

# Venezuela and its Neighbors: The Discursive Struggle for Latin America<sup>1</sup>

## *Venezuela y sus vecinos: la lucha discursiva por América Latina*

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**Abstract:** Over the past decade, Venezuela has moved into a deep recession, which has resulted in millions migrating abroad. In February 2019, the United States and its allies recognized the interim government of Juan Guaidó, engaging in a standoff with the government of Nicolás Maduro. This article carries out a nuanced analysis of the situation in Venezuela across multiple levels as it problematizes our ontological understanding of individuals, states, and international system. Through a post-structuralist approach to security, I argue that individuals have been portrayed in contradictory humanitarian discourses as a means of advancing particular political interests. Furthermore, I critically analyze the role of space, time, and multilateralism, and their subsequent effects for the 21<sup>st</sup> century global order.

**Key words:** Venezuela, Latin America, post-structuralism, Cold War, international relations

**Resumen:** Durante la última década, Venezuela ha entrado en una profunda recesión económica, que ha provocado que millones emigren al extranjero. En febrero de 2019, los Estados Unidos y sus aliados reconocieron al gobierno interino de Juan Guaidó, creando un enfrentamiento con el gobierno de Nicolás Maduro. Este artículo realiza un análisis profundo de la situación en Venezuela a través de múltiples niveles al problematizar nuestra comprensión ontológica de individuos, estados y el sistema internacional. Con un enfoque postestructuralista de la seguridad, sostengo que los individuos han sido retratados en discursos humanitarios contradictorios de manera de promover intereses políticos particulares. Además, analizo críticamente el papel del espacio, el tiempo y el multilateralismo, y sus efectos posteriores para el orden mundial del siglo XXI.

**Palabras clave:** Venezuela, América Latina, postestructuralismo, Guerra Fría, relaciones internacionales

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## 1. Introduction

Michael Reid begins his 2007 ominously titled book *Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul* by asking, in a world of challenging security dilemmas, changing economic markets and development patterns, and ever-shifting discourses of power: "But what of Latin American, the other great region of the developing world" (Reid, 2007, p. 1)? This article attempts to partially answer this question by focusing on the region's current largest political debate and hotspot, Venezuela, and how understanding the discursive struggle for this South American country can provide some insight into regional and global moves for power and hegemony. Specifically, I seek to carry out a theoretical analysis of the situation in Venezuela, and more broadly of regional affairs, to see how this analysis can help us make sense of humanitarian assistance, multilateral actions, and relations of power in the region.

Over the past decade, Venezuela has entered a period of economic turmoil with hyperinflation averaging 80,000% in 2018 alone, and the number of Venezuelans going abroad in search of better opportunities spiking from 700,000 in 2015 to an estimated 3.4 million in 2019, 1.5 million of whom migrated to other South American countries alone (Cara Labrador and Mellow, 2019; O'Grady, Alcantara, and Emamdjomeh, 2019). Without a doubt, there exists a deep academic and social debate about who is to blame for this situation, whether that be poor macro-economic mismanagement since the presidency of Hugo Chávez and continued policy failure under Nicolás Maduro, or hostile sabotage and crippling sanctions from the United States (U.S.) starting with the administration of George W. Bush. It is beyond the scope of this article, however, to review the successes and failures of the Bolivarian Revolution and to properly apportion blame among the parties, as that would entail an empirical and quantitative review of figures, and it would probably still fail to fully capture the nuances presently unfolding in Venezuela. The purpose of this article is instead to focus on the discourse and discursive practices that have been employed by various groups to define and interpret the situation in Venezuela. Likewise, I focus my analysis on recent events, specifically since the election of Donald Trump<sup>3</sup> in the U.S. in 2016, and the proclamation of Juan Guaidó, leader of the opposition, as interim president of Venezuela in February, 2019.

Overall, I argue that Venezuela's current situation allows us to understand how individuals can be constituted simultaneously through opposing, and often contradictory, humanitarian discourses to serve various political purposes. Furthermore, I advance the idea that this case study illustrates how both right-wing and left-wing leaders can utilize multilateralism to further their masculine image and reassert their political dominance within both domestic and foreign policy circles. In essence, this article provides a post-structuralist reading of the "crisis" in Venezuela to help us problematize this term and its implications for world order and political hegemonies, as well as how social discourses are employed across various times and spaces to aid in the production of individuals, states, and identities. The events examined in this article are still in development, and will probably continue to develop over the next decade, hence this is a first attempt at placing "the Venezuelan crisis"

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, my analysis focuses on the implications of the election of several center-right leaders in recent years throughout Latin America: Mauricio Macri in Argentina in 2015, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru in 2016, Sebastián Piñera in 2017 in Chile, Iván Duque in Colombia in 2018, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018, etc. This electoral shift signifies a transition from the "Pink Tide" that had previously dominated regional politics.

within the grander legacy of Latin American politics and the constitution of 21<sup>st</sup> century international politics.

