are further evidence of an 'immorality' that, for Venezuelans has no remedy save the use of force. For them, understanding the issue as political does not sufficiently account for its metaphysical dimensions.

For Carlos, the medical doctor who lived in the barrios, there is no alternative but intervention. Venezuelans are completely unable to solve the crisis on their own:

> I attended the screening of an *Al Jazeera* documentary the other day. [imitating others] 'Let Venezuelans resolve their issues on their own' [responding to them] How? Tell me *how*?

Al Jazeera, in this case, represents the side of the international stance on Venezuela that believes that there should not be any foreign intervention. Interestingly what for Venezuelans feels like apathy from the international community, is the definition of national sovereignty for others, in this case, *Al Jazeera*.

In a powerful way, the idea that Maduro's government is criminal and morally corrupt, reinforces the divide, or the want for distance from those who support it. Here I refer to Ignacio's argument as an example of this logic: "what 'dialogue' can be had with racists?"

Again, seeing the other as morally reprehensible—not merely in what Urbinati, Mudde and Kaltwasser claim is populism's moral appraisal of power as corruptible—but as empirically evidenced in the media's accusation of its criminal activity, means dialogue and consensus are not so much inviable as intolerable. They are also morally 'wrong': it is 'wrong' to negotiate with 'evil' or with criminals, as in so doing, you are helping 'sustain' or promote them.

Encounters with the 'corrupt'

For Nelson, the brown-black Venezuelan who travelled by bus to Chile, '*viveza criolla*,' this 'creole cunning,' is so ingrained it appears written in Venezuelans' genetic make-up. To stress this point this, he tells me of a recent experience with another Venezuelan in Chile:

> Two days ago, a guy came up to me and said, "where can I get a fake contract?" A Venezuelan. And I said to myself, what the f**k. Son of a b****h. Sorry for the expression. You just left Venezuela. Why the hell are you thinking about cheating? And I tell him, "Bro, the best thing you can do is get a proper contract." No, but the problem is that if he gets a normal contract he will have to work. And I was like, this asshole came here to what? Sell drugs? Steal? The f**k you have to work. How can you get along in life if you don't work? I don't see any hope for Venezuela. This generation of evil and perverse and dirty (*cochina*) people would have to pass.

At the mention of the word 'fake contract' Nelson proverbially 'loses it.' The dislike—or rather disgust given his use of the word dirty (*cochina*)—is evinced by an ensuing stream of insults, difficult to translate. Nelson apologises for the vulgar expressions he has used, but importantly not for his feelings.

Nelson had been working thirteen hours a day, two jobs and no weekends, to afford living in Chile and sending money back to his family. It is easy to see how he could be deeply enraged by someone trying to escape work. Moreover, Nelson implies that other Venezuelans, those he feels are intent on cheating the system, tarnish Venezuelans' reputation abroad. Many of the Venezuelan interviewees referenced the xenophobic effects of the stereotypes and generalisation made of them in their host countries, principally in Perú and Colombia, as I briefly mentioned in chapter 6. That another Venezuelan would want to cheat the system—stealing and selling drugs are some of the most common criminal activities that Venezuelans

have been charged with—has real consequences for brown-black Nelson, and for other Venezuelan migrants across Latin America.

Nelson almost naïvely wants to hope that the privilege of leaving Venezuela should push this man towards becoming less 'cunning.' Nelson wishes he show more respect for the country that has taken them in. As I mention, the use of the word '*cochina*,' suggests that there is not only something 'dirty' but 'vile' about this 'cunning.' This is in line with social psychological accounts that see disgust, more than any other moral emotion, as having very concrete mental representations (Panksepp 2007).

Eva, who as I explained before has moved to Spain recently after experiencing a gun-point assault in her car, shares Nelson's moral disappointment with the Venezuelan 'people':

> Now it's not so political, I mean, it is, it was at some point, it was influential, but now people have crap (*porquería*) in their heads [...] Venezuelans, not all, because there are some that are still there that are good, in my view. But the majority has got crap in their head, as if they're always looking to harm someone, to advance themselves [...] And I tell you, I don't think it's a political problem, it's sowed in the minds of some, not to say all Venezuelans, to harm another.

The implication is that this behaviour, one of constantly seeking to harm an 'other' so as to advance self-interest, is an unresolvable problem; her use of the word 'sowed' underlines how ingrained, intrinsic she feels the attitude is. Here, I note, Eva does not directly blame Chavismo, or the 'mafia/criminal' state,[39] rather, her disillusionment extends to *all* Venezuelans. This idea of a *cochinera* (dirty) mentality, is related to Venezuelans' '*viveza criolla,*' but is no doubt believed to be considerably worse. It very explicitly expresses Eva's and Nelson's *disgust*—a prime moral emotion, the object of which they seek distance from. It was prevalent throughout the interviews and is related to the idea that those who remain in Venezuela are not only conformists but corrupt.

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[39] I discuss this idea of the 'mafia state' in the next section.

There is a sense, however, that the government *is* a particular exponent of this 'corrupt' trait of Venezuelans, and some of the interviewees who had worked for the government, were open about stories that they felt confirmed this for them.

Ibrahim, in his mid-forties, moved to Perú and has been working on the streets selling SIM cards since. He worked in the oil refineries in his hometown of Punto Fijo before migrating, and recounted a particularly harrowing account of his experience of voting in 2012:

> The same general managers that knew me [...] tells me, look you have to vote for—this was Chávez's last election—'Look you have to vote for Chávez, because that's known.' And I'm like 'it's known?' 'Yeah.' And true thing. I remember, Chávez being there, I go to the elections thinking, well, I work for the government, because Chávez—the country hadn't fallen so badly as it has now or when I left. And you won't believe it. I go out on a Sunday, and Chavistas are out saying, report yourself, report yourself, location, this and that. I voted and I didn't report that I voted. But because it was a Sunday, I had to work support, so I went to the refinery. I'm inside with the manager of human resources, and he tells me to come to his office and closes the door. S**t, I got scared [...] he says, 'thanks for supporting the government. For supporting the revolution.' And I was like, 'what? How do you know I voted?' 'The general manager sent me a message.' That general manager wrote to him directly [...] And he showed me his phone and it showed where I voted and who I voted for [...] When Maduro's election came, I didn't vote. Because I already knew.

Although I cannot confirm the veracity of Ibrahim's story, the detail with which he recounts this episode seems to show it is carved in his memory: the realisation instilled by his managers that he 'must' show support for the Revolution that was employing him—fear—was not used lightly. And yet he had already felt that he *needed* to vote for the government because he worked in the oil industry. The story shapes Ibrahim's own understanding of the Revolution, and the subsequent—although unnecessary—guilt he felt in having to tell me that he voted for the Chávez government.

Thirty-year-old Gisela, breast cancer survivor now in Panamá, after pleadingly telling me she needed tranquillity, tells me of the many times she had been mugged travelling on the bus from La Guaira, her hometown in the coast, to Caracas where she taught. She then shared a similar corruption scandal from when she worked for the Ministry of Sport in her state:

Look, the governor, when the state of Vargas athletes would go to national games, the director of the sports institute, was who gave the figures to say how many medals, how much money had been invested, how much hadn't, all that. And I remember how all that information was fake. Because the sports institute was forced to tell him, for example, look we spent 1000 dollars. And me, I as planner, knew that we had spent 100. But he had to tell him 1000 because he was stealing the other 900. But the governor didn't know.

Support for interventionism

Most Venezuelan migrants—although hesitantly—felt that intervention was the only way forward for Venezuela, given what they felt was the intransigence of the government.

Rosario, white, in her late forties—who lives in Houston with her staunchly Chavista mother and works independently selling baked goods—flaunted a Facebook profile image at the time of our interview in March 2019 that read: "I support humanitarian and military intervention now!" (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Facebook profile picture of one Venezuelan migrant interviewee, Rosario, in 2019.

Only one other interviewee, a single mother in her early thirties, Margarita, held deep faith in intervention. She emigrated by bus to Perú after having been unemployed in Venezuela for 2 years. She tells me that what she earned managing a supermarket was only enough to pay for the public transport it cost her to go to work in the first place: it was just not worth it. She asked her brother, who was already abroad, and supporting her, to help her migrate instead. Venezuela, with the help of "her president Trump" as she referred to him—who she felt only needed a small push to intervene—would recover in little time:

> I'm not like other Venezuelans who say that it will take 10 years. I don't think so. I think we're going to show the world that it will be very little time, because we have the economic support of the international community. So for example, my president Trump said that we have more than 500 million dollars for the transition. Germany and other countries also bet on that. So the transition will be to support Venezuelans who are in an emergency situation. And then when we have financial security, multinationals will come to provide jobs. So I think in 3 years Venezuela will be different.

