EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: CALLING FOR A NEW POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN

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WHAT THE CARIBBEAN CAN TEACH US ABOUT RACE, CLASS & SOCIAL CHANGE.
PLUS: REFLECTIONS ON THE ETHICS OF TOURISM, VENEZUELA'S OIL ECONOMY, HOLISTIC HEALTH & HEALING, CUBA, & RELEARNING U.S. HISTORY

why the CARIBBEAN matters
Lessons from the Caribbean

by Tim Shenk, editor

These days, there seems to be a new emergency every week. This issue of the CUSLAR Newsletter is an attempt to zoom out from the ongoing crisis in our country to consider how the Caribbean might offer lessons for the next stage of work for social change, wherever we are.

The Caribbean is a tangle of stories of oppression and hope. Four centuries of slavery and colonialism and another century of economic dependency have left indelible marks on the people, land, languages and cultures of the Caribbean.

Christopher Columbus reported to the King of Spain about his initial travels to the island the Tainos called Ayiti, now Haiti and the Dominican Republic: “Mountains and hills, plains and pastures, are both fertile and beautiful…. The harbors are unbelievably good and there are many wide rivers of which the majority contain gold.” He promised his majesties “as much gold as they need … and as many slaves as they ask.”

Beginning with that moment, the Caribbean would become a central focal point for European merchants, swashbucklers and kings as a site for extraction of resources and exploitation of labor. Much of Europe was built with profits made -- that is, wealth stolen -- from the Caribbean colonies.

Yet this legacy of underdevelopment is not just in the past. In the 21st century the Caribbean has become, with the exception of Cuba, a place for global companies and their local affiliates to have their way, to the general detriment of the island populations.

The Caribbean has much to teach us about the current political moment. First, on the economy. Learning Caribbean history means getting a clearer picture of the brutality involved in developing our current global economic system. And learning about the Caribbean today suggests that this system is still inhumane, with dynamics that play out in new and recycled ways.

Second, on race. Studying how differently race and racism are understood in the Caribbean than in the United States allows us to argue confidently that race is a social construction and not a natural phenomenon. Further, it is possible to see how racialized hierarchies have been used to divide and control the oppressed class on behalf of the owning class.

Third, on revolution. The Haitian Revolution of the late 1700s and early 1800s, and the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s to today, have shown it is possible to resist and even defeat the ruling class.

The Caribbean and the economy

Why does the global economy work the way it does, producing extreme inequality among people and nations? The Caribbean is an important part of the answer.

Columbus “sailed the ocean blue” not out of a desire to travel to exotic distant lands and meet exciting and unusual people. He traveled west toward India, he thought, seeking fortune. The indigenous people of the Caribbean discovered him on their shores, and in return for their hospitality, he and his men put them in chains.

The enormous profit extracted from the colonies through slave economies was a large part of what fueled early capitalist enterprise. The harsher the conditions of the enslaved, the more profit could be pocketed or reinvested.

And stealing is much better for business than buying, if you can get away with it.

Afro-Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James notes that by the mid-1700s, the French merchants were the most powerful economic force in France. The slave trade and their star colony, Saint-Domingue, now Haiti, were the basis of their wealth and power.

Knowing the basis on which our profit-driven economy is built may cause us to rethink the role of the economy in today’s society as well.

Studying how capital operates in the Caribbean today reveals a picture nearly as stark as in colonial days. Jeb Sprague-Silgado, CUSLAR’s guest speaker in March, outlined a strong trend toward what he referred to as the transnationalization of the Caribbean economies.

Sprague-Silgado has documented that in recent decades, global firms have taken control of the bulk of the economic drivers of the region: the tourism industry -- which Daniella Hobbs highlights on page 7 -- as well as large-scale mining and export processing zones. The transnationalization of these sectors means that less and less of the money made stays to benefit the people where goods and services are produced. Local elites are more detached from local development and oriented toward global chains of accumulation. Poverty and poverty-driven emigration continue despite the resource wealth of Caribbean countries.

Mackenzie Stevenson reports on Sprague-Silgado’s visit on page 4.

Looking at the Caribbean in this way gives us evidence toward understanding our economic system as a poverty-producing system.

CUSLAR is a Cornell University-based organization, founded in 1965, which seeks to promote a greater understanding of Latin America and the Caribbean. CUSLAR members are a diverse group of people united in our concern about the role of the United States in the social, political and economic affairs of the region. CUSLAR supports the right of the people of Latin America to self-determination and control over decisions that affect their lives and communities.

CUSLAR is a project partner of the Center for Transformative Action.
The Caribbean and racism

In the Americas, the poverty-producing economic system is completely entangled with race. History has bound these two categories together: slavery, for example, was neither exclusively a race problem nor a class problem.

Racial hierarchies developed differently in the Caribbean than in the continental English colonies, based on particular economic motivations.

Theodore Allen notes the importance for the planter class in both places of creating a petit bourgeoisie. This middle strata, cleaved from the laboring class, would do the necessary dirty work of policing and controlling the rest of the workers, servants and enslaved.

In the Caribbean, because there were so few European whites compared to the rest of the population, a complex racial hierarchy emerged. Creoles, or whites born in the islands, had certain status below the European-born. Mulattoes, or people of mixed-race, were granted differing rights and status depending on the situation. They were free and often held positions as officers in the army or as plantation managers. According to James, when the owning class of Saint-Domingue felt a threat of rebellion, they would extend more rights to mulattoes to encourage their loyalty.

