

Les Cahiers de Framespa

e-STORIA

36 | 2021

Cent ans d'anticommunisme en Europe et dans les Amériques

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Socialism equals death, market equals life: anti-socialist and pro-market policy discourse among the contemporary Venezuelan Opposition.

El socialismo es igual a la muerte, el mercado es igual a la vida: discurso antisocialista y pro-mercado en las políticas socioeconómicas de la oposición venezolana contemporánea

Le socialisme est égal à la mort, le marché est égal à la vie: discours anti-socialiste et pro marché dans les politiques socio-économiques de l'opposition vénézuélienne contemporaine.

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<https://doi.org/10.4000/framespa.10371>

Abstracts

English Español Français

While there has been much coverage in the media and in academic work on the crisis in Venezuela, little has been written about the Venezuelan Opposition, grouped in the Democratic Unity Coalition (MUD) and even less about their economic and social policies. This paper seeks to address this latter lacuna by providing a critical examination of three key MUD policy documents. Situating this analysis within a wider discussion on the relationship between democracy and neoliberalism, and using a framework derived from Wendy Brown's book "In the Ruins of Neoliberalism", the article argues that the Venezuelan Opposition is fundamentally neoliberal in ideological orientation. This means that it seeks to, paraphrasing Brown, critique and dismantle society, using anti-socialism as its principle trope to do so; attack "democracy understood as popular sovereignty and shared political power", even while it uses democracy as its main discursive banner; and extend the personal protected sphere at the expense of the public. This may result, the article concludes, in a form of neoliberal authoritarianism rather than 'restored' democracy as the Opposition claims.



Si bien ha habido mucha cobertura mediática y trabajos académicos sobre la crisis en Venezuela, poco se ha escrito sobre la oposición venezolana, agrupada en la Coalición de Unidad Democrática (MUD) y menos aún sobre sus potenciales políticas económicas y sociales. Este

texto busca abordar esta laguna al proporcionar un examen crítico de tres documentos clave de política de la MUD. Este análisis se sitúa dentro de una discusión más amplia sobre la relación entre democracia y neoliberalismo y utiliza el marco derivado del libro de Wendy Brown "En las ruinas del neoliberalismo", lo que le permite sostener que la oposición venezolana es fundamentalmente neoliberal en su orientación ideológica. Esto significa que busca, parafraseando a Brown, criticar y dismantelar la sociedad y para ello utiliza el anti-socialismo como su principal tropo; atacar a "la democracia entendida como soberanía popular y poder político compartido", aun cuando usa la democracia como su principal bandera discursiva; y ampliar la esfera de protección personal a expensas del bien público. Esto puede resultar, concluye el artículo, en una forma de autoritarismo neoliberal en lugar de una democracia "restaurada" como afirma la oposición.

Bien que les médias et les travaux universitaires aient largement couvert la crise au Venezuela, peu de choses ont été écrites sur l'opposition vénézuélienne, regroupée au sein de la Coalition pour l'Unité Démocratique (MUD), et encore moins sur leurs politiques économiques et sociales. Cet article veut combler cette dernière lacune en fournissant un examen critique de trois documents politiques clés du MUD. Situante cette analyse dans une discussion plus large sur la relation entre démocratie et néolibéralisme, et utilisant un cadre dérivé du livre de Wendy Brown *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, l'article établit que l'opposition vénézuélienne est fondamentalement néolibérale sur le plan idéologique. Cela signifie que le MUD cherche à, paraphrasant Brown, critiquer et démanteler la société, en utilisant l'antisocialisme pour arriver à ses fins, alors même qu'il utilise la démocratie comme principale bannière discursive, tout en étendant la sphère de protection personnelle aux dépens du public. L'article s'achève sur la possibilité qu'advienne une forme d'autoritarisme néolibéral, en lieu et place de la démocratie « restaurée » à laquelle l'opposition prétend revenir.

Index terms

Mots-clés : Venezuela, Opposition vénézuélienne (MUD), Socialisme, La démocratie, Néolibéralisme

Keywords: Venezuela, Venezuelan Opposition (MUD), Socialism, Democracy, Neoliberalism

Palabras claves: Venezuela, Oposición Venezolana (MUD), Socialismo, Democracia, Neoliberalismo