Margarita's hope in Venezuela's future was rare. A study conducted in Caracas in late 2018 showed that, in Venezuela, the majority was against intervention, 54 percent. When asked about renewed dialogue with Maduro, only 37 percent felt it would be useful; 63 percent would prefer a negotiated settlement to remove him, as mentioned previously (Smilde 2019). Venezuelan interviewees reflected these same tensions. In the words of Adriana, the chemist teacher and violinist in Perú:

> Yes, it's a bit complicated. A military intervention can obviously negatively affect everyone. And anyone can fall. So you don't know if it's your family, so its delicate. But on the other hand, if the government is still there [...] people are getting sick, dying, all of that. So at the end of the day we need a drastic solution, because it's obvious, there's no doubt that the government will not resign peacefully, like 'please leave' or with protests or none of that. So in this case, I would be inclined towards American intervention because it's a solution now.

The appeal of intervention seems to lie in its immediacy (*ya*, meaning now), even if as Adriana explains, it would affect *everyone* negatively. Similarly, Jeison, the Venezuelan pop singer living in Mexico, and former Chávez supporter, ultimately justifies intervention given a situation he sees as unsustainable:

> Look, intervention is complicated, because there is an issue of oil interests, so eventually it's going to be a mess to get the US out. I think that if you get to a point where it was almost—localised, as a Venezuelan, I think that as an alliance, Guaidó is able to intelligently utilise the forces on his side, plus the support of the great powers, I think there should be an intervention. Maybe not like the one in Iraq, or Afghanistan, but there has to be an intervention now, because this is unsustainable, a parallel world, some crazy s**t (*una vaina loca*). I mean, I have acquaintances who have died because they didn't have medicines.

The apparent immediacy of intervention as a solution is not readily questioned by most Venezuelan migrants. Only US-educated Wilson, the brown voice teacher in his mid-fifties from Valencia (in the centre north of the country) shared a more nuanced view—a position he says stems from "his leftist heart":

> When we speak of military intervention—I would say yes, right? As long as it was, and this is the problem, as long as it was a military intervention for humanitarian reasons, seeking to lift a country out of the misery in which it finds itself [...] I obviously want my country to come out of this torment. But I'm not 100 percent certain that their reasons are actually humanitarian. You go back and remember what happened in Vietnam, of course, it was another time in history you would say, what happened in Iraq, that they pretended was going to be super quick, and it was several years before they could more or less tame the beast. So, of course, not wanting military intervention only leaves you with the other agenda, the diplomatic agenda, the talks, dialogue, hope that these people get the point, and will actually want to hold elections, which I doubt, because even if the top of the government is willing to, obviously all its surrounding criminal groups will not agree so much. So, it's very complex, really.

Wilson understands how Venezuela's oil and mineral wealth makes intervention a thorny business. Interventions have historically been complicated, so for him, intervention in Venezuela cannot be 'surgical': fast and precise. I note how Wilson insists that he "obviously wants his country to come out of this torment," as if trying to assure me that he does indeed want this, were I to doubt it by his cautiousness. Not wanting military intervention only leaves diplomacy and dialogue as options, which Wilson has no faith in. For him, it is delinquent groups that are actually in charge: specifically, he mentions the Colombian guerrilla and Hezbollah. This deep pessimism was pervasive and underlines the extent to which Venezuelans feel their life choices are being heavily constrained.

Contesting Human Rights

Amnesty International entitled its 2019 report on Venezuela: *Hunger for Justice: Crimes against Humanity in Venezuela*. Their methodology is described in detail and consisted of interviews with more than 70 people and 15 representative case-studies involving those who had either died, were seriously injured, detained or subjected to torture. The report suggests, among many other crimes, that the authorities carried out "targeted extrajudicial executions as a means of punishment and social control through the PNB (National Bolivarian Police), and above all the FAES (Special Action Forces) units":

> [E]xtrajudicial executions documented in different parts of the country illustrate a recurring pattern. In all cases, the victims were young men who were critical of the government, or perceived as such by the authorities, from low-income areas and whose participation in the protests had been visible or whose criticisms had gone viral on social media. That is, they were targeted executions based on the profile of the victims. All died as a result of gunshot wounds to the chest and were executed while in the custody of the authorities (Amnesty International 2019, 17).

According to Human Rights Watch (2020), since 2016, nearly 18,000 Venezuelans have been killed at the hands of police and security forces, for alleged "resistance to authority." Human Rights Watch has been denouncing Hugo Chávez's presidency since 2008 when they reported on the state of Venezuela's democratic institutions. They claimed, at the time, that "discrimination on political grounds" and an "open disregard for the principle of separation of powers" had been defining features of the Chávez presidency (Carroll *The Guardian* September 18 2008). The Human Rights Watch delegation was expelled by President Chávez that same year, accused of anti-state activities.

As mentioned, transnational solidarity work has been historically invested in the protection of human rights, against dictatorship and the dominance of military regimes and political torture,

most especially in Chile (Kelly 2013). Yet, solidarity activists disregard reports on the state of human rights today because they feel these are part of the US' agenda.[40]

Aaron, who is an academic, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the role the media plays in presenting Venezuela as a 'nightmare dictatorship'—that he contrasts to data presented by the World Bank and the United Nations:

> So, I did a bit more research, and started reading the media. And they were presenting it as this like abominable nightmare dictatorship. And I thought, 'what the hell's going on here?' [...] What I do usually is look at United Nations documents or things like that, to look at the statistics. And clearly there was something really weird going on, where there's either this almost like a conspiracy among the media to try and present the country as badly as possible. Well, there was an even bigger conspiracy that involves like the World Bank, the United Nations and stuff to make a dictatorship look really good.

Aaron is referring to the sharp decrease in poverty headcount that Venezuela experienced from 2004 to 2009; in reality, social and economic indicators on Venezuela have not been provided by the Venezuelan government to the World Bank since 2015, as mentioned in chapter 2. Furthermore, the UNCHR (2019, 14) report on Venezuela, confirmed that "there are reasonable grounds to believe that grave violations of economic and social rights, including rights to food and health, have been committed in Venezuela" given that, among other things, government social programmes are used "in a discriminatory manner, based on political grounds."

Although some solidarity activists insist that these reversals are the effects of sanctions and what they feel is an economic war waged against Venezuela— and although this is true to the extent that they have exacerbated the crisis—it seems unrealistic to believe the government's actions and mistakes have had minimal weight. These human rights are in fact understood as *negative obligations*, i.e. duties *not* to act, and are not affected by economic scarcity. For solidarity activists, non-governmental human rights organisations are pushing a *political* (and fake moral) agenda that seeks to justify ousting governments that—at least in discourse—call for

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40 See T. Evans (1996), for a full account on US hegemony and the Project of Universal Human Rights.

the widening of social and economic human rights, and are not 'US puppets.' Although the fairness of the 2018 elections that President Maduro won are highly contested, their argument stands that if the US and the West were concerned about human rights, they would call for regime change in countries like Saudi Arabia or China[41]—an important rebuttal famously advanced by Aryeh Neier (1996, 91) who called this problem the "New Double Standard": when governments and intergovernmental bodies that can have influence, "pay lip service at best" to "the human rights abuses [that] occur in countries of first-rank importance."

Image of Pablo Iglesias removed for copyright reasons.

Figure 20. VSC's Facebook post quoting Pablo Iglesias' critique of human rights as an excuse for US intervention

For José, the principal organiser of one of the largest Venezuelan solidarity organisations in the world, preoccupation with human rights is simply an excuse to force regime change:

> That there's a migratory crisis in Venezuela? Well, obviously. Tons of people are leaving the country. But to use that as justification to have the EU intervene, and to have that mean that we must remove this government and put a new one? That's a different thing. It's one of the strongest narratives that they are promoting. Human Rights all that. Well, it so happens that they care about Human Rights in Venezuela but they don't care about Human Rights in Colombia. It's been one month since the elections, and they've killed 119 social activists, most of them identified with Petro.

[41] Both are considered 'not free', but Saudi Arabia scores slightly worse on the Freedom House measure.

In what is commonly referred to as 'deflection arguing,' José simply points at other human rights violations in the continent—he does not address or deny the allegations, given his purpose is to underline their use as an excuse for regime change (see Figure 20 for a similar argument by Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias). This accusation could definitely be made of governments wanting to remove Maduro from the presidency, but not of non-governmental organisations who document these violations in *all* countries. Bílková (2018) suggests it is hard to imagine how diverse domestic and international NGOs could 'plot' against one state and contravene their own values.