Even today, race is constructed differently in the Caribbean than in the U.S. A Dominican friend once showed me his cedula, or national ID. Under race it said indio claro. Other racial categories, from light to dark, are blanco, blanco jojoto, indio lavado, indio claro, indio canelo, indio quemado, moreno, prieto.

My friend wondered aloud what even is the color indio.

Why highlight this history now? First, differences in racial categories from place to place must mean in some sense that these categories were made up. So the fact that racism exists at all means that it has been useful to someone. Modern racism was born as an owning-class strategy to divide and rule. Though many things have changed since the 1600s, we are far from a post-racial society.

It’s important to notice the ways racism continues to hinder our potential to work toward a just world. Undoing a racialized class system must be a central part of our social activism.

At the same time, challenging racism cannot be disconnected from a critique of capitalism. White people have long benefited from whiteness, but the vast majority is also part of an exploited economic class that must work in order to eat.

Today because of worsening economic conditions, all-white unity, which is the basis of racism, is crumbling. More and more white people find themselves hurting, unable to cash in on “wages of whiteness” or any wage, for that matter.

To build a broad-based movement for deep societal change, we can take a lesson from Caribbean history. A key for Haitian revolutionaries was recruitment of poor whites, even French soldiers sent to kill them -- not simply as allies, but on the basis of a common economic position and need.

The Caribbean and revolution

Revolution, or replacing one ruling class with another, succeeded in Haiti in 1804. This has been the first and only successful slave rebellion to date. Leaders such as Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jean-Jacque Dessalines united the dispossessed and expelled the French governors, ending France’s most profitable colony.

It was no easy road. The Saint-Domingue slave rebellion had many false starts and eventually triggered the largest expedition that had ever sailed from France. Yet not even 20,000 trained soldiers could restore order.

The descent of Haiti from richest to poorest in the hemisphere is perhaps a cautionary tale for those who would follow in Toussaint’s footsteps. The global elite have ever since seeded division, supported dictators and pillaged Haiti of its resources.

Again in the 20th century, revolution in the Caribbean would upset the world balance of power. In Cuba in 1959, a guerrilla army led by a 32-year-old Fidel Castro overthrew the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. The Cuban Revolution would gradually proclaim its socialist character and align itself with the USSR, but first and foremost the revolution has been a triumph by regular Cubans over corporate and foreign interests.

Both the Cuban and Haitian processes are antidotes to discouragement. They promise no easy path to human liberation. Yet they show possibilities for big changes in how society is set up, and how our socially produced wealth can be distributed more fairly. If we can study history not just for names and dates, but for lessons in political strategy, we may be more prepared to maneuver in our current efforts for change.

The Caribbean isn’t just a tourist destination. It’s a site for study, strategy and solidarity.

The Caribbean has much to teach us about race, class and the possibilities for deep and lasting social change.
Sprague-Silgado explores economic shifts in Caribbean

by Mackenzie Stevenson

Annually, over 23 million tourists partake in brief escapes in the Caribbean. Yet most visitors may not grasp the monumental shifts underway in the region.

To understand the Caribbean today, according to Dr. Jeb Sprague-Silgado, we must look at globalization and political economy.

Globalization has led to changes in the Caribbean due to technological and organizational developments of capitalism. These activities have resulted in gains for those involved in transnational capitalism, and exploitation and loss for nearly everyone else.

On March 8 and 9, CUSLAR and Cornell Organization for Labor Action (COLA) hosted Sprague-Silgado, a visiting professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He presented talks at Ithaca College and Cornell University titled, “The Caribbean in the Vortex Of Capitalist Globalization,” based on his forthcoming book.

CUSLAR intern Richard Gaunt introduced Sprague-Silgado’s Cornell University talk by describing characteristics of the current economic system.

“The economy does not confine itself to our immediate borders,” Gaunt said. “The capitalist economy today is global, and this means we cannot limit our thinking and actions to our own states and nations. The economic and political processes that happen in one part of the world are inseparable from what happens elsewhere.”

Sprague-Silgado began his talk with a brief history of how he became interested in the Caribbean and global capital. On February 29, 2004, there was a coup d’état in Haiti that overthrew democratically elected leader Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Shortly after, Sprague-Silgado, then an undergraduate student, participated in a human rights delegation to Haiti. While he was there he learned about “social cleansing,” where the new government, put in place with the support of the U.S., conducted deadly raids on poor areas. This inspired his research on repression of resistance movements in Haiti, as well as a study of paramilitaries.

“I argue that we need to understand the Caribbean through the global political economy, and specifically, using the global capitalism approach that has arisen through transnational corporations and globalized forms of accumulation,” he said.

It is no longer accurate to describe what is happening in the region as neocolonialism or a new brand of imperialism, he noted. Those who benefit from current patterns of accumulation in the Caribbean are members of a transnational capitalist class and their local representatives.

“There has been a progressive dismantling of national production systems,” Sprague-Silgado said. “Their reactivation is an important element of an integral world production system.”

Global capitalism experts have suggested we are in a new phase in the history of capitalism. Sprague-Silgado identified four key sectors that may be representative of the major economic changes occurring through the rise of globalization.

In the Caribbean, this has meant a massive shift from agricultural exports, peasant subsistence farming and import substitution industrialization. The new pillars of the Caribbean economies include large-scale mining, the cruise ship industry, export processing zones and labor migration with a focus on capturing remittances. All four areas are oriented toward funneling the largest profits to transnational companies and away from local communities.