Full text

Introduction

- 1 The Venezuelan Opposition¹, as grouped in the Venezuelan National Assembly, and currently led by National Assembly Popular Will (VP) Deputy, Juan Guaidó, is, as we are constantly reminded by the world's media, recognised as the legitimate government of Venezuela by almost 60 countries, led largely by Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) members, chief among them the United States, and many Latin American countries, most notably regional giant Brazil. The Guaidó-led Opposition to the government of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela's (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela or PSUV) Nicolás Maduro, is characterised as a battle between the forces of 'democracy', grouped into the Coalition for Democratic Unity (Mesa de Unidad Democrática or MUD) against an authoritarian dictator leading a kleptocracy (Maduro/PSUV). Within this narrative, the Opposition's past anti-democratic strategies to overthrow Maduro's predecessor, and founder of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, President Hugo Chávez are airbrushed out by the world's media, and more recent attempts using such tactics are justified by the call to democracy. Even less interrogated and problematised, however, are the actual policies which the Venezuelan Opposition seeks to implement once they achieve their aim of removing Maduro. It was notable, for example, that when Guaidó first proclaimed himself President in January, 2019, the world's media reported little on the actual policy proposals presented at a packed and expectant presentation made by Guaidó in the Central University of Caracas on January 31st of that year, preferring to pursue scoops on plans to remove Maduro². Yet, the Opposition led by Guaidó, has so far failed

to remove Maduro, neither through ideas nor through force and remains divided on how to go forward strategically. Venezuela, meanwhile, remains mired in social, economic and political crises, deepened by a punishing US-led, and Opposition inspired and approved, sanctions regime.

- 2 The aim of this article then is to fill this lacuna on the Venezuelan Opposition's economic and social policy. In it I will argue that while the Venezuelan Opposition differs on strategy, it has shown a remarkable consistency over the years and across its various institutional guises in proposing a neoliberalised institutional order, discursively presented as "democratic", to replace the existing Bolivarian order. To develop this case, I will first present a brief discussion on neoliberalism and its relation to democracy, ultimately settling on a structural framework derived from Wendy Brown's 2019 book "In the Ruins of Neoliberalism"³. After a brief discussion on the objectives and strategies of the Venezuelan Opposition, I will then, using Brown's structure, closely examine three of its key policy papers produced respectively in 2010, 2012 and 2019⁴ in order to illustrate how the Venezuelan Opposition adheres quite closely to the main aims of neoliberalism as outlined by Brown. I conclude by observing, based on this evidence, that the Opposition project is a deeply conservative one which could ultimately damage rather than promote democracy.

1. Neoliberalism, the denial of the social and the hollowing out of democracy

- 3 Analysts identify neoliberalism as a multidimensional phenomenon with policy, ideological and institutional manifestations. First, neoliberalism is seen as a set of policy prescriptions grouped around trade liberalization, deregulation, and privatization, with important roles for foreign direct investment (FDI) and financial capitalism⁵. Additionally, it can be viewed as an "ideational frame...that shapes the way its holders see the world"⁶, one which "proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade"⁷. This frame is viewed by others as hegemonic, due to its deep embeddedness in intellectual and policy networks at the national and international levels⁸. These policy networks reach their maximum expression in the corridors, lobbies and meeting rooms of unelected multi-lateral governance institutions, such as the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, the EU, the ECB and the European Courts of Justice etc, all of which are, as Quinn Slobodian painstakingly proves, the apex of neoliberal governance⁹.
- 4 The negative impact of neoliberal policies enacted by these institutions, and the national governments which constitute them, on society and on democratic politics are well documented. As society has become more commodified and dependent on the market to survive¹⁰, inequality has increased globally, including in the core liberal democracies of the 'West'¹¹, throwing these into deep representative and legitimization crises¹². These crises of democracy can be characterised as processes of de-democratization, most succinctly put as "the...contraction of popular rule"¹³, becoming "hollowed out" media dominated 'audience' democracies¹⁴, or indeed 'post-democracies'¹⁵, rather than truly representative popular democracies. These socio-economic and political inequalities are further reinforced by "hyper reactionary" forms of neoliberalism¹⁶, or what some have termed, 'radical right populism'¹⁷ which seeks to restore traditionally dominant patriarchal systems of social hierarchy by rolling back progressive advances on racial, gender, and sexual inequalities, while continuing with and indeed intensifying neoliberal socio-economic policies¹⁸.
- 5 Such processes are powerfully presented in Wendy Brown's 2019 book "In the Ruins of Neoliberalism"¹⁹. Here she argues that neoliberalism unintentionally prepared the ground for the rise of the populist right in Europe and North America through the