Andy, the British Canadian activist (as I mentioned, originally driven by anti-British imperialism in Ireland) had a similar claim regarding hypocrisy:

> So, we twinned London with Venezuela. And brought Chavez over to speak in London. They provided cheap or free oil to allow them to give seniors free passes on London Transport. It was fantastic. Of course, as soon as the right-wing mayor Boris Johnson got in, he immediately tore it up. He said: we don't deal with dictators, and immediately started talking to Saudi Arabia... Right? I mean, the hypocrisy.

Tony, the Australian ex-lecturer, stressed his distrust of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch more specifically, given their alleged links to Washington:

> I'm an internationalist who's been very influenced by Cuba. And also, Venezuela. I've seen the dirty wars in Latin America [...] But in 2003, when Bush invaded Iraq, he was talking about 60 other countries that they might carry out a pre-emptive war against. And the Cubans thought 'we're on the list, surely we're next.' And they arrested about 70, what they call 'dissidents', but they were just people being paid by US basically there. And there was a huge human rights outcry: 'ah the terrible, repressive regime in Cuba,' blah, blah [...] then Human Rights Watch, and those other organisations linked to Washington—including Amnesty International, by the way—went for Cuba and they went for Chavez. [...] I'd spent years investigating, you know, the fakery of Amnesty international and Human Rights Watch against Venezuela and Cuba. And there were issues against Chavez for a number of years, and they just called him everything that's just invented stuff, they started to do the same thing about Gaddafi in Libya. And the same thing about Assad in Syria, the same stuff.

Tony describes these human rights organisations as 'going for' Cuba and 'going for' Chávez: as organisations placed to discredit—injure—with no moral base, rightfully elected

governments. In his eyes, what he understands as their 'agenda,' and their 'links to Washington' completely discredits them. Allegations related to drug trafficking were similarly not countered or even discussed—presumably because they are felt as irrelevant or tangential to the 'Hybrid War' being waged.[42]

This distrust of Human Rights organisations, shared by most activists, is expounded in the pro-government English online newspaper, *venezuelanalysis.com*: Tamara Pearson writes, "Latest Human Watch Report: 30 Lies about Venezuela" (January 23 2014); Nino Pagliccia, more recently writes, "UN Report on Human Rights in Venezuela Faulty by Design" (*venezuelanalysis.com* July 8 2019). The second article criticising the UN report alludes to the view of a former lawyer for the UN High Commission, Alfred de Zayas, who argued that it is methodologically flawed (although he does not explain in which ways) and more significantly that the report indeed ignores mentioning the severity of US sanctions (Wilpert 2019).[43]

The role the US has historically played in the region, particularly in Chile but also Nicaragua, has tied the defence of human rights (at least what regards civil liberties) to what Dan Kovalik called the 'imperial hubris' of the United States.[44] The accusation is not new, and without fundament. Several scholars argue "human rights" have been the "chosen battlefield of US worldwide propaganda"(Heuer and Schirmer 1998, 5). For Rieff, human rights in the 1990s have indeed been "an organising principle for action," similar to how anticommunism propelled the Cold War (Rieff 1999, 1). Rieff (1999, 2) notes how the interventions in Somalia meant to protect

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42 In April 2020, in one of VSC's online events, and after Maduro was indicted by the US government for narco-trafficking, the speaker who was briefing on the situation, Francisco Domínguez, explained to the audience how he felt that the drug allegations were false, because Venezuela does not produce cocaine—Colombia does. The allegations are about transport and involvement in sales, not production, but it seemed Domínguez was not aware of this.

43 The allusion to sanctions could explain the violation of food rights—yet it does not counter, as I mentioned, negative obligations, understood as the state's role in guaranteeing and protecting civil and political rights.

44 This was at a talk Kovalik gave for the Venezuelan Solidarity Campaign (VSC) in London (March 2020) promoting his book *The Plot to overthrow Venezuela* (2019).

civilians in a failed state, and the alleged prevention of genocide in Kosovo, were "a realist's hypermoralization [sic] of international political action"—illegal under the UN charter and invoking an "ad hoc assemblage of moral-humanitarian claims" that set the course for Afghanistan and Iraq (Branch 2005, 103; De Sousa Santos 2008; Nardin 2005; Moyn 2010). Douzinas (2007, 7) argues instead that human rights—legal remedies protecting the *individual*—reinforce oppression by serving to criticise ideologies that challenge geopolitical power structures, whilst acting as "bargaining chips" for aid. From fieldwork in slums of the global south, Davis argues more broadly that all NGOs are top-down, unelected, answer only to their donors, and come at the expense of the true needs of local communities (Davis 2004).

The arguments made by these scholars, no doubt difficult to ignore, demand deep consideration. But, in the case of solidarity activists, given movements around human rights arguably flourished from the International Left's campaigns against Pinochet's brutal repression of political and civil rights in the 70s alongside Amnesty International (see Kelly 2013), it seems contradictory that many of these same activists are willing to justify their dismissal of major claims of political and civil rights violations in Venezuela today simply because Venezuela has a socialist government. Can the inherent issues with American moral discourse automatically mean we can dismiss the claims of political torture and repression made by the UNCHR, the OAS, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, in Venezuela or elsewhere?

We can argue that the expertise of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and their formal knowledge correspond to a more valid interpretation of the situation of human rights in Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, among many other countries, but for solidarity activists, defending the Chavista governments against US interests and defending what they believe are the economic and social rights 'the people' have *gained* with Chávez, seems to trump whatever can be claimed of the government's repressive persecution of detractors and crimes against humanity. Their point is that it is those *against* President Maduro—both within Venezuela's confines and beyond—that have historically committed human rights violations against populations in Venezuela and around the world.

Kelly (2013, 168) suggests that, for those involved in Chile solidarity, the idea of human rights was "primarily a means to talk about the suffering and victimisation of families and compatriots" —it was never truly about human rights. This is convincing to a degree. It can easily be concluded that the fact political torture and repression in Pinochet's government

stood initially as central to solidarity activism, and now lays dismissed, these activists are more concerned with promoting their *political* agenda than a *human rights* agenda. However, I do believe this argument assumes a simplistic allegiance to ideology, and ignores the complexity involved in justifying political choices to oneself and others—even if the choice is itself largely pre-determined, or instinctual. Assuming solidarity activists share a blind allegiance to ideology misses what is genuinely meaningful about taking a stance in a political divide, or what could account for the motivation to take it in the first place—what I argue is behind the idea of 'doing what is right' or 'solidarity,' in Žižek's (1989) terms, the real power of 'ideology.'

Many solidarity activists sacrifice aspects of their professional careers for maintaining this political position (as discussed earlier). Dismissing this behaviour as adherence to political dogma, is a way to rob solidarity activists' decision of meaning. That is not to say that they are not blindly adhering to their political beliefs in praxis—their 'solidarity' could be, in fact, the product of an irrational binding to their political identity, or social beliefs, or indeed a number of different unconscious processes hard to isolate or determine. What I mean to say here is that, regardless of what spikes their behaviour, solidarity activists' *justification* for it, before themselves and others, is entirely deontological, i.e. a moral (and therefore meaningful) mandate. As is the justification for intervention that Venezuelan migrants defend, from the other side of the divide.

Activists give priority to the belief that fighting imperialism is more important than fighting political repression, in other words, they have a hierarchical or prioritised 'folk theory' of human rights, where 'some rights are more equal than others.' Venezuelan migrants, similarly, felt the government's behaviour towards those that criticise it, its extrajudicial executions, its war against the press, and its banning of leaders of the opposition, the way it has dealt with the crisis, merit either foreign or domestic military intervention—intervention that would no doubt lead to further violation of human rights. For Marcos, as discussed in the last chapter, it even justified the mass killing of those he sees as 'communists.'

Venezuelans' contradiction of wanting military intervention to stop President Maduro's crimes against humanity (declared as such by the UN in September 2020), not incidentally, speaks to the paradox of human rights intervention more broadly (including controversies around the International Criminal Court in Africa) that Branch (2011) references in his work on Uganda and the Acholi people. Branch (2011, 181-182) highlights the "inherent dilemmas" in trying to realise universal moral imperatives under political contexts—justice seeking that

builds as it were (and as mentioned in the context of Adorno, Butler and Schmitt) "enemies of humanity." Using the case of Uganda, Branch argues convincingly that intervention generally fails to prevent the violations of human rights it purports to, and indeed many times exacerbates civilian suffering (Branch 2011, 182).