Sprague-Silgado pointed out five strategic traits that are key in all of the cases. They include the emergence of a transnational financial system within which the Caribbean is being integrated, the formation of transnational infrastructure in the region, globalization of labor in market relations, the shift to a transnationalism with a global goal of competitiveness, and integration of local companies into transnational chains.

“What we have here is a relationship of states to the global system that is transitioning as transnational business interests articulate interests that are tied less to territoriality,” he noted. This means that as companies become less accountable to certain geographical areas, workers face more precarious lives. People, then, must try to migrate to seek a livelihood for themselves in the globalizing economy.

“What I describe is an emergent process, one that is deeply contradictory, crisis prone, and open to different interpretations.” Sprague-Silgado said. What is not up for debate is that big changes have come to the Caribbean, and our analysis must consider these new realities.

Mackenzie Stevenson is a 2017 graduate of Ithaca College, where she studied Spanish and Communications.
Changing U.S.-Cuba relations have been of interest to many in recent months and years.

The governments of the United States and Cuba had a historic “thawing” of relations in December 2014, and the two countries reopened embassies in the other’s capital cities in 2015 for the first time since 1961. Travel from the U.S. to Cuba has become easier for purposes of educational exchange. Many cultural and university-based trips recently have become possible.

The end of the “wet foot, dry foot” immigration policy in January has meant a precipitous decline in Cubans crossing to the U.S., from about 600 to 20 Coast Guard pickups per month. U.S. policy was reinterpreted in 1995 to allow Cubans who reached U.S. shores to pursue residency a year after arrival. Now the Coast Guard returns would-be migrants to Cuba. The Cuban government has praised the change as it limits dangerous sea travel.

Yet many analysts have expressed concern that shifting U.S. policy toward Cuba has not addressed Cuba’s two central requests: ending the trade blockade and returning the U.S. military base and prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Daniel Shaw, who teaches Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the City University of New York, wondered if the softened U.S. stance is a “Trojan horse” aimed at increased access to Cuban markets by external investors. He noted that President Obama did not entertain questions about ending the trade embargo that has crippled the Cuban economy for decades.

Further, Shaw said, “If the U.S. was truly sincere about respecting Cuban sovereignty and human rights, they would first return Guantanamo Bay to the Cuban people.”

As more U.S. students and travelers continue to gain interest in Cuba, it will be important to encourage informed perspectives on the island and its people and history.

The CUSLAR library has dozens of titles on Cuba. We especially recommend primary sources. The Cuba Reader is an excellent introductory text for its comprehensive treatment of each historical epoch, including essays, letters and speeches by Bartolome de las Casas, Jose Marti, Theodore Roosevelt, Fidel Castro, John F. Kennedy, “Che” Guevara, Ernesto Cardenal and Silvio Rodriguez. -Ed.

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Parity and Paradise
The impact of tourism in the Dominican Republic
by Daniella Hobbs

Picture this: you are on a soft sandy beach in Punta Cana, on the eastern coast of the Dominican Republic. The sun is beaming down on you while the crystal blue water quietly laps against the shore. It’s pure bliss and relaxation, but does that bliss extend past the walls of your resort?

If you ask the United Nations World Tourism Organization (WTO), they may tell you it should.

In 1999, the WTO established the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, and a few years later created the World Committee on Tourism Ethics in order to interpret, apply and evaluate the provisions included in the code of ethics.

The code is made up of ten articles, which attempt to establish the rights of tourists, locals and companies involved in the industry. While the articles are meant to evoke positive practices, the reality of tourism has not always followed suit.

One article that requires further examination is Article 5, which describes tourism as a beneficial activity for host countries and communities.

It states that “local populations should be associated with tourism activities and share equitably in the economic, social and cultural benefits they generate.” It also says that “tourism policies should be applied in such a way as to help to raise the standard of living of the populations of the regions visited and meet their needs.”

From a marketing perspective, this article is a great sell. Through Article 5, it could be argued that, by traveling to another country, tourists are not just providing themselves with a relaxing vacation, they are helping contribute to the economic development and betterment of that country as a whole. This sounds great, but is it true?

Dominican Republic has consistently been ranked among the top vacation destinations in the region. It had nearly as many visitors as the second and third most visited countries combined.

In 1995, just four years before the WTO released their Code of Ethics, investment restrictions on foreign investors were lifted in the DR. Since then, tourism has become the primary strategy for economic development in the country. However, by 2007, 85 percent of the total private-sector tourism investment came from transnational companies.

According to Jebs Sprague-Silgado, the transnationalization of the tourism industry, starting in the 1990s, has shifted focus away from the development of any one country, and toward the growth of a transnational capitalist class.

This means that, rather than helping the Dominican Republic develop as a whole, tourists are primarily helping one specific class, a class that may not be accountable to Dominicans.

The unequal economic growth that the tourism industry produces can be seen through an analysis of the Dominican economy over the span of a decade.

According to the World Bank, between 2001 and 2011, the GDP per capita in the DR rose by nearly 50 percent. However, less than 2 percent of its population rose to a higher income group during that time.

“Look, we are poor, we don’t have very much, but we have Miches. But with all this development going on in the Dominican Republic, if you come back in 10 years, we will still be poor, but Miches will not be ours.”