realisation of its three core objectives: critiquing and dismantling society; attacking “democracy understood as popular sovereignty and shared political power²⁰”; and extending the personal protected sphere at the expense of the public. In terms of the first objective, Brown argues that neoliberalism aims to dismantle and disparage “the social state in the name of free, responsabilised individuals²¹”. This “vanquishes a democratic understanding of society tended by a diverse people equally entitled to share in self-rule²²”. Crucially, it generates “an anti-democratic culture from below while building and legitimating anti-democratic forms of power from above²³”. The second objective, attacking democracy, or what Brown reminds us the prominent founding neoliberal theorist F.A. Hayek called the “the dethronement of Politics”, aims to limit and contain the political understood as “a theatre of deliberations, powers, actions, and values where common existence is thought, shaped, and governed²⁴”. Neoliberalism seeks to achieve this by, “Detaching the political from sovereignty, eliminating its democratic forms, and starving its democratic energies²⁵” putting in its place “management, law and technocracy²⁶”. Democracy simply becomes a “method of setting rules, rather than a form of rule²⁷”, while the state becomes “lean, non-sovereign, and laser-focussed, insulated from vested interests, pluralist compromises, and the demands of the masses²⁸”. Finally, by extending the personal, protected sphere, neoliberalism seeks to generate “a moralisation of public life” and hence its “privatization by familialisation and Christianisation²⁹”. It works in tandem with processes of marketisation by “dismantling public provision [while] extending private sphere norms to delegitimise the concept of social welfare provision and the prospect of democratising the social powers of class, race and sexuality³⁰”. Liberty hence becomes disembodied from democracy, and instead generates “the psychic and political formation of a liberal authoritarian political culture³¹”. Overall, then, Brown argues that neoliberalism expands marketisation, reduces the state and its purview and with it the expanse of the political, and through an emphasis on ‘traditional’ modes of socialisation, expands privatisation by individualisation and familialisation. In the following section I will provide a brief background account of the objectives and strategies of the Venezuelan Opposition to outline how it uses democracy as a discursive banner, while sometimes using un-democratic means to achieve it. I will then use Brown’s framework to analyse the three cited Opposition policy documents, demonstrating not only congruence between their policy objectives and those of neoliberalism but also their projection of that neoliberalism as uniquely democratic.

2. Neoliberalism and the Venezuelan Opposition

- 6 While there are radically different, and indeed opposing, analytical approaches to interpreting the Venezuelan crisis³², most agree that the Opposition’s main objectives are to construct, or as the Opposition would argue, restore, a liberal-democratic politico-institutional regime (“liberty”) and a market based socio-economic regime (property rights), both summed up by and subsumed into the Opposition’s key identifying banner ‘democracy’. This project stands in opposition to the, at least originally, democratically participative and ‘socialist’ Bolivarian regime originated by ex-President Hugo Chávez and currently led by President Nicolas Maduro, which the Opposition and its international backers qualify as an authoritarian dictatorship. ‘Democracy’ then is, for the Opposition, quite simply the removal of Maduro, and perhaps the entire PSUV from government and even political life in the country, and the installation of an Opposition-led administration.
- 7 Cannon³³ outlines three main strategies which the Opposition has pursued to achieve this overall aim: institutional, mobilisational and extra-constitutional. The first largely involves participation in elections, despite persistent suspicions on the legitimacy of the electoral process in the country, which have led to occasional boycotts of such

processes. The second mobilisational strategy involves encouraging, promoting and facilitating mass demonstrations, including production stoppages, often with violence, against the government and in favour of the Opposition conception of ‘democracy’, particularly at times when this is seen to be threatened. The third extra-constitutional strategy involves attempted overthrows, usually involving arms, of the existing regime, most famously against President Chávez in April 2002, but more recently against Maduro in May 2020. While each of these strategies have always been present in the Opposition repertoire, the relative weight of each of them has waxed and waned depending on the balance of power within the fractious Opposition coalition³⁴ and on the geopolitical context, with the latter extra-constitutional strategy most prominent in more recent years, coinciding with the arrival of Donald J. Trump as US President in 2016. Nonetheless, I aim to show in this article that notwithstanding this division on strategy, there is much greater unity on overall Opposition policy aims and objectives, at least according to the key documents reviewed here.

8 For the purposes of this article I identified and found the MUD’s three most notable and recent policy documents³⁵. Drawing on Fairclough’s³⁶ concept of intertextuality whereby underlying assumptions are considered, and Bacchi’s³⁷ understanding of policy discourse as a political and strategic tool, and using Brown’s text as a guide, I compiled a list of key search words to analyse these documents for each of the three elements discussed: 1) state, freedom, social, socialism; 2) democracy, politics, sovereignty, rule of law, liberty, equality; 3) family, individual, citizen, private, public, property, market, class, race, ethnicity, gender. Using these search words and exercising close readings of the relevant sections in the documents, I uncovered three main discursive tropes:

9 1. An anti-socialism equating the ‘Socialist State’ with tyranny, economic and social desolation and death.

10 2. The urgent and complete replacement of the ‘Socialist State’ by a marketised, regulatory state guided by the ‘rule of law’ and the ‘traditions’ of Venezuelan society.

11 3. The ‘unleashing’ through this state of the ‘natural’ entrepreneurial energies of a repressed Venezuelan people, who will then be in a position to provide socially for themselves and their families, with minimum intervention from the state.

12 The following three sections will discuss each of these in turn. While each of the documents are treated chronologically within each section, these three tropes are repeated coherently with very little variation throughout all documents, hence underlining the consistency of Opposition positions on them.