It is easy to understand the need to fight for individual freedoms, in the case of Venezuelan migrants, and the need to fight for social justice and equality, in the case of solidarity activists: these fights are not mutually exclusive in theory but appear so as political systems become increasingly polarised through a moral and demonising logic. It seems that in the Venezuelan case the human rights paradox lies on both sides of the divide: either violent intervention or a totalitarian state are, depending on the side, seen as evils acceptable in the name of the purported 'greater good' of dismantling or maintaining Chavismo in power and, therefore, expanding certain *preferred* rights.

This, I believe, actually raises an important question about how social concepts live in the public sphere, i.e. as 'folk theories'—detached from our legal and academic conceptual debates. The more robust definition of human rights as universal and *indivisible*—a definition that withstands arduous theoretical probing—does not live so plainly in the political sphere where groups see some rights as 'more equal than others' in an Orwellian sense. There is wide acceptance for human rights and democracy. Both are seen as inherently 'desirable,' and 'good,' but the broad reach of their definitions means exactly *what* is good about them is contested. The Venezuelan divide is thus not a question of divergence of values, but rather a divergence of value *priorities* and age-old parochialisms. In other words, it is eristic: a conflict for the sake of conflict, not a dialectical project for arriving at the 'truth,' or at least something considered fairer for all parties. A dialectic cannot be had with those considered to be morally 'wrong.'

Conclusions

> What do you think of Hugo Chávez? Are you for or against him? Venezuelans inevitably confront these questions when we travel or meet people unfamiliar with our ideas. Unless one stands at one of the two opposite poles dominating political life in Venezuela during this last decade, it is hard to answer them. A generalized [sic] Manichean mind-set tends to push and flatten every position towards the extreme ends and nuanced views are often dismissed or cast aside as camouflaged versions of either pole (Coronil 2008, 3).

Summary

I was deeply interested in understanding what justifications *felt* more valid or appealing to each of the two sides of Venezuela's divide, taking a 'social subjective' Weberian understanding of legitimacy. Specifically, I hoped to look at how sides made sense of Venezuela's crisis and what emotions underlay their political 'positions,' seeing them as central to their rationale and rejection of the other. These are, as Coronil (2008) writes, so entrenched—and Manichean, in other words, *moralised*—that any attempt at a nuanced view is derided. Consequently, so is rapprochement or the idea of negotiation. In some extreme cases, the morality of the issue justified violence, even extermination.

Interestingly, the conceptual debates exposed by participants, more specifically on democracy, race, 'the people,' and human rights, are in many ways similar to the theoretical debates that plague the literature. Part of what the analysis shows is that concepts—regardless of the ways theorists purport to argue for them—'exist' discursively in shared political positions; that is, as 'lay political philosophy'—many times highly contradictory in its parochial nature. In refraining from arguing for one particular understanding of a concept over another, I sought to show how ideas about the political world in the public sphere, co-opted by populist logic, make them *seem* opposed to one another, and how they come to have profound effects over the lives of those I spoke to.

Political power *felt* legitimate to my interviewees when it was enacted, in their judgement 'morally'; conversely it was illegitimate when it was enacted 'immorally.' In this sense,

legitimacy for these groups is not simply the extent to which a government abides to the law—in a Rawlsian understanding—but rather the extent to which they believe it engages in what they each consider proper moral conduct, i.e., in the interest of the collective (for solidarity activists); by respecting political, civil rights and human rights more broadly (for Venezuelan migrants). Both groups remain 'in solidarity' with Venezuela to the extent that they appear concerned with the suffering and hardships Venezuelans face: one group blames the government for it; the other the US.

Interviewees did not speak of policy in terms of its efficacy: groups were invested in a discussion relating to the immoral qualities (and failures) of their opponents and defending the position that felt 'right' to them, based on the knowledge they thought valid. For the two groups, the legitimacy of Maduro's governance—their position—was not 'political' but more meaningfully, a deontological issue related to the concept of 'solidarity,' i.e. a sense of duty to 'engage with what is right,' using the idea of 'the people' as the victim of wrongs. This I contend is where populism theory becomes relevant. Populism is not committed to an ideology, it is committed to a moral political project, as many authors have noted.

I argued that for solidarity activists, legitimate power is that which stands in the name of (or directly represents) 'a people'—in this case a previously excluded racialised dark-skinned and poor majority. There are two related elements to this conception: a 'democratic' understanding that sees 'majority' rule as legitimate, but also a 'moral' understanding, that see 'rightness' and therefore legitimacy, in the discursive empowerment of those living under unjust racial and class disadvantage—i.e. in a purported correction of injustice through dispossession of power from a corrupt elite, what I term 'historical-racial' moral logic. This is not legitimacy seen in terms of how lower income groups are *de facto* 'served,' but rather whether they are perceived to be 'in power.' Solidarity activists' support is bolstered by the US' immediate endorsement of opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's self-proclaimed president, the harsh (and for Idriss Jazairy, the UN Special Rapporteur, *illegal*) sanctions it has imposed on the country, its past interventionist behaviour in the region, and President Trump's disclosure that he would consider military action in Venezuela. In this regard, the group's 'solidarity'—their engagement in political activity relating to Venezuela—is antagonistic, inasmuch as it is directed to defending a specific 'people,' and fomenting moral outrage against the US and the opposition.

Conversely, for Venezuelan migrants Maduro's government *felt* illegitimate because it was seen as criminal, repressive, authoritarian, intimately tied to narco-trafficking, and deeply corrupt. Again, this conception implies two understandings of legitimacy: one that sees Maduro as both unpopular, and intolerant of dissent, and therefore 'undemocratic' and 'imposed'; and one that sees Maduro as 'morally' corrupt, and therefore unfit to govern, represent, or decide on their behalf. 'Solidarity' for Venezuelan migrants is reflected in the way they raise funds to send medicines, or organise events to raise awareness—again antagonistically, seeing its purpose is to foment outrage against the government. I note Venezuelan migrants 'distance' themselves in several facets of their lives: they seek geographical distance from their country by leaving, in physical terms; they seek political distance by escaping Maduro's *governmentality*; and finally, more radically, they seek 'moral distance' from those they have left behind—'the people' more broadly (not only Chavistas).

Importantly, both groups 'feel' Nietzsche's *ressentiment*. For Venezuelan migrants, it is the Chávez and Maduro governments that 'force' them to leave Venezuela, as I discuss in chapter 8. In practice, the opposition does not have a voice in policy matters, nor can it effectively protest. For solidarity activists, it is the hegemony of neoliberalism, embodied by the US and its foreign policy, that they feel belittles their ideals and curtails their career opportunities. Both groups feel slighted in relation to their autonomy: using the terms of Self-Determination Theory discussed in chapter 4, that is, the degree to which they feel they can endorse their own behaviour. This, it seems, makes them feel especially 'powerless,' and if we take Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck's (2016) finding seriously, vulnerable to populist logics and attitudes.

Theoretical contributions

I resist concluding that what I witness in these groups is merely a clash of value priorities as a result of geography. The analysis does indeed suggest that such a clash exists, but it exists in Venezuela, too.

I find that the underlying similarities in both groups' broader rationale make a more compelling argument for the appeal of populism. The groups' exaltation of democracy as the most legitimate form of government, the privileging of certain facts over others, the significance of 'the people' in their political discourse, and each group's feeling of 'loss of

political voice' or autonomy in their respective settings, are all significant to the extent that they are reproduced in *both* facets of the divide. The most salient of these logics seems to be, of course, the framing of the conflict in meaningful moral, rather than, political terms—specifically in a bid to demonise 'the other,' many times as 'uncaring.'

I note how some solidarity activists were sacrificing career opportunities for holding a political position on Venezuela. To understand their support as the result of 'brainwashing,' (as many Venezuelan migrants seem to suggest) or, as Kelly (2013) argues, a will to promote ideology, neglects what is highly compelling about sustaining political (qua moral) positions in the face of significant opposition. Hence why I argue morality seems to *matter* a great deal. The 'transcendence' of what is 'good' above the (material) advancement of careers, for instance, solidifies a specific enhanced sense of group and self (as Foucault might suggest) that is rewarding and also contravenes mainstream ideas of success (see Lamont 2000).