## 2. (Re)Conceptualizing Security and the State

Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War* (1959) can be viewed as a fundamental text within the field of International Relations (IR), not only because it established neorealism and pushed the field's theoretical discussions into its so-called "second debate", but more importantly because it framed how subsequent scholars learn about and analyze IR. Stated differently, Waltz's division of political space among three images, the individual, the state, and the international system, has anchored mainstream IR's thinking towards questions of conflict and peace. Even post-structuralist and post-modern thought, as is the case of Richard Ashley's (1989) theoretical endeavors, takes Waltz's three images as its starting point for critique. My objective here, as has been advanced by many post-structuralist thinkers, is not to suggest that we live in a world of mirages and illusions – but instead to propose that we view individuals, states, and the international system as mutually co-constituted entities that are in a constant state of reproduction and rearticulation *vis-à-vis* each other (Campbell, 1992; Der Derian, 2009a; Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989; Doty, 1993; Hansen, 1997; Shapiro, 1997, 2007). Furthermore, it is their very materiality that makes it difficult to appreciate this co-constituted quality about them.

To put it differently, one could apply Cynthia Weber's line of reasoning about the phallus to Waltz's three images, or as she states when exploring the works of Butler and Lacan, "although it is impossible to 'be' or to 'have' the phallus, it is not impossible to 'appear' (not) to be or (not) to have the phallus. This is the very sense of pretending, the 'seems to' space in a Lacanian economy of desire. It is the space of masquerade" (1999, p. 109). Thus, individuals, states, and the international system can be refashioned not as well-delineated and separate entities that exist apart from each other, or as objects that "are" or "have" particular characteristics – but rather as entities that exist in tandem with each other and that *appear* to be or to have. Once again, I do not challenge the materiality or "thing-ness" of the world around us. I simply suggest that nothing exists outside itself, or beyond the discursive universe of socially rendered relations of power and symbolic systems of understanding that have been constituted by human societies across millennia (Derrida, 1997; Foucault, 1978, 1980; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). If Simon Dalby provocatively asks, "What then might security mean without states?" (Dalby, 1992, p. 106, cited in Hansen, 1997, p. 380), I further that inquiry by asking in the context of Venezuela's current situation: What might then security mean without individuals, states, and the international system – or at least our present ontology regarding these three entities?

The answer might circuitously lead us back to Waltz's three mirror images; emphasis here is on the word "mirror", because mirrors hold a special place within the Western psyche and semiotic process stemming from their simultaneous ability to reflect back objects as they appear to be, or to distort the objects that are placed before them (see Onuf, 1995). What I am implying is that security studies is a field centered on who/what is the proper referent object of security, be that individuals or states (Krause and Williams, 1997). Or to quote Hansen:

By 'saying security' the particular case is characterized as extraordinarily important, and it is moved into a special area where extraordinary means

can be used... This points at the *self-referring character* of security discourses, it is not the threat of military force which in itself characterizes the security discourse, it is the successful construction of a threat which ‘we’ have to act upon (1997, p. 376-377, italics in original).

Thus, a critical approach to security studies is one that recognizes an intersubjective relationship between Waltz’s three images whereby they co-constitute each other, yet at the same time appear to have a degree of distinction among them (or at least in how they are perceived by society at-large). Returning to Hansen, she proposes three “anti-methods” (deconstruction, genealogy, and intertextuality) for better understanding international politics that are of vital importance to our present inquiry, especially deconstruction as it allows us to navigate the hierarchical dichotomies that constitute Western thinking in order to undo them (1997, p. 372). Approaches to Latin American security tend to oscillate between emphasizing either the state or individuals as the proper object of desire for security; this article, however, seeks to deconstruct those objects and demonstrate how they are both one/whole and many/separate at the same time.