By 2013, there was a 12-hour day on average. Few people in Veron-Punta Cana have running water or consistent electricity, and waste water is dumped into the same grounds they draw their water from. While college spring breakers plant themselves at poolside bars, roughly 2,000 children are unable to go to school due to overcrowding.

About 80 miles north lies Miches, a coastal town of roughly 30,000 people—mainly fishermen and farmers. In 2009, community leaders told researchers, “Look, we are poor, we don’t have very much, but we have Miches. But with all this development going on in the Dominican Republic, if you come back in 10 years, we will still be poor, but Miches will not be ours.”

Fast forward to present-day, and the Four Seasons is building a Miches resort that will open in 2019. Will the ethics laid out by the WTO become a reality in Miches? History suggests a different story.
Cornell students see potential in DR Jungle Clinic

by Adriana Guzman

A place of total healing. That is the promise of the Jungle Clinic.

In the summer of 2016 I had the pleasure of visiting the Jungle Clinic in the mountains of Sosúa, near the northern coast of the Dominican Republic. The Jungle Clinic is a vision that is currently in the process of creation and construction. The four-hour journey from Santo Domingo up to the mountains transported myself and the other Cornell-CUSLAR Global Health Summer Program participants from hectic city life to complete serenity.

Our Cornell group visited the Jungle Clinic for two weekend retreats, both times with the intention of reflecting, opening ourselves to new ideas, strengthening relationships, and healing. The theme of the first retreat was “Let it Go,” which can be considered unlearning -- unlearning things that we take to be the absolute truth or to be the only “right” way to view things. Dr. Angel Pichardo Almonte, who is the clinic’s medical director and Global Health’s primary partner in the Dominican Republic, delved into the world of truths and realities, explaining that there are many and that there is a need to be open to this multiplicity for the sake of understanding the world around us. Dr. Pichardo spoke about the creation of knowledge, asking us how we know things. He also spoke about the connection between physical health and the concept of letting go. If we hold onto anger, resentment, or any other “load,” it will affect the health of our colon and our lungs, as those are the areas most affected by our inability to “let go.”

The second retreat included students from the group RenaSer and artists from the Cultural Foundation Cofradía. RenaSer is a student group, originally organized by Dr. Pichardo, that is focused on holistic healing. Fundación Cultural Cofradía is an organization whose focus is “the revaluation and consolidation of the fundamental manifestations of Dominican popular culture.” The theme for this retreat was, “Let it Flow, Let it Grow,” speaking to the energy of humanity and, quite literally, to the planting of fruit trees and medicinal plants. The energy of this retreat was upbeat and joyful, creating bonds that transcended the moment.

During both weekends, we cooked with the intention of healing and we slept under the stars. Cooking with the intention of healing may sound abstract, but the idea was to have healthy ingredients and to prepare the meals as a group, imbuing it with love and positive emotions. In a way it reminds me of the novel and film Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel in which the emotions and intentions that the cooks had while preparing meals were transmitted to the people who ate the food.

We also rode horses through the mountain brush, riding up and down the hills that seemed to stretch forever. The horses belonged to a previous owner of the property who had them for a riding school. The horses were calm and followed the lead horse keeper, creating a safe environment for first time riders. We rode until we got to a staircase that led down into a clearing with a small body of water and a waterfall flowing into it. It was a moment of bliss.

The Jungle Clinic, just as the trees we planted there, is barely a fraction of the size it will be in future years. The goal for this space is for it to be a fully functional, self-sustaining residential space where the food and medicine is grown on site. The lush rural acreage will welcome patients seeking holistic, natural treatments, and their families or caretakers, for weeks at a time. In addition, the clinic will have a central teaching component with dormitories and labs for students interested in holistic healing.

Adriana Guzman is a senior at Cornell University majoring in Biological Engineering and minoring in Global Health and International Development. She is one of the program assistants who helped prepare the 2017 cohort of students to travel to the Dominican Republic.
Ven gran potencial en clínica holística en Sosúa

por Adriana Guzman

Un lugar de sanación total. Eso es lo que promete el Jungle Clinic.

En el verano de 2016 tuve el placer de visitar el Jungle Clinic en las montañas de Sosúa, cerca de la costa norteña de la República Dominicana. El Jungle Clinic es una visión que está en proceso de creación y construcción. Las cuatro horas que hicimos para viajar desde Santo Domingo hasta las montañas nos transportaron al grupo de Salud Global de Cornell y CUSLAR, desde la vida agitada de la ciudad hasta la serenidad completa.

Nuestro grupo de Cornell visitó el Jungle Clinic dos veces para retiros de fin de semana, ambas veces con la intención de reflexionar, abrimos a nuevas ideas, fortalecer amistades y sanarnos. El tema del primer retiro fue “Dejar ir”, que se puede conocer como desaprender. Podemos desaprender las cosas que entendemos como verdad absoluta. Desaprendemos la noción de que hay varias de estas realidades, explicando que hay varias de estas y que es necesario estar abierto a esta multiplicidad para comprender el mundo a nuestro alrededor.

Dr. Pichardo habló sobre la construcción del conocimiento, preguntándonos cómo sabemos las cosas que sabemos. También habló sobre la conexión entre la salud física y la idea de “dejar ir”. Si nos aferramos a la ira, el resentimiento o cualquier otra “carga”, afectará la salud de nuestro colon y nuestros pulmones, ya que estas son las áreas más afectadas por nuestra incapacidad de “soltar”.