I also argued 'immorality,' in the Venezuelan case, was not simply embodied by those who directly exercise political power, as Urbinati (2019) and C. W. Mills (2000 [1956]) claim when looking at populism and elites respectively. Even if we always instinctively distrust those in power, as Machiavelli argues, in justifying the immorality of others (including those in power) there are specific 'wrongs' that we seek to highlight. For solidarity activists, the legitimacy of Chávez's and Maduro's governance is rationalised not merely from the belief in its numbers—its democratic pedigree—but also from its (purported) reversal of a historical-racial and class injustice (that bears evidence). The resulting expulsion of the opposing faction is understood as 'moral' given those opposed to the progress of 'the people' are seen as immoral, undeserving, even treasonous. Conversely the illegitimacy of Maduro for Venezuelan migrants, stems from his government's immorality: its continuous violation of human rights, its ties to narco-trafficking, its electoral tampering, and its exorbitant corruption (claims that also bear evidence). Their forced removal is also justified, in their eyes.

Second, the two groups also present *each other*— not only those that 'hold power'— as immoral and 'uncaring.' This suggests populism does not only make moral judgements about those in power, as these authors want to argue, *it makes a moral judgement about 'the other*,' point blank. Populists, lest we forget, are many times in power themselves.

In the empirical chapters, I tried to deconstruct these prevailing stereotypes by showing how they respond to an essentialised idea of the other that locates *political* positions on a *moral*

plane. For solidarity activists the opposition is *mantuano* (white-settler class), it is anti-democratic/violent/racist, also right-wing. For Venezuelan migrants, solidarity activists are ignorant, they are paid by the government, and they are blinded by their ideology. For both groups, the other is fundamentally 'uncaring,' 'negligent,' which as I discuss in chapter 4, is a negative moral judgement that signals the other as inherently unempathetic—a trait that, when taking an evolutionary view is the most prejudicial to the group. If there is something that these interviewees show, on the contrary, is that *both* activists and migrants, appear to care immensely about Venezuela.

It is in this moralising respect centred on a battle to represent the 'legitimate' people that I characterise Venezuela's divide as 'populist.' By engaging in a discussion on legitimacy, morality, and populism, I tried to explain in chapter 4, how this research contributes to understanding the particular *appeal* of moral logic in populist politics—an aspect of populism widely accepted as one of its principal tenets—but either assumed to be appealing *per se* or hardly scrutinised. I also argued for an abstract understanding of populism as a logic or rationale, taking from Laclau (2007) that polarises the political sphere both domestic *and* transnational.

In understanding the relationship between morality and political power, Sayer (2005) suggests that "without morality, any politics is directionless—as capable of increasing oppression as reducing it." But I would argue, on the contrary, that even *with* "morality," politics is as capable of increasing oppression as reducing it—the moral indignation, against the treatment of Germans by Poles before WW2, sustaining Nazi propaganda, is a case in point.

To avoid this pitfall, I highlight specific aspects of moral *logic* (or in Giner-Sorolla's 2012 term 'moralisation') vis-a-vis morality that helps explain how it 'sticks' using Ahmed's (2004) phrasing. Moral logic:

1. is parochial, or "defensive" and highly emotional (Giner-Sorolla 2012, 18), as is of course, populism;

2. it serves to strengthen divides by drawing moral boundaries, seen as absolute;

3. it enforces the idea of the moral superiority of the in-group, enhancing the concept of group and self, thus providing emotional certainty;

4. it claims morality's universality as transcendent, and therefore 'true,' which makes it particularly meaningful;

5. it helps to reinforce values that are seen as constituent of the self, and therefore provides certainty;

6. it is conditional, i.e., it calls out for indignation and exclusion based on lack of reciprocity (what Elster calls quasi-moral values, not incidentally, aspects of morality we share with primates);

7. it is essentialising, meaning that it characterises subjects, rather than actions, in moral terms.

Morality, if we take a moral philosophical quasi-Kantian understanding, is on the other hand almost impossibly exacting. It applies to everyone universally, in other words, without specific regards to whatever it is 'they' have 'done'—a prime example being the universal declaration of human rights.

This moral logic is evinced in the contradictions that result from participants' judgements of others. Solidarity activists for instance blame opposition for being coup-mongers; yet defend and admire Chávez's coup in 1992. They also worked to defend political rights in Pinochet's Chile, together with Amnesty international; but today find that Amnesty's allegations against Maduro's government are excuses aimed at dismantling the government. They stand for anti-imperialism and sovereignty, but are willing to accept the intervention of Russia and China, given they fight for multi-polarity. Venezuelan migrants, similarly, feel offended that solidarity activists have opinions on Venezuela without having lived there, but can praise, or at least accept the opinions of others who have not lived there, provided they agree with them on Venezuela's crisis. Some Venezuelan migrants make claims against repression, but are willing to accept intervention—some even desire the extermination of the other allegedly to spare 'more suffering.' I note these contradictions—some which caused deep moral indignation to participants—were mentioned by interviewees when speaking of 'the other'; not surprisingly contradictions within their own position were rarely if ever acknowledged.

I have noted above that, under this antagonistic pull, acts are seen as embodying immorality. In other words, for both groups, actors do not commit immoral acts, rather acts are committed by immoral actors. Actions are seen as determinate of an immovable moral character. This

reasoning works, and is particularly meaningful, given it is drawn on what are understood as *universal* principles. Essentialising, or determining the 'nature' of another, is a type of 'folk sociology': 'nature' is seen as predictive of the future behaviour of the other. Once this essentialising takes place, actors stop questioning the assumptions implicit in their positions, and assume moral 'rightness,' understood as absolute, and reaffirming of the in-group, and therefore self. Despite any criticisms they might share of a leader, no participant questioned or doubted their own political qua moral position. We might 'use' moral logic as a tool to reason about our political position initially, but not on a recurring evaluative basis, were it to need re-adjusting. (Which is why, I note, some scholars argue reasoning does not come prior to emotion). Once those positions reaffirm what we believe about our group and ourselves, they become entrenched. This entrenchment is consonant with neuroscientific accounts that highlight the role of emotion in resisting change to one's beliefs, as doing so incurs in significant cognitive load (Kaplan et al. 2016), and psychological uncertainty (Giner-Sorella 2012).

Emotional certainty of the group and self, is instead gained by holding a superior moral position—understood as transcendent and 'true.' This appears to be at least one of the most appealing aspects of populist politics, particularly for those feeling most vulnerable in society. It makes rapprochement intolerable, insofar as opponents are seen as enemies, and not legitimate political adversaries, with a *right* to hold a contrary opinion. I note that these dynamics become especially tricky in the populist sphere, an environment when everyone assumes they are abiding the 'truth'; not holding opinions.

Taking from several sociologists, I have also noted how integrating reflexivity and highlighting the role of experience helps broaden the explanatory power of Bourdieu's habitus in addressing the moral dimensions of sociality—despite the fact Bourdieu himself famously overlooked it. I lastly also suggested an interdisciplinary approach in tackling issues of morality.

Epistemology, divides and democracy

I contend here that both groups make moral judgements of the other based on specific (and contested) knowledges and epistemologies—notions of what counts as valid knowledge to justify their beliefs of the other's immorality—not simply because they sense that elites are 'by

nature' corrupt, or because they fear what power 'can' do. Participants refer to specific news, highlight certain events, and point at data they have come across. Although we could be inclined to believe that they are simply justifying something that they already feel more instinctively, this was not the way the groups' political positions were ultimately 'reasoned' or understood, and therefore, justified.

Specifically in the empirical chapters 5-7, on democracy, race, and the people, I described how divides seem strengthened or structured by epistemological ideas: our understanding of what we feel counts as *sufficient* or 'valid' evidence to agree or disagree with a position— our belief in certain media outlets, or the credibility and methodology of certain institutions. Venezuelan migrants were sceptical of news outlets in Venezuela given how they feel auto-censorship has played out. They also ignore the role the sanctions have played in the crisis because they believe these are excuses made by a government unwilling to accept responsibility. César, an afro-Venezuelan, dismissed racism as a discursive device of the government. Solidarity activists were, similarly, highly sceptical of any information being presented by the international media, international NGOs, even the United Nations, given that, in their understanding, these institutions are under the aegis of the US.

I note an inverse, albeit imperfect, analogy that helps explain the significance of this epistemology in divides—our social understanding of which knowledges are valid—the scientific method. Scientists aim to arrive at the only *plausible* interpretation of an observed event, and to understand a specific phenomenon to such a degree they are able to manipulate, or even predict an outcome to a statistically significant degree. In order to achieve this, and replicate the results, an epistemological culture surrounds science's practice, a method, whereby others—at least for the moment—can arrive at the same interpretation. Put very bluntly, the smaller the range of plausible interpretations, the higher their explicative value. Scientists know exactly *how* to achieve the "state of no dissent until proven differently" amongst their peers by following the scientific method that underpins their epistemological culture. Their peers may come with completely different life-stories, an entirely different 'positionalities', and yet the method is such that few prejudices can restrict arriving at a consensus in the interpretation of what has been observed.