2.a. Socialism = Death: Hatred of the state and state action against inequality

13 The principal focus of Opposition critique of the PSUV are its state-led attempts to, using Brown’s words, “build political equality³⁸,” “deliver the common good³⁹” and modulate to some extent “the powers of capitalism, colonialism, race, gender, and others⁴⁰” in Venezuelan society. Such critiques of the PSUV socialist state litter Opposition documents reviewed. In the 2010 document reference is made to the creation of a “statist system inspired in failed collective experiments⁴¹”. The state-led economy is seen as antithetical to society “perpetuating poverty and blocking creativity and prosperity⁴²”, while “drowning and suffocating community initiatives in the social, economic and cultural fields⁴³”. In the 2012 Guidelines document, alleged state dominance of the public and private media is seen to cause an “incessant siege of the liberty of expression⁴⁴”, installing a “model of an autocratic, single ideology based on the cult of personality of...President (Chávez)⁴⁵”. This model is furthered by what the document calls a “Communicator State” (“*Estadocomunicador*”) making information and communication a “privileged space for the education and ideologization for a ‘socialist society’⁴⁶”. “The Public Administration”, in this Socialist State, is not at the

service of citizens but is rather expected to permanently satisfy the requirements of the President and his political organisation. This is achieved, for example, through “increased public sector employment, [and] increased ministries and civil servants⁴⁷”, whose only purpose is to reward loyalty to the President. In other words, it is the increase of state presence both as an interlocutor and as an employer which is seen as the source of tyranny and popular suffering.

14 Popular participation mechanisms installed by PSUV governments, such as communal councils are viewed as “tutored participation...suffocating citizen initiative⁴⁸”. In the round, the “transition to socialism” is “a destructive process” of the modes of production and values attributed to ‘capitalism’, creating a “centrally planned economy where private ownership of the means of production that the government considers strategic does not exist⁴⁹”. This project is similar to that “maintained by force in Cuba and North Korea⁵⁰”, whereby society is subordinated to the State, rather than as it ‘naturally’ should be, the other way around⁵¹.

15 Similarly in Guaidó’s “Country Plan⁵²”, the PSUV governments are accused of creating “a totalitarian political model and a failing economic system [which] have destroyed the capacity of Venezuelan citizens to provide for themselves and support one another⁵³”. “The national production capacity”, the document declares, “...has been decimated by two decades of nationalizations, arbitrary expropriations and regulation [and] the petroleum industry has been destroyed as a result of socialist policies⁵⁴”. The result is “death, disease, widespread hunger and malnutrition⁵⁵” and massive migration of Venezuelans throughout the Latin American region and beyond. Socialism therefore equals death. State action by the PSUV in the realm of the social is portrayed as total domination of society by the socialist autocrat, and society is viewed as simply individualised citizens seeking to provide for themselves and their families.

2.b. A “strong but restricted state” ...

16 To replace the ‘socialist state’ the Opposition seeks to install a neoliberal, technocratic, “strong but restricted” state, as Opposition leader Maria Corina Machado told a colleague and I in 2012⁵⁶. Its main task will, according to 2010’s MUD document, be to encourage “private initiative through the state’s regulatory activity in the economic area, in a socio-economic system in which the private productive sector should be strengthened⁵⁷”. This will be achieved by increased competitiveness, increasing “cooperation” between public and private sectors, guaranteeing private property rights, “economic liberty”, and private initiative, and increasing private national and international investment. All of this with the aim to promote “the entrepreneurial character of workers and businesses⁵⁸”. The state will return to the pre-Chávez decentralised governance model, seen as more democratic and more effective in terms of service delivery and citizen participation⁵⁹, and which will have the seemingly important benefit of reducing the power of the central state⁶⁰.

17 According to 2019’s Country Plan⁶¹, the state will be transformed “from a socialist economic model to a social state based on the rule of law and a market economy⁶²”. This will mean massive privatisations of state-owned companies⁶³, in favour of a state that “stimulate[s] production through a constructive dialogue between civil society and the organised private sector driven by entrepreneurship as a dynamic social force in the economy⁶⁴”. “Centralised economic controls” the document continues “...will be dismantled [in favour of] health[y] competition as a mechanism of self-regulation in the market⁶⁵”. Central to this will be the “right’ to private property “so that every Venezuelan owns the means required to ensure their well-being and the well-being of society⁶⁶”. The central objective of “public governance” will be to “service the productive development of Venezuelans⁶⁷”.