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El Dr. Angel Pichardo Almonte, Cornell University’s primary partner in the summer service-learning and research program in Dominican Republic, shares the Jungle Clinic with Cornell Global Health students, Dominican students from the group RenaSer and artists from Fundación Cultural Cofradía.

El segundo retiro incorporó a estudiantes del grupo RenaSer y artistas de la Fundación Cultural Cofradía. RenaSer es una organización de estudiantes, organizada por Dr. Pichardo, que se enfoca en la sanación holística. La Fundación Cultural Cofradía se concentra en “la revalorización y consolidación de las manifestaciones fundamentales de las culturas populares dominicanas.” El tema de este retiro fue, “Dejar fluir, dejar crecer”, reconociendo la energía humana y, muy literalmente, practicando la siembra de árboles frutales y plantas medicinales. La energía de este retiro fue muy animada y llena de alegría, creando vínculos humanos que trascendieron el momento.

Durante ambos retiros, cocinamos con la intención de sanar y dormimos bajo las estrellas. Cocinando con la intención de sanar puede parecer abstracto, pero la idea era escoger ingredientes saludables y preparar las comidas en grupo, inculcándolas con amor y emociones positivas. De alguna manera me recuerda a la novela y película Como Agua para Chocolate por Laura Esquivel en que las emociones e intenciones que las cocineras tenían mientras cocinaban, se transmitían a las personas que comían la comida.

También montamos caballos a través de las plantas nativas de la montaña, cabalgando en las colinas que parecían estirar al infinito. Los caballos pertenecían a un dueño previo del terreno quien los mantenía para una escuela de equitación. Los caballos eran muy mansos y siguieron a su cuidadora, creando un ambiente seguro para jinetes de primera vez. Cabalgamos hasta que llegamos a una escalera que bajaba hacia una lagunita con una cascada relajante. Fue un momento de felicidad perfecta.

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El Jungle Clinic, como los árboles que sembramos allí, es apenas una fracción del tamaño que será en los próximos años. El objetivo para este lugar es que sea un espacio residencial totalmente funcional y autosuficiente donde la comida y medicina se cultive allí mismo. La finca rural dará la bienvenida a pacientes quienes buscan tratamientos holísticos y naturales, y a sus familiares o cuidadoras para estadías de varias semanas. Además, la clínica tendrá un componente central de enseñanza con dormitorios y laboratorios para estudiantes con interés en la sanación holística.

Photo: Christopher Guerrero

Dr. Angel Pichardo Almonte, Cornell University’s primary partner in the summer service-learning and research program in Dominican Republic, shares the Jungle Clinic with Cornell Global Health students, Dominican students from the group RenaSer and artists from Fundación Cultural Cofradía.

Photo: Paige Wagar

This cabin serves as the Jungle Clinic’s residential space while other buildings are built. Medicines from fruit trees and herb gardens will be used at the holistic clinic.

LEARN MORE!

Cornell Global Health students interested in applying for the Summer 2018 Dominican Republic program can find resources and student reflections at: globalhealthindr.wordpress.com
The late Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela from 1999 until his death in 2013, has been one of the region’s most charismatic and controversial leaders. Many have noted his administration’s success in decreasing Venezuela’s poverty rate, but fewer have explored his presidency in the context of Venezuela’s historic dependency on oil.

**by Richard Gaunt**

Few political leaders of the 21st century are as polarizing as the late Hugo Chavez. Since his election in 1998, Venezuela has been the subject of consistent negative press from world media, portraying an oftentimes tense political situation.

The leader of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution, who was elected by a powerful base of the poor and working classes is remembered for his efforts to reorganize Venezuela’s political and economic systems to alleviate the massive poverty of the country. Less recognized however, are his efforts to shift the balance of the world oil market. For these efforts, *Chavismo* has been seen as a threat by global elites for nearly two decades.

Venezuela is situated over the largest oil reserves in the world, according to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The first Venezuelan oil well was drilled in 1914, and by 1935 oil exports already constituted 91 percent of all output from the country. Today that figure hovers around 95 percent.

The centrality of oil to Venezuela’s economy has created the conditions for what the International Monetary Fund calls Dutch disease, in which one export outcrows all others leading to import dependency and fluctuating currency values. It is because of this that economic crisis in Venezuela is not a recent phenomenon, but has largely been the norm rather than the exception for nearly a century.

Venezuela was wealthy with oil, but the benefits of this wealth were not evenly distributed. When *Chavismo* swept the poor and working classes of the country in the late ’90s, almost 60 percent of the country was living in poverty, according to the United Nations. Today that figure has decreased to 33 percent. Although Chavez emphasized the need to “move beyond” the oil economy that had created this class divide, he was very aware of its rootedness in Venezuela.

Domestically, Chavez believed that the national oil company had become far too powerful, famously referring to PDVSA as a “state within a state.” According to analyst Gregory Wilpert, the new constitution solidified state ownership of PDVSA, and laws were made that ensured that all revenues from oil had to support “public interest” and social programs.

Under Chavez, Venezuela became a key economic partner of Cuba, primarily trading oil for Cuban medical resources. Without doubt, this partnership played a role in lifting Cuba out of the economic difficulties it suffered due to the ongoing blockade from the U.S., and collapse of the Soviet Union, its former trading partner.