The epistemological consensus of science adverts to the fundamental importance, conversely, of pluralism in democracy—as no such epistemology could ever be imposed upon people's lived experience. This would undermine every understanding we conceivably hold of human

dignity. Lack of consensus in what stands as 'truth'—regarding power and the political—emanates from each person's unique constitution as 'political subject,' in other words their unique manner of meaning-making in politics, as I discuss in chapter 1, *both* social and idiosyncratic. As such, theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (and Schmitt before them) understand antagonism as that which inescapably *constitutes* the political.

In looking at their contested epistemologies, the only conclusion that can be made is that no group has the ultimate claim to 'truth' on Venezuela, despite what they each hope to argue. We understand and frame issues from within our own position and are therefore limited in the ways we can understand, even view, such complex issues—myself included. Yet, we are all *entitled* to a position—it is hard to argue against this. This is in fact the principal reason we see democracy as both legitimate and moral—above any other reason. We only *feel* an 'other' "loses" entitlement to an opinion when moral logic builds an essentialising, immovable enmity on the basis of immorality. Competing political interests—agonism—is not only desirable, it is the pillar on which democracy is built, as Laclau (2007) and Mouffe (2000) argue: each side has to *want* to prevail. This does not mean that tolerance cannot exist (see Jeison's comment below); taking from Wittgenstein (1953, 88), "agreements in forms of life" *necessarily* precede any agreement of opinion. We must see opponents as *legitimate* adversaries, i.e., worthy of our respect, if we mean to avoid the radical and visceral aspects of Venezuela's divide.

Future research

One of the questions this research is not able to address, is what solidarity means to the actual recipients of solidarity—the unions, the communal councils *in* Venezuela. To better understand the phenomenon of North-South solidarity, we would need more insight into how the ties with those on the ground are built and sustained. Not all activists had ties on the ground, but they had attended or hosted events where they met Venezuelan labour union leaders that were visiting—whom they referred to as their comrades.

Similarly, how the positions and divisions *in* the country relate to the transnational ones explored in this thesis require further investigation, given the information gathered here relies very bluntly on polls, and not in-depth interviews.

In terms of the analysis, the idea of positionality itself—to describe a relation to a particular movement, leader or party (rather than ideology)—needs to be examined in other contexts. Is it possible to argue that as divides and populisms take hold, we come to see politics as positions against or for specific groups, rather than as support for ideas or ideologies, or our placement on the left-right spectrum? Work in other contemporary contexts would be needed.

The research also points at a hierarchical understanding of human rights that needs further probing. The historical tension between economic, social and cultural rights on the one hand, and political and civil rights on the other, is fascinating to the extent that it is replicated in everyday discourse. Specifically, it is unclear if certain human rights are always prioritised or if they are prioritised under certain constraints or under the pull of populism or ideology.

There is a clear need for more sociological research on morality as a directing element in social life. As I noted in chapter 1, what I can conclude about gender in this investigation is limited. It would, no doubt, be interesting to understand gendered aspects of morality as studied in moral psychology. For example, as I mentioned in chapter 8, Gillian's (1982) study showed that women find it easier to take the perspective of another, and this finding is partly reflected here. It would also be interesting to see if there are indeed gendered aspects to supporting the revolutionary international left, related more specifically to masculinity.

To further develop the idea of historical-racial morality here proposed, further examination is required in other contexts where it might be at play: for instance, in the solidarity work with apartheid in South Africa, or in the solidarity work with the North, in the US civil war—even in the arguments proposed by the Nazis prior to the war. There is a latent ethnicisation in *all* populisms, pointed at by Urbinati (2019) also see Subbiah forthcoming (2020), relating to moral ideas, that warrants deeper reflection.

Concluding remarks

The contradiction-laden moral arguments, the sense that both sides are 'apologetic' towards those who share their stance, and the internal criticism of leadership, suggests that the main ontological concern of Venezuela's divide is not the legitimacy of the government—although my initial question is framed this way. Each group seems to be insistent on sustaining a moral version of themselves, as framed by the populist sphere in which they operate.

This I note, is incredibly hard to contravene. Divides are in fact "empathy walls," obstacles to a "deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances," writes Arlie Hochschild (2016, 9) in looking at embedded anger in the American Right. Coronil (2008, 3) calls it "the rule of the stereotype": an inescapable mutual demonisation, that as he notes, and I have confirmed in this research, has broken friendships and divided families.

I argue here that any divide's strength lies, in part, in its ability to convince us that we already 'know' the other—in an essential moral way. Such is the distance that groups were seeking from each other that only one interviewee advocated for tolerance: Jeison, a 37-year-old brown pop-singer now living in Mexico. Jeison supported Chávez initially, his father still lives in Venezuela and strongly supports Maduro. Perhaps from this more intimate understanding of the support for a project he has now abandoned, Jeison tells me:

> I still defend that tolerance must exist, because Chávez became president for a reason: the conduct of thinking that the poor are garbage and must be trampled. That is why s**t like what happened in Venezuela, happens. That people revolt, and a crazy person like that becomes president. Because they're sick of being marginalised, of not having the same opportunities that we had, of having a really high level of education. But that does not mean that we cannot not say that 'what is happening now is s**t.'

I found it interesting that others, with Chavista family members (parents, grandparents or siblings) did not come to the same conclusion. These interviewees do not see their family members as *enemies* (they see them as either 'stupid' or 'intransigent'). As a result, they inaugurate a reign of "no politics at home" (see Coronil 2008, 3). To the extent that these political divides cut across close family groups, it seems that specific life experiences or idiosyncrasies (rather than broader moral systems inculcated in the family as Lakoff 1996 argues) make certain positions *feel* more valid than others.

From my side, understanding the crisis as a 'spectrum' of blame, between the Venezuelan Chavista government, and US economic warfare, has been useful in allowing me to converse and engage with both groups, and more importantly empathise, as I have noted, with their sense of injury—a Rorty (1996) inspired form of solidarity. I understand both the devastating effects of the government's highly inadequate policies, the degree of its unpopularity, and at the same time the, albeit new, but no doubt grave effects of the US sanctions.

A final question I pose is, can we say 'solidarity' with Venezuela is unproblematic? In other words, are there ethical implications to sustaining Venezuela solidarity, as Venezuelan migrants want to argue, given the government has committed fragrant violations of universal human rights and crimes against humanity? Are they fighting or helping to perpetuate structural inequalities with their support? Answering these questions would be the equivalent of falling into the value-laden trap Max Weber adverts sociology should stay clear from. Yet not answering it, risks being labelled as apologetic.

Changing the political system from the outside is looking increasingly insurmountable for the Venezuelan opposition— especially if, as some scholars argue, the Maduro government veers towards what Linz and Stepan (1996, 44) call 'sultanism': a regime where "all individuals, groups, and institutions are permanently subject to the unpredictable and despotic intervention" of those in charge, and "all pluralism is precarious." Under the Linz and Stepan paradigm, Venezuela is still in many ways somewhere between totalitarianism and post-totalitarianism (one or two steps away from sultanism). Whether Venezuelan migrants agree to it or not, Chavismo is likely to stay (and should stay) as a force in Venezuelan politics—in what form, and with what strength, is yet to be seen. It is important that any solutions to the Venezuelan conflict are accountable to its institutions and independent from foreign interests (as Branch 2011, 243 notes for the Ugandan case). These must be 'self-determining,' not only to protect sovereignty for the sake of it, but to protect their integrity, were these to be questioned in future, by externals or by Venezuelans themselves. Branch (2011) again refers to the importance of popular sovereignty, that principal component of democracy, as key in resolving these conflicts. An election, deemed fair by all parties, seems to be the best way to proceed. Whether it will actually take place, is a different matter entirely, sadly.

I do feel that Chavismo has been a positive motivational force for community activism and organisation in the poorer sectors. The way it has opened a discussion on racism will be positive in the long run. The situation now seems too antagonised to allow for proper reflection beyond political bickering. Unfortunately, Chavismo's articulation of the wrongs of *Punto Fijo* has lost moral force after 20 years in power, even when US sanctions are profoundly harmful. For scholars interested in measuring impact, there are strong reasons to believe —importantly, the rise in delinquency—that many structural aspects of poverty were never properly countered (Smilde 2017). If we are to take what the UNHRC (2019; 2020) reports suggest at face value, I find it necessary to remain highly doubtful of Maduro's political performance—especially towards the most vulnerable communities. I also feel sceptical of his claim to

legitimacy based on how contested the last elections have been, how the special forces (FAES) have acted, and how opponents have been incarcerated. I still find no reason to believe military intervention can be justified. Which leaves us in a dire position, at least in the foreseeable future.