18 Crucial to achieving this objective will be a “new relationship between citizens, the state and oil” to “facilitate the empowerment of Venezuelans...⁶⁸”. To this end, a new Hydrocarbons Law will seek to preserve “the property of the Nation over the oil fields⁶⁹

but with private capital as majority shareholders in oil projects; and will include a “competitive” fiscal regime and maximised production of gas and oil. Overseeing this transformation will be a new Venezuelan Hydrocarbons Agency (AVH). The AVH will, according to the Country Plan “effectively and technically manage the [oil] deposits and regulate and supervise the sector⁷⁰”. Additionally, Guaidó’s party leader, Leopoldo López and his fellow Harvard alumnus, Gustavo Baquero, propose in another document, “Energetic Venezuela” (*Venezuela Energética*)⁷¹, to “democratize the oil,” by creating a new Assets Fund for Venezuelans (FPV), whereby each Venezuelan citizen over 18 years old will receive an annual market based gratuity derived from a personal account in the FPV, with “directly owned shares which will grow based on oil and gas sales⁷²”. This personal fund can only be used to finance “essential needs⁷³” i.e. medical insurance, mortgages, and education costs, and will also be the basis of future pension entitlements, hence introducing individualised and privatised logics into the management of the strategic asset of oil and the provision of public goods. The fund, it is said, will be “totally transparent⁷⁴” albeit in an individualised, financialised manner, in that monthly statements on personal accounts will be provided to each citizen, and a webpage will be accessible for citizens to monitor daily activity of the fund. The individual citizen then becomes an asset manager, using their FPV funds to finance his or her own principal asset - themselves. The FPV will, Lopez and Baquero assure us, be controlled by an “independent board without governmental interference⁷⁵” although how this will be selected, who will participate in it and how accountable it will be to Venezuelan citizens is not made clear. The state (or as the authors repeatedly insist, ‘the government’) will be financed by a flat rate 50% tax on each citizen’s fund, regardless of income, thus, ensuring it’s “accountability to citizens⁷⁶” although it is not clear if this will be additional to existing taxes on income or replace them.

2.c. ...for an “entrepreneurial” and “productive” society.

19 Society hence, ceases to be the “essential site of emancipation, justice, and democracy⁷⁷” to become, as the Venezuelan Opposition insists, merely “productive”. The essential ingredients for a “productive society” are to be “restored”, to “ensure private property rights and economic liberty, and to develop free private initiative and the access of citizens to quality goods and services⁷⁸”. Underlying this conception is an idealisation of Venezuelan workers and businesses as innately “entrepreneurial⁷⁹” a characteristic currently suppressed by the socialist state. Social policy therefore, is seen as complimentary to economic policy, and should primarily aim to create “access to dignified and well-paid jobs, a quality education in a competitive world, and a highly efficient public health and social security system, among others⁸⁰”. Indeed, as Julio Borges, a leading Opposition politician, told a colleague and I in 2012, “the ultimate aim of social policy is the end of such social supports⁸¹”. In other words, the best social policy is that the country does not need a social policy as all needs will be fulfilled by the market.

20 To this end, the state becomes a regulator rather than a provider of social policy except in the most extreme of cases. State social provision becomes targeted, rather than universal, and the private sector becomes the principal purveyor of social and essential services. Guaidó’s “Country Plan” envisages private sector involvement in all essential areas of human need. Food provision for the “needy” will be distributed by the private sector⁸². Food production will be increased by “increasing the capacities of the private sector”, with the state acting as “regulator of agri-food development⁸³”, but aiming to intervene as little as possible. Jobs promotion and family income will be aided by “community entrepreneurship programmes⁸⁴”. Minimum public pensions will be supplemented or replaced entirely by private provision⁸⁵. Individual salaries are seen to be directly related to individual effort and not to human need⁸⁶. Health

“distribution mechanisms will be developed by private initiatives and organizations⁸⁷”. Education’s primary objective will be to “create a teaching system in which Venezuelans learn and develop skills to generate wealth through productive work and entrepreneurship⁸⁸”. Indeed, Venezuela’s “private education sector, [is] perceived as a fundamental ally that complements and supports the work of promoting statehood⁸⁹”, and “NGO’s, churches, universities and multilateral organisations will be incorporated at the financial, institutional and human resources level⁹⁰” in the education sector. Housing will be provided through private sector loans⁹¹ and the privatisation of public housing⁹². Each of the electricity, water, gas and telecommunications utilities will have their own “autonomous” regulatory bodies⁹³, and will include investment from “domestic and foreign private investors” (i.e. privatisation) allowing “tariff transitions” to ensure “the financial sustainability of public service companies guaranteeing access to disadvantaged communities⁹⁴” (i.e. price rises).

The overall objective of Guaidó’s “Country Plan” is “to empower citizens so that every working Venezuelan can earn a living and satisfy both the needs of their family and themselves⁹⁵”. In this way, the document claims, “Venezuelans will be the protagonists of a process of sustainable and inclusive economic growth⁹⁶”. Through these measures then, the concept of public provision is dismantled as processes of privatisation and “familialisation” are advanced.

3. “The Venezuela to come” or the Venezuela that has already been?