However, perhaps most significant to understanding the global financial stakes in Venezuela, are Chavez’s global oil politics. His first years in office were less concerned with the internal politics of PDVSA, and more concerned with the international politics of OPEC.
In the first two years of Chavez’s presidency, OPEC experienced a resurgence, which Middle East Energy News (MEES) described as a “product in no small part of the drive and enthusiasm of Hugo Chavez.” Chavez visited representatives of member nations, encouraging adherence to production limits. In 2000 at Venezuela’s urging, member nations convened in Caracas for the first time since OPEC’s founding.

Higher oil prices, and a reinvigorated OPEC, took a toll on U.S. oil company stocks, and drew the ire of U.S. and European politicians. According to MEES, both the European Union, and the Clinton administration issued warnings to OPEC nations regarding the consequences of their efforts. The hostility toward OPEC in the West was captured well by one senator saying that he “would expect someone to be punching people in the nose for hurting our people,” quoted by MEES.

Chavez saw these efforts as a way to shift the balance of power in the oil market, effectively hampering the efforts of transnational corporations to establish unified, global production. He believed he could use the existing framework of OPEC to act as an anti-imperialist force.

“Oil,” Chavez said, “can be a geopolitical weapon,” referring to efforts to achieve sovereignty over resources, and therefore open up a space for democratization of the economy free from interference by dominant world economies. Efforts to this end were perhaps most clearly embodied in the cooperative movement, which sought to decentralize the economy and promote employment and diversity of production. The cooperative movement recognized the necessity of not just gaining resource sovereignty, but fundamentally changing the economy itself to move beyond oil.

Chavez’s efforts are often viewed through the lens of “resource nationalism.” While it is clear that his first priority was to use Venezuela’s resource wealth for the benefit of the “public good” in Venezuela, his global outlook and belief that it was necessary to move beyond an oil economy represent a clear break from the logic of resource nationalism. Chavez was met with enormous domestic and international resistance for these efforts, most significantly an attempted coup in 2002 and PDVSA strike in 2002-03. The centrality of oil geo-politics to the Bolivarian Revolution project might also give some insight into why the Obama administration placed sanctions on Venezuela in 2014, calling the country a “threat to national security,” even though Venezuela has never attacked militarily.

In spite of success in reducing overall poverty, Venezuela’s dependency on oil has yet to be fully uprooted. This has left Venezuela struggling with the problems of inflation and import dependency that has characterized the past century of its history, along with added struggles with a transnational class seeking to regain full control over Venezuela’s oil revenues.

Progressive movement in Venezuela is highly dependent on successfully navigating and moving beyond an oil dominated, single-export economy in the global market in order to reduce import dependency. The cooperative movement, while not without its failures, still stands as an example of such an effort. Enormous transnational interests and historical weight stand in the way of such a movement. Perhaps it is Chavismo’s recognition of this task and its obstacles, and its integration of local and global politics, that made its project of “twenty-first century socialism” so explosive in its context.

Richard Gaunt is a 2016 graduate of Ithaca College. He currently lives in Quito, Ecuador where he works as a journalist.
Honesty is the best foreign policy

by Meredith Rector

“As Nicaragua ponders its options, we can and will -- with all the resources of diplomacy -- protect each country of Central America from the danger of war.” - Ronald Reagan


How could this really be stated by a U.S. president and distributed on a massive scale for all to read? It was astounding to me that such a powerful and influential figure could unflinchingly assert something this inaccurate. These were alternative facts before there were alternative facts. There was no diplomatic action being taken in Nicaragua: rather, it was a CIA-funded opposition which incited civil war and suspended aid, slowly wrecking its economy.

U.S. history was taught to me in a very skewed way, as it is to many American children. Christopher Columbus was revered as a hero until the entire story can be shared. Thus when the harsh reality is finally acknowledged in the classroom, students can become confused and disillusioned.

Another more recent instance of skewing of history is the neocolonial and anti-communist motives of the United States government that permeated foreign policy decisions in the twentieth century. My knowledge of these sentiments and their manifestations throughout Latin America surged during college and caused my shock at the blatantly false statement above.

The discrepancy between these two time periods is that due to its distance in history, colonialism can be scrutinized. The 20th century justifications for American hemispheric intervention are still recent and relevant, so they are omitted from the secondary education system because it gravely impacts how adolescents understand the U.S. role in the world.

The hot-button issue in U.S. foreign policy during the latter half of the twentieth century was communism. U.S. officials began to identify this threat based on developments that countered the interests of U.S.-based elites.

One example is U.S. intervention in Nicaragua throughout the 20th century. Although the United States has been intervening in Nicaragua since the 1800s, the conflict came to a boil in 1979. The U.S. backed Somoza dictatorship, which had been in power since the 1920s, had finally been overthrown by the people. This meant that a socialist party had taken power and the Nicaraguan people had a say in their own government for the first time in 50 years. The United States intervened to prevent this outcome.

The United States creates more problems by destroying states and violating their autonomy rather than giving them the chance for true independence and the right to choose their way of life.

1916-24 - U.S. Army establishes National Guard in Dominican Republic during military occupation. U.S.-trained military leader Rafael Trujillo rises to power and rules the DR as his personal plantation for 31 years,-condoned by the United States.

1926-33 - U.S. Marines occupy Nicaragua and fight on the behalf of Nicaraguan elites and U.S. business interests against nationalist peasant forces led by Augusto Cesar Sandino.