Moreover, a recent publication, the *Routledge Handbook of Latin American Security* (Mares and Kacowicz, 2016), includes a theoretical sub-section with chapters on neoliberal institutionalism, peripheral realism, constructivism, gender, and so forth. Curiously missing – or perhaps hidden – is a chapter on post-structuralist or post-modern approaches to Latin American security, which seems to imply a greater timelessness to Latin America, whereby it can possibly only be read through specific lenses: colonial, Cold War, and post-Cold War strategic competition. My objective in this article is to contribute towards the academic literature on Latin American security studies by employing post-structuralist approaches to security, which have typically been applied to comprehend U.S. foreign policy for certain regions (see Campbell, 1992; Der Derian, 2009b; Shapiro, 1997, 2009, p. 41-63; Solomon, 2015), but typically not in connection with Latin America. Overall, I seek to demonstrate the value of postmodern approaches to IR for understanding a nuanced situation such as the one currently unfolding in Venezuela. For the case in point, let us consider Michael Shapiro’s words when discussing the ideas of Foucault:

Michel Foucault put the matter of geographic partisanship succinctly when he noted that “territory is no doubt a geographical notion, but it is first of all a juridico-political one: the area controlled by a certain kind of power.” Now that global geographies are in flux, as political boundaries become increasingly ambiguous and contested, the questions of power and right are more in evidence with respect to the formerly pacified spaces of nation-states (1997, p. 15).

I go one step further in this study by proposing that these “global geographies” are not only ambiguous or in flux, but I also call into question to what extent “spaces of nation-states” were ever truly “pacified” and/or well-defined in Latin America. In other words, through the theoretical deliberations of the following sections my aim is to partially outline the *violent cartographies* that are unfolding in relation to Venezuela and to make sense of this moment in international politics. Shapiro defines this concept in his more recent work by stating:

Violent cartographies are the ‘historically developed, socially embedded interpretations of identity and space’ that constitute the frames within

which enmities give rise to war-as-policy (Shapiro, 1997: ix). Violent cartographies are thus constituted as inter-articulations of geographic imaginaries and antagonism, based on models of identity-difference (2007, p. 293-294).

In regard to Latin America, one could say that a very specific violent cartography has been charted in such region since the arrival of Europeans in 1492, a cartography aimed at claiming and reinterpreting enormous parcels of space for the purpose of extraction and exploitation (see Burkholder and Johnson, 2010; Galeano, 1997; Schoultz, 1998; Smith, 2008). The wars of independence imposed a new layer on that violent cartography as white Creole elites took the reins of state apparatuses and embarked on their own project to discipline Latin America's space and the bodies that occupied it, instituting various discourses and modes of citizenship in that process. In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine super-imposed another layer on the region's violent cartography as the U.S. and its imperial reach turned to the region as its own privileged space in which to constitute its masculinity, hegemony, and identity. To this list one could add many other layers: the Cuban revolution, Cold War, military right-wing dictatorships, Washington Consensus, and so forth. "The idea of Latin America" (Mignolo, 2005) is not an ahistorical or atemporal one – it is one that has been successively mapped out for centuries, and Venezuela's current situation cannot be divorced from this legacy. However, Latin America's historical legacy should not be taken as the sole means through which one can understand Venezuela either, as will be outlined in the following sections through my discussion of discourses, multilateralism, and other concepts.

Mainstream IR scholars might critique this article by saying it misses the material reality of the situation in Venezuela as they reduce it to a single word: oil. My rebuttal is that they miss the nuanced processes unfolding around this issue while they insist on viewing Venezuela as nothing more than an enormous oil lake, thereby failing to appreciate the importance of individuals, power relations, and inter-state power competitions. Relatedly, the objective of this article is not to position itself as either in favor or against any particular side of the conflict – rather, I seek to point out the contradictions and drive for power that characterize the rationales and actions of every party involved, from Maduro to Trump, and so forth. In a Foucauldian (1978) sense, power is not moral or partisan, it is instead a force or a tool that every entity within the global order wants to employ and utilize to serve their interests.

The election of Hugo Chávez as president of Venezuela in 1998 marked the beginning of a discursive and power dispute for the global positioning of Latin America and its people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is still ongoing today. Chávez broke Venezuela's preexisting compacted "Punto Fijo" democracy and inaugurated a populist and participatory form of democracy that continuously veered towards authoritarianism, while always trying to maintain the appearance of democracy (Balderacchi, 2017; Corrales and Penfold, 2007; Ellner, 2010, 2019; McCoy and Myers, 2004). Moreover, apart from shaking domestic political discourses and institutions to their core, Chávez challenged the place of both Venezuela and Latin America within the liberal international world order (see Corrales and Penfold, 2011). This rupture with pre-existing discourses unleashed a process which was continued by his successor, Nicolás Maduro, in an even more authoritarian manner and which has had far-reaching and complicated political effects that are in need of closer examination.