²¹ This article began by noting the negative impact of neoliberalism on actually existing liberal democracy, using Brown’s frame to illustrate how this is a direct result of the realisation of neoliberalism’s three principal objectives: critiquing and dismantling society; attacking “democracy understood as popular sovereignty and shared political power⁹⁷”; and extending the personal protected sphere. It went on to show that while on the one hand the Venezuelan Opposition has demonstrated disagreements and fissures on strategy, it has remained relatively unified in its policy positions supporting neoliberalism. To develop this point, the article then outlined how the Venezuelan Opposition seeks to achieve the neoliberal objectives identified by Brown in a post-PSUV Venezuela. These objectives are then, referring back to Brown, that Venezuelan democracy become a “method of setting rules, rather than a form of rule⁹⁸” and that the state becomes decentralised, dismembered, and dissected, with its power, including over the all important oil industry, hived off to regulatory boards led by unelected technocrats. The state then will become, as Brown warns, “lean, non-sovereign, and laser-focussed, insulated from vested interests, pluralist compromises, and the demands of the masses⁹⁹” and decisive intereventory state action against inequalities could become well nigh impossible. The realm of the political, the realm of the social will be diminished as the expanse of the private will be increased.

²² If, then, the ultimate effect of such policies will be anti-democratic, the question remains as to how and why the Venezuelan Opposition can justify identifying its overall objective as ‘democracy’. The answer to this lies in the fact that definitions of democracy are contested and that as Gonzalez¹⁰⁰ argues, the discursive use of the concept of ‘democracy’ provides a unifying logic to the Opposition’s strategic disparity. The concept of democracy can be used to refer to empirical practice or normative aims. Merkel¹⁰¹, for example, identifies minimalist, mid-range and maximalist models of democracy. Minimalists models are essentially electoral, while mid-range models would add elements such as the rule of law, an active civil society, and perhaps some participative or deliberative mechanisms, and finally, a maximalist model would include all these and a high level of social welfare to ensure material equality among citizens. Yet democracy can also be seen as a normative project which is essentially

unfinished. In this sense we can view democracy, along with Balibar¹⁰² as “a permanent struggle for its own democratization and against its own reversal into oligarchy and monopoly of power.” This struggle, as Balibar warns, can experience “advances and setbacks [and] is never homogenous¹⁰³” and its objectives “cannot be summarized in either representation or indeed participation [as] there exists a multiplicity of criteria, which the democratic struggles themselves indicate...¹⁰⁴”. In this sense then, established models of democracy are merely “historically situated instruments to approach the elusive ideal of the ‘rule of the people.’¹⁰⁵”, whereas democracy itself is the constant search to protect and expand popular against oligarchic rule.

23 Between the minimalist electoral concept of democracy and Balibar’s expansive notion of democracy as struggle, there is wide field for ‘democracy’ to function as what Laclau¹⁰⁶ identifies as an “empty signifier”. This is because, as Gonzalez¹⁰⁷ points out, “of its ambiguous registration sites in which different forces try to establish their particular meanings.” “Filling the meaning of ‘democracy’” she continues (ibid.) “is a battle in which a certain meaning succeeds when it becomes common sense.” In the Venezuelan case, Gonzalez¹⁰⁸ argues, the Opposition filled the empty signifier of ‘democracy’ with ‘polyarchy’, a term coined by US political scientist, Robert A. Dahl, which is similar to elements of Merkel’s mid-range model: electoral competition in a representative system of government, rule of law, and an active civil society. It is characterised by an acceptance of capitalism as complementary and not inimical to democracy, in line with most mainstream political science¹⁰⁹. This use of democracy by the Opposition in Venezuela, Gonzalez¹¹⁰ argues, had three outcomes. First, through the articulation of an us/them division between Opposition and Chavismo around polyarchy, the Opposition found a means to forge a limited unity among themselves but one which excluded popular sectors and those seeking political transformation. Second, this strategy invisibilised the left/right division in favour of a civilised/barbarian antinomy, with the former embracing polyarchy and the latter the *chavista* project, adding a racist and classist element to the exclusionary dynamic. Third, it contributed to a zero-sum game of polarisation, as both groups have “the same understanding of exclusionary politics¹¹¹”. However, the Opposition understanding is to “prevent any novel political transformation: and in this it is authoritarian as democracy ceased to be understood as a plural society that must find institutional and legal means to solve conflicting interests¹¹²”.

24 This claim to “absolute truth”¹¹³ around polyarchy allowed the Opposition to justify any and all strategies to remove the ‘undemocratic’, ‘uncivilised’ and therefore illegitimate Bolivarian regime, while simultaneously and counter-intuitively claiming such actions as democratic. Such claims were reinforced by the extension of the polarising dynamic into the international domain, with the endorsement of Guaidó as Venezuela’s legitimate president, as noted previously, by most OECD countries and the continuance by Russia and China, as well as most developing world states in recognising Maduro as Venezuela’s legitimate head of state. Moreover, this article argues that the discursive use of “democracy” also served to obscure the fundamentally neoliberal socio-economic policy orientation of the Venezuelan Opposition which will, if realised, following Brown, contribute further to the right-wing authoritarian logics inherent in its political strategising.