1946 - U.S. Army School of the Americas opens in Panama as a hemisphere-wide military academy. Many of the most notorious Latin American death squad leaders and military strategists were trained at the School of the Americas. It exists today at Fort Benning, Georgia, under the name of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

1950s - U.S. supports Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship in Cuba due to the regime’s support of the penetration of the Cuban market by U.S. companies.

1965 - U.S. Marines land again in Dominican Republic to interfere with constitutionalist revolution. Popular forces led by Colonel Francisco Camaaño are thwarted in reinstalling democratically elected president Juan Bosch, a man U.S. officials believe to have socialist tendencies. Under U.S. military, scrutiny, Trujillo loyalist Joaquin Balaguer is elected in 1966.

1973 - CIA assists in Chilean coup where Allende is ousted and revolutionary contra forces against the Nicaraguan Sandinista government.
A government not subservient to the U.S. (and therefore outside of the influence of the business elite) threatened the previously unchallenged access the U.S. had to Nicaraguan markets and natural resources. The existence of a successful socialist state, although it was not communist in nature, was close enough to pose a threat to the American rhetoric of the inherent danger of communism and loosen the neo-imperialist vice grip the U.S. maintained over Latin America in general. Nicaragua was made into the enemy even though it had no communist way of life and no ties with the Soviet Union.

The Sandinistas and the people of Nicaragua enjoyed their own sovereignty for less than a year before Ronald Reagan and the CIA fabricated and funded a faction called the contras to rebel against the Sandinistas. The U.S. attacked with increasing tenacity throughout the 1980s. It blocked aid from reaching Nicaragua, pressuring the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to terminate assistance. Nancy Stein documents that in 1983, the CIA took direct charge of economic sabotage in Nicaragua, bombing the international airport, two ports and oil pipelines, destroying millions of gallons of fuel and hundreds of tons of food and medicine.

By 1990, Nicaragua was once again ruled by a U.S. approved president, Violeta Chamorro. After decades of repression and military control, the one peaceful ascension the Nicaraguan people had seen since gaining their independence from Spain was crushed.

This is but one instance of many to occur in the twentieth century. As National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger funded non-socialist political parties in the 1960’s in Chile in order to prevent a socialist president. When this plan failed, he advised President Richard Nixon to support a military coup and installation of a brutal dictatorship. The U.S. backed an overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 because of his efforts to improve labor practices and redistribute land. The list goes on. I wish my country wasn’t blatantly violating sovereignty throughout Latin America and the world just because another country has differing political or business interests. But it is.

I don’t intend to downplay the true threats in the world that the United States does address. There are many things this nation does well and downtrodden populations that U.S. citizens work to assist. The issue with communism during the twentieth century is that all nations or people were painted the same, despite their unique situations. These nations were simply seeking improved quality of life for their people and a government living outside the American shadow.

The United States creates more problems by destroying states and violating their autonomy rather than giving them the chance for true independence and the right to choose their way of life. I don’t want to be disillusioned by my country. I have been given immense opportunity because I am American and I don’t discount the greatness of the United States. But some time since our founding, our leaders have lost sight of the principles for which this country stands because they serve those only with enough money and power to influence foreign intervention.

The political elite can overlook almost any transgression for those who are malleable to their will, and democratic values are determined by the highest bidder. One thing U.S. leaders can learn from Latin America is that oppression of the less-privileged is rampant, and it can lead people to rebel against the status quo. Let’s learn those stories, too, not just what we’re taught in school.

Meredith Rector is a 2017 graduate of Elmira College. This summer she is moving to Nicaragua to volunteer with a non-profit organization.
Willie Baptist: I’ll start off by saying this: much of the discussion of the very significant global economic crisis of 2007-08 has been that it’s over. In fact, the following year, 2009, the official word was that it’s over. But, for increasing numbers of the people, it continues. The pain is becoming even more excruciating. Even though there has been increased employment, underemployment is growing.

I think to understand and appreciate the full significance of President Trump’s victory is to appreciate that that victory was a product of this crisis. The whole presidential campaign never addressed the issues of hurt and pain and suffering happening here in America and all throughout the world. I think to understand and appreciate the full significance of President Trump’s victory is to appreciate that that victory was a product of this crisis. The whole presidential campaign never addressed the issues of hurt and pain and suffering happening here in America and all throughout the world.

This is a country that is founded on the notion that we’re all created equal, and that we’re endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among them the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. How are you going to pursue life and happiness if you’re homeless or if you don’t have a decent job. What’s available now is SLJs. Have you ever heard of SLJs? Shitty little jobs.

You’ve got a lot of people working two or three of these SLJs and still can’t make ends meet. In America, the richest country in the world. Upwards of 50 percent of the growing homeless population works, and yet they can’t afford homes or even the basic things.

This is the reality you just don’t hear in the media, and you certainly didn’t hear in the presidential campaign. It was all about the middle class.

The Poor People’s Campaign is a counter to that. It’s a way to identify and bring
The immorality of poverty needs to be exposed. Some 700 people in this country or more since 2008 have died from freezing to death from being homeless. Many of those deaths occurred right next to a house that was sitting empty. That’s a moral contradiction. How can we deal with that?

In political strategy, studying the history of conflict and war, the forces that won were the forces that were able to identify the weak points of their adversary. That’s how you fight. You don’t fight whatever you’re up against going at their strengths -- you identify their weak points.