### **3. Humanitarianism and the Effects of Space-less/Time-less Narratives**

This section highlights how numerous hemispheric leaders have drawn upon “humanitarian” discourses to legitimize and rationalize their policy positioning *vis-à-vis* Venezuela, specifically the Maduro administration in early 2019. Overall, humanitarian discourses function as part of a greater process that constitutes bodies and places individual subjectivity within those bodies, thus resulting in a complicated process of embodiment that is neither apolitical nor objective (see Alexander, 1994, p. 14). More specifically, corporeally-centered discourses (such as international humanitarianism), and the resulting sanctions and international interventions that these discourses help enact, portray individuals in a passive manner or to use Foucault’s term as “docile bodies” (1977), thereby curtailing their agency and creating an end-effect of violence or subjugation of “the other”. For instance, let us analyze some of the tweets<sup>4</sup> offered by hemispheric leaders in support of interim president Juan Guaidó, such as Chilean President Sebastian Piñera on 30 April, 2019:

We reiterate our full support for President Guaido and democracy in Venezuela. Maduro’s dictatorship must end through a peaceful force, and within the constitution, of the Venezuelan people. This will restore freedoms, democracy, human rights and progress in Venezuela (El Comercio, 2019).

Or that of Colombian President Iván Duque on the same day:

We call on the military and the people of Venezuela to be on the right side of history, rejecting dictatorship and the usurpation of Maduro; uniting in search of freedom, democracy and institutional reconstruction, headed by the Venezuelan National Assembly and President Juan Guaidó (El Comercio, 2019).

As has been argued by many scholars (see Finnemore, 1996; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Vaughn, 2009), international humanitarian discourses are not a given, they have been gradually introduced and gradually imposed, and can be utilized to achieve both domestic and foreign political objectives. For instance, both Piñera and Duque have a strategic need to present themselves before their people as capable leaders who are responding promptly to the growing demands of Venezuelan migrants within their national borders. Calling upon an international humanitarian, or humanist, discourse also linguistically renders any actions they may undertake as inherently acceptable or well-intentioned, since these discourses draw upon a Kantian cosmopolitanism that views cross-border political action as having the *possibility* of improving the quality of human life. This is not to suggest that these world leaders have some nefarious or deeper, more sinister “real” intention; but rather to highlight the automatically positive way in which their discourses are framed and how that gives them political leverage within both the domestic and the international political arenas. Piñera’s employment of a “human rights” trope and Duque’s reflection on “freedom, democracy, and institutional reconstruction” serve to label the Maduro administration as unable to provide these benefits for individual Venezuelans and could legitimize the use of

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<sup>4</sup> Tweets are particularly useful for the argument being laid out here, because they represent a segment or piece of discourse that is thrown simultaneously into all of time and space, and has the ability to reach thousands, if not millions, of individuals. Tweets, much like discourses, can also be “deleted,” but once they have been published can never be completely erased, hence my employment of them here as pieces of qualitative data. Hashtags and abbreviations have been deleted from the tweets, so as to make them easier to read.

violence or the violation of another state's sovereignty. Humanitarian discourses do not inherently lead to negative outcomes, but they do hold the potential for enacting violence and suffering upon human bodies. Coincidentally, these bodies are the same ones labeled by these discourses as deserving protection. Bodies then are not given – they are materialized and rendered through discursive practices, and oftentimes in multiple and contradictory ways (Butler, 1993).

The employment of humanitarian discourses thus limits the agency of individual Venezuelan bodies as it discursively represents their subjectivity as something that has been taken away from them by the Maduro administration, and can only be returned once regime change occurs in Venezuela. For instance, the tweet of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on 30 April 2019 also encapsulates this line of reasoning:

Today interim President Juan Guaido announced start of Operación Libertad. The U.S. Government fully supports the Venezuelan people in their quest for freedom and democracy. Democracy cannot be defeated (El Comercio, 2019).

Pompeo's claims come off as dubious, at best, since he is an ex-CIA director and represents the administration of Donald Trump, which has made anti-immigrant rhetoric its policy hallmark. Furthermore, the nature of his humanitarian discourse and support for "people in their quest for freedom and democracy" deserves closer scrutiny, considering the Trump Administration has separated migrant children from their parents at the southern U.S. border in an effort to discourage immigration, with little regard for the possible long-term psychological damage that this could cause. All hypocrisy aside, this example illustrates how different bodies in different spaces can be discursively rendered in contradictory and nuanced ways to serve specific political aims, even if the intentions of those aims are questionable or not.

The efforts of Piñera, Duque<