25 In particular, it facilitated the obscuring or denial of three central features of the Venezuelan drama which are inconvenient truths for its positioning as democratic in opposition to what it considers an authoritarian ‘socialist’ PSUV project. First, there is an almost total absence of any serious critique of inequalities in the documents reviewed, the very issue which propelled Hugo Chávez into the presidency in the first place. The question of class inequality is entirely absent from all the documents; ethnicity has two general cultural mentions, but without recognising inequalities in that area¹¹⁴; gender has a lengthy section in 2012’s Guidelines¹¹⁵, but is almost entirely absent from the other documents. When any of these are mentioned, they are not viewed as structural problems inherent to capitalism, but rather the sole result of the

reviled socialist policies, which only the market can overcome. If socialism equals death, the market is the resurrection.

26 Nor is there any recognition of a possible negative role that the continuous and insistent seditious actions of the Opposition itself might have played in the supposed failure of Venezuelan socialism. On the one hand the Opposition declares itself against the PSUV's socialism, and acknowledges that it has repeatedly acted (and will continue to act) to achieve its downfall. Yet simultaneously Bolivarian socialism's failure is portrayed as endogenous and innate to socialism *qua* ideology, and not apparently influenced by Opposition actions to destroy it. Almost all of the direct actions, and especially sanctions have in their totality led to many thousands of deaths, and untold economic losses¹¹⁶. The Opposition then are co-creators of the current situation of economic, social and political crisis¹¹⁷. Few societies, socialist or otherwise, could withstand such persistent assaults, never mind thrive. Yet for the Opposition, and for its international supporters, including the US, the crisis is entirely socialism's failure and Venezuela is repeatedly used as a warning by the global right and far-right, of what can happen when the social is given salience by the state¹¹⁸.

27 Moreover, while there is recognition of Venezuela's specific situation as a petro-state, the economic, social and political imbalances that this can cause are not recognised as contributory to the crisis. It is worthwhile to recall that a similar devastating crisis dominated Venezuela in the 1980s and 1990s with similarly noxious results¹¹⁹. These have been attributed by most analysts to a precipitous decline in oil prices (itself exacerbated by Venezuelan production expansion, as advised by the Opposition today) and the subsequent neoliberal policy responses imposed by multilateral agencies, with the willing cooperation of Venezuelan political and business elites, to solve the crisis. Indeed, it was this crisis, and the subsequent inequalities generated, as stated earlier, which proved the catalyst for the emergence of Chávez. And it is these very policies which the Opposition seeks to impose again to replace the socialist state.¹²⁰

28 These neoliberal recipes against crisis are nothing new, as they are consonant with those constantly advanced by multilateral agencies, intergovernmental agencies, and powerful nation states throughout the world since the 1980s. That they do not work, are indeed counterproductive seems irrelevant. Why then persist with these failed and damaging policies? Brown insists, it is the denial and disparaging of the social which is the underlying animus behind the ubiquity of these policies. As she points out, "deregulated markets tend to reproduce rather than ameliorate historically produced social powers and stratifications of class, race and sexuality¹²¹". Moreover, locating provision for the social exclusively within the narrow confines of the "traditional' family helps "secure male supremacy, heteronormativity, and ethnic-racial loyalties¹²²". Ultimately then neoliberalism is a deeply conservative project, sometimes cloaked in technical jargon and progressive language, as in the documents reviewed here, but seeking to preserve and widen social hierarchies while simultaneously appearing to deny them. However, the focus on the individual and the family as the sole locus of social provision, "generates an imago and ethos of the nation that rejects a public, pluralistic, secular democratic order for a private, homogenous, familial one¹²³". In this crucible, Brown warns, an intolerant authoritarian perspective on freedom as "individual and corporate prerogatives against equality...¹²⁴" can develop with unpredictable, noxious impacts on democracy.

29 **Conclusion**

30 This article seeks to fill a lacuna in the literature on the Venezuela Opposition around their socio-economic policies. Placing the discussion within literature on the relationship between democracy and neoliberalism and using a frame derived from Wendy Brown's 2019 book 'In the Ruins of Neoliberalism' to examine three key MUD policy documents, it is argued that these obscure a disdain for the social and a distrust of the political behind a polarising pro-"democracy" discourse, which is viewed as the antithesis of socialism. Anti-socialism here becomes the discursive screen to conceal a rejection of any view of democracy which is not polyarchy - meaning pro-market and pro-elite, technocratic governance. These discursive practices and policy aims and

objectives can lead, it is argued, to a form of neoliberal authoritarianism which is anti-collective, anti-political and anti-egalitarian.

Notes

1 I use Opposition here (with upper case first letter) to refer exclusively to those parties which are grouped in the National Assembly, uses the MUD as its main identificatory label and is generally recognised internationally as the official opposition to the Bolivarian project. There is, however, increasing opposition within the left to the Maduro administration, including within the PSUV, which is suffering repression and ostracism by that party and the state. I am not referring to this opposition here.