With regards to the question I have just proposed, I note that if solidarity activists are raising funds to help those in communal councils, it is unfair to say they are not playing a positive role for Venezuelans. If Venezuelan migrants are involved in raising funds to provide medicines to the hardest hit communities, they are also, clearly, playing a positive role. The issue of legitimacy, of course, remains. But it need not, necessarily, distract from the greater ideal of solidarity which is to work to help Venezuelans tackle the problems they face today. Part of the answer to Venezuela's conflict then, as López Maya (in an interview with Prieto 2020) suggests, involves working to countermine the difficulties that Venezuelans face today, and, in my view, help build and sustain the 'on the ground' networks and grass-roots efforts required to strengthen Venezuelans' democratic values. This in the hope that when elections do come, Venezuelans will seek to defend and protect *all*, and not just some, of their human rights.

Appendix A.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

GATES Cambridge

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Summary:

This PhD research is looking at transnational Solidarity Movements with the Bolivarian Revolution. I am interviewing political activists here in the UK, some in Spain, some in the U.S. and am especially interested in the difficult opposition they have had to face in their home countries (and in Venezuela, when they've been), and also the inspiration behind their love for Venezuela and the revolution. All your data will be anonymised.

Questions:

1. I was wondering what inspired you, or motivated you to be involved with Venezuela?

2. What have been the most rewarding aspects of your work with supporting and researching Venezuela and Venezuela's revolution?

3. Have you encountered any difficulties because of this support? Or extreme dissidence?

4. How would you describe President Chávez's leadership, or your relationship with him, if you had the chance to speak with him?

5. Do you have any interesting stories to tell about times that you have seen him/ met him/spoke to him? Or about times that you have been in Venezuela, and how those times have inspired you?

Institutional details of the research:

Researcher: Parvathi Subbiah
PhD Candidate, Gates Cambridge Scholar
Department of Politics and International Studies
Centre for Latin American Studies

Supervised by: Monica Moreno-Figueroa
Senior Lecturer in Sociology
University of Cambridge
Fellow in Social Sciences, Downing College

Funded by: Gates Cambridge Trust

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

GATES Cambridge

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Summary:

This PhD research is looking at transnational Solidarity Movements with the Bolivarian Revolution. I am interested in looking at how Venezuelans living abroad perceive, feel and think about these activist groups internationally, as well as trace the reasons for which they have left the country, and if it is partly politically motivated. All your Fata

Questions:

1. How long ago did you leave Venezuela?
2. How has this change affected you personally?
3. Are you happy/dissatisfied with your move?
4. Do you feel you have migrated for political reasons? Or mostly economic reasons?
5. Are you still a supporter of the Bolivarian Revolution? If not, were you at some point? If yes, has this changed because of Maduro?
6. I will read out several quotes, by activists of the Bolivarian revolution, that are not Venezuelans, tell me what you feel and think about them.

Institutional details of the research:

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University of Cambridge
Fellow in Social Sciences, Downing College

Funded by: Gates Cambridge Trust

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

GATES Cambridge

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study: Narratives of Solidarity from Abroad

Researcher: Parvathi Subbiah
PhD Candidate, Gates Cambridge Scholar Department of Politics and International Studies Centre for Latin American Studies

Supervised by: Monica Moreno-Figueroa
Senior Lecturer in Sociology
University of Cambridge
Fellow in Social Sciences, Downing College

Funded by: Gates Cambridge Trust

I confirm that I understand the purposes of the study and have had the opportunity to ask the researcher (Parvathi Subbiah) any questions that I might have.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

I agree to the interview / focus group being audio recorded. Y / N

I agree to the use of quotes in publications. Y / N

Name of Participant:
Date:
Signature:

Name of Researcher:
Date:
Signature:

Appendix B.

1. Table of non-Venezuelan solidarity activists cited in the text, with their pseudonyms:

Pseudonym	Age bracket	Nationality	Perceived Race
Jose	Mid 60s	Spanish	White
Ignacio	Early 20s	Spanish	White
Ricardo	Late 30s	Spanish	White
Martín	Mid 30s	Spanish	White
Victoria	Mid 30s	Spanish	White
Juan	Late 60s	Spanish	White
Alberto	Late 50s	Spanish	White
Cameron	Late 60s	British	White
Sahas	Early 30s	British	British-Asian
Abdo	Mid 30s	British/Sudanese	Black
Chris	Late 40s	British /Spanish	Mixed (British-Asian/White)
Tim	Mid 50s	British/South-African	White
Liesel	Early 20s	British	White
Aaron	Early 30s	British	White

Pedro	Late 40s	British/Chilean	White
James	Early 70s	British/Canadian	White
Jack	Early 20s	British	Black (Mixed Black-British/White)
Andy	Late 60s	British/Canadian	White
Mack	Mid 30s	American	White
Chase	Late 60s	American	White
Tamara	Mid 50s	American	White
Tony	Late 50s	Australian	White
Fernando	Early 40s	Australian/Argentinean	White
Damien	Early 30s	Australian/Russian	White
Mauro	Early 50s	Brazilian	Moreno (light brown)
Perla	Mid 40s	Argentinean	White

2. Table of Venezuelans migrants cited in the text, with their pseudonyms:

Pseudonym	Age bracket	Country of Residence	Perceived Race
Camila	Late 20s	England	White
Alicia	Early 40s	England	Morena clara (with indigenous features)
Cintia	Late 50s	England	White
Francisco	Mid 50s	England	White
Ibrahim	Early 40s	Perú	Moreno claro
Wilson	Early 60s	Perú	Moreno claro
Margarita	Mid 30s	Perú	Morena oscura
Adriana	Early 30s	Perú	Morena clara
Nelson	Early 30s	Chile	Moreno oscuro
Hector	Late 30s	Chile	Moreno claro
Gisela	Early 30s	Panamá	Morena clara
César	Late 30s	Moving to Chile	Afro-descendent
Jeison	Late 30s	Mexico	Moreno oscuro
Eva	Early 30s	Spain	Morena oscura
Jairo	Mid 30s	Spain	Moreno oscuro
Pablo	Late 50s	Japan	White

Marcos	Late 30s	Colombia	Moreno oscuro
Jaime	Early 40s	Colombia	Moreno oscuro
Rosario	Early 50s	USA	White
Lorena	Late 60s	Costa Rica	White

Appendix C.

Computational methods

The graphs below represent computational textual analysis, done in the R programming language, using several different packages.

Procedure

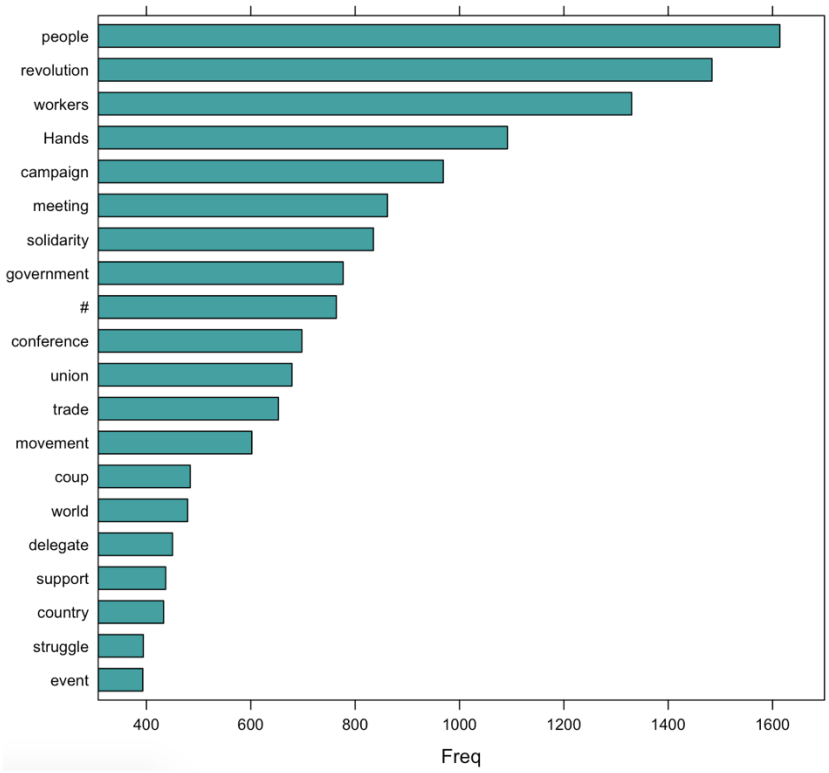

Figure 21. Most frequent nouns identified.