It’s clear from my assessment that the weak point of Trump and the weak point of the ruling class of this country, the people who support the status quo -- is this economic crisis.

And so the Poor People’s Campaign is an effort to focus attention on the fact that in this system that can produce so much, poverty can exist in the midst of plenty. The problem of poverty is not a problem of scarcity.

The crisis is like a ping pong ball going down a flight of stairs. It bounces up and down, but its general direction is down. More and more people are being displaced by robots and computers. People are graduating into peonage slavery with exorbitant amounts of debt.

The Poor People’s Campaign represents people who are struggling and realizing that this is unjust, and we need to do something about it. This is not primarily about helping poor people. It’s about realizing that their condition is indicating the direction of this country.

Claudia de la Cruz: I have to echo some of what Willie was saying in terms of the importance of this political time in which we are. You have folks who have experienced being frustrated with a political system that doesn’t work for the majority of people, and understanding that there’s a need for systemic change to take place.

Part of the process of the Poor People’s Campaign is political education with leaders and in communities. We’re identifying folks that have been engaged in political education and popular education for several decades, to figure out what type of curriculum we want to be able to implement, to both engage with communities in understanding the reality, but also answering questions that might lead us to strategizing for changing the realities in which we live.

We need to have spaces for people to strategize together. Historically we have different silos that are based on issues. You have the immigrant community, the LGBTQ community, the women’s movement. We need to see what our common identity is.

TS: What do you think CUSLAR’s role in contributing to movements for justice today?

WB: Latin America, of all the continents, is the most advanced in terms of critical consciousness. In this global economic crisis, Latin America is exerting the class question. The class question is, you don’t have control of ownership of the institutions or the economy, and therefore you have to go work for other people. That’s not a system failing: that’s how the system works.

CUSLAR, in its relationship with Latin America, gives us a way to help facilitate relationships that would help increase the class consciousness in this country, and to also help strengthen work and struggles in Latin America.

We went to Cuba and learned about their tremendous internationalist medical apparatus. They take poor folks from different countries and provide them with free medical education, and they have doctors going all over the world, to help out for free.

They told a story of when Ebola broke out in Africa. Initially, doctors were dying. The Cuban government made a call for 400 doctors to volunteer to go to Africa. Over a thousand volunteered. I asked one of the leaders of the school, how is it that you have people who are prepared to do that? I know CUSLAR is experienced in bringing together people to learn from this kind of thing.

I think the class consciousness of Latin America has to be tapped into if we’re going to win. If we’re just gonna be out there and crying the blues about how sad we are, and who’s more oppressed than who, because that’s what we did in the ’60s. We had the oppression Olympics.

What do you see as CUSLAR’s role in contributing to movements for justice today?

CC: When we talk about capitalism, we’re not talking about a national issue. When we talk about poverty, we’re not talking about a national issue. We’re talking about a system that is a global system, that has impoverished and dispossessed most of the world.

We’ve been all over, and we’re finding that people are ready to break their isolation. People are ready to build something new. Because, you know, our lives depend on it. The lives of our loved ones depend on it. So it’s a matter of doing it right this time. That’s why I’m excited about the Poor People’s Campaign.
Latin beats and global issues
de la Cruz shares history of hip-hop from S. Bronx

On April 20, Claudia de la Cruz spoke to Cornell University students about growing up in the South Bronx during the emergence of hip-hop, an art form with its roots in a culture of resistance to poverty and racism. Now an educator with Rebel Diaz Arts Collective and the Popular Education Project, de la Cruz explained some of the conditions that led to the rise of hip-hop.

“I grew up in the poorest congressional district in the country,” she said. Her parents immigrated from the Dominican Republic to New York and experienced the difficulties of making it in a new place. They raised their family in a neighborhood where landlords purposefully burned down their own apartment buildings to collect insurance as property values tanked.

Hip-hop, breakdancing and graffiti were responses to the abandonment and frustration residents felt in this context.

de la Cruz noted the difference between hip-hop rooted in the culture of resistance and the rap industry. The same companies that own major rap record labels, in which artists promote violence and the use of illicit substances, also have a stake in the prison industry.

Co-sponsoring the event were: OADI, Holland International Music Center, Latina/o Studies, Latino Living Center, International Students Union and SAFC.

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Spring 2018 application deadline: Jan. 26

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REVIEW
Toward an ecological revolution
by David Johnson


The need to drastically reduce carbon emissions is as clear as it is urgent. Technologically speaking, there is a path forward: innovations in energy production abound, including in renewable sources like sun and wind.

It would seem we have a problem and a solution. Why then do we see little meaningful reform, when the stakes are so high and the answers so clear?

A new book edited by Vijay Prashad bursts through this rigid state of affairs. Focused around Naomi Klein’s Edward Said lecture, Will the Flower Slip Through the Asphalt is a short collection of narrative essays and analysis that responds to the global climate crisis in a refreshingly expansive way.

Prashad, in his introduction to the collection, wastes no time:

“Denying climate science is only the symptom of a much deeper problem that confronts the planet. It is the endemic crisis-ridden capitalism that lashes out like an injured dragon, breathing fire here and whipping its tail over there. Fatally wounded, capitalism seeks regeneration through any means — whether by seizure of precious natural recourses or the cannibalization of human labor.”

According to this bold diagnosis, the problem is that our economic system regards both humans and nature as mere resource-inputs for the accumulation of capital.

Read the full review at: cuslar.org/ecologicalrevolution