2 See for example this Guardian report on the meeting, which only devotes one short very general paragraph to the content of the Plan Pais policy presentation: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/31/si-se-puede-shouts-rapturous-crowd-at-juan-guaido-rally>

3 Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019.

4 “Programmatic Proposals” (Propuestas Programaticas) (2010); “Guidelines for the Government of National Unity Programme, (2013-2019) (Lineamientos para el Programa de Gobierno de Unidad Nacional, [2013-2019]) (2012); and, the English version of Juan Guáido’s Country Plan (Plan País) (2019).

5 Phillipp Ther, *Europe Since 1989: A History*, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 17.

6 Francisco E Panizza, *Populism and the mirror of democracy* London, UK and New York, NY : Verso, 2005, p. 9.

7 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 2.

8 Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

9 Quinn Slobodian *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

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12 Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Malden, Mass. : Polity, 2004; Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London: Verso, 2013; Wolfgang Merkel, “Is Capitalism Compatible with Democracy?” *Zeitschrift Für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 2014, 8:109–128; Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

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15 Crouch, *op cit*.

16 Nancy Fraser, “From progressive neoliberalism to Trump—and beyond”, *American Affairs Journal*, 2017, 1:4, Available: <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond/>, consulted 18 November, 2020.

17 See for example Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019.

18 Ray Kiely and Richard Saull, “Neoliberalism and the Far-Right: An Introduction”, *Critical Sociology*, 2017, Vol. 43:6, pp. 821–829.

19 Wendy Brown, *op cit*.

20 Brown, *ibid.*, p. 15.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.* p. 28.

24 *Ibid.* p. 56.

25 *Ibid.* p. 57.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

32 This can be roughly divided into a liberal or institutionalist approach, which is closest to the Opposition's viewpoints on the Bolivarian regime, a more radical, heterodox approach which while not uncritical, is more sympathetic to the overall aims of the Bolivarian revolution, and a third intermediate and less extensive position which focusses on polarisation within civil society in the Bolivarian era. Providing references for each of these approaches in what is now a voluminous literature would occupy too much space here, but for an excellent overview and discussion of this divide in the literature see Kirk A. Hawkins, 2016 "Chavismo, Liberal Democracy and Radical Democracy", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19:311-329, DOI: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-072314-113326.

33 Barry Cannon, "As Clear as MUD: Characteristics, Objectives, and Strategies of the Opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela", *Latin American Politics and Society*, 2014, 56, pps. 49-70

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35 The first two documents are in Spanish and quotes used are translated by the author.

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39 Brown, *ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

41 MUD *Propuestas op cit.*, p. 2.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

44 MUD, *Lineamientos, op cit.*, paragraph 109.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*, paragraph 111.

47 *Ibid.*, paragraph 157.

48 *Ibid.*, paragraph 33.

49 *Ibid.*, paragraph 301.

50 *Ibid.*, paragraph 333.

51 *Ibid.*, paragraph 380.

52 Plan País, *op cit.*

53 *Ibid.*, paragraph iii.

54 *Ibid.*, paragraph ix.

55 *Ibid.*, paragraph vii.

56 See Cannon, 2014 p. 57.

57 MUD *Propuestas op cit.*, p. 5.

58 *Ibid.*

59 MUD, *Lineamientos, op cit.*, paragraph 164.

60 MUD, *Lineamientos, op cit.*, paragraph 295.

61 Plan País, *op cit.*

62 *Ibid.*, paragraph ix.

63 *Ibid.*, paragraph 6.

64 *Ibid.*, paragraph 12.

65 *Ibid.*, paragraph 13.

66 *Ibid.*, paragraph 15.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*, paragraph 19.

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*, paragraph 23.

71 Leopoldo López, Gustavo Baquero, *Venezuela Energética: Propuesta para el bienestar y el progreso de los venezolanos*, [Online], 2018, consulted 9 September 2020, URL: <http://www.leopoldolopez.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ResumenejecutivoVE.pdf>.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*

76 *Ibid.*

77 Brown, *op cit.*, p. 50.

78 MUD, *Lineamientos*, *op cit.*, paragraph 15.

79 MUD, *Propuestas*, *op cit.*, paragraph 46, p. 13.

80 MUD, *Lineamientos*, *ibid.*, paragraph 43.

81 Cannon, 2014, p. 60

82 *Plan País*, *op cit*, paragraph 28.

83 *Ibid.*, paragraph 44.

84 *Ibid.*, paragraph 31.

85 MUD, *Lineamientos*, *op cit.*, paragraph 900.

86 *Ibid.*, paragraph 339.

87 *Plan País*, *op cit*, paragraph 29.

88 *Ibid.*, paragraph 41.

89 *Ibid.*, paragraph 42.

90 *Ibid.*

91 *Ibid.*, paragraph 53.

92 *Ibid.*, paragraph 54.

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110 *Op cit.*

111 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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