I extracted ('scraped') all the blog posts published on the website of *Hands off Venezuela* (HOV) using a Python 'spider,' built for that specific purpose.

After collating all the text, I first looked for the most prominent words (Figure 21), and for the most prominent phrases (of 2 or 3 words) using the R package 'udpipe' (Figure 22).

As the Figure 21. shows, the most prominent words are, unsurprisingly, 'people,' 'revolution' and 'workers.' Figure 22. Shows how the phrase 'trade union' actually appears more frequently than 'Hugo Chávez' (as discussed in chapter 7). It is also interesting that the 'United States' appears in this list, as a prominent element against which the discourse is built.

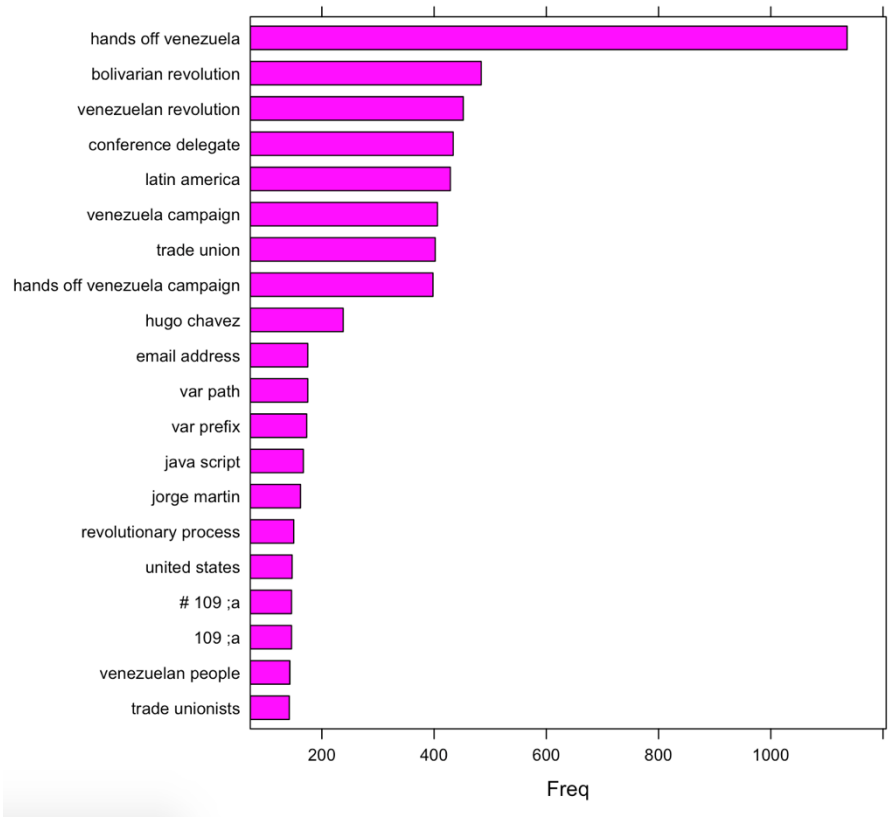

Figure 22. Most frequently used pairs of words or phrases.

I ran a sentiment analysis algorithm (in the 'tidytext' R package), that uses a Lexicon (specifically the NRC lexicon) that associates specific words with 8 specific emotions. Figure 23 shows the most important words associated with each of the eight emotions it targets (anger, anticipation, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise, trust).

The algorithm, I found, suggests that 'revolution' and 'socialism/socialist' are words associated with anger, disgust, fear, and sadness—which was completely inaccurate for the group being studied—HOV

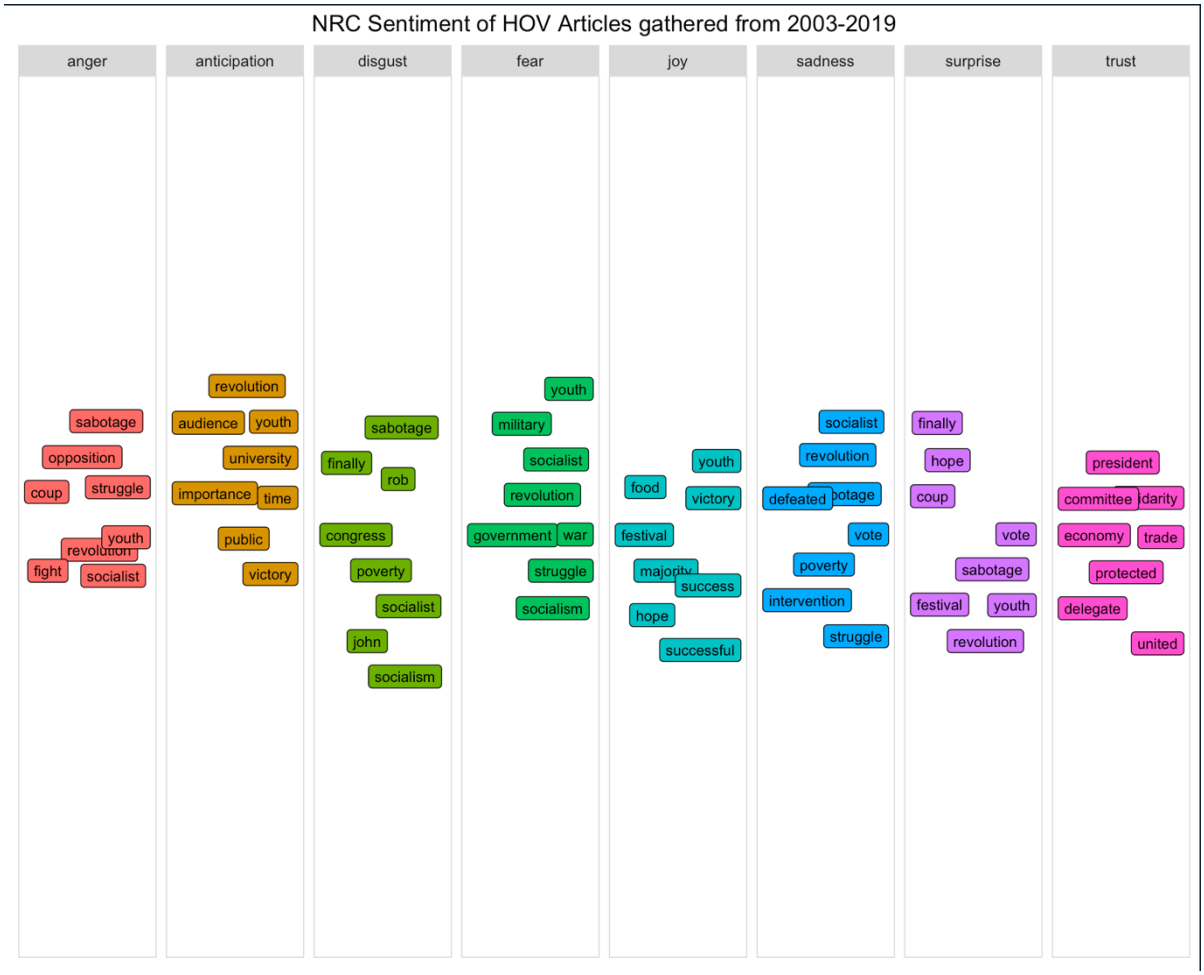

Figure 23. NRC Sentiment Analysis showing the 8 most prominent words for each emotion.

and anyone from the further left more broadly. 'Poverty' is associated with 'disgust,' (also definitely not true for those involved with HOV) but also with 'sadness,' which makes more sense. The only other words that appear to be consistent with the interviews, and an interesting find, are 'delegate' and 'united' with trust, and 'majority' with joy—a theme described in chapter 5 on democracy.

The last graph shows the results of applying a machine learning algorithm (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) to the group of texts. LDA is useful for summarising large volumes of texts into 'topics.' The LDA algorithm makes two important assumptions: that every document is a combination of one or more topics; and that every topic is a mixture of words (Liske 2018). The concept behind the algorithm is that words belonging to a topic appear together in documents. Here I chose 4 topics (after trials with 10, and 6 topics) and found it was the one that was easiest to interpret. The first topic that the model has identified (Topic 1) are words around the Bolivarian revolution itself (process, way, people, workers, socialism). Topic 2 is less clear, but we can interpret it as having to do with all forces against 'the people':

opposition, coup, world, media, countries. Topic 3, is webpage jargon, and Topic 4, identifies words that have to do with Hands off Venezuela as an organisation.

Figure 24. LDA Top terms for each of the topics identified by the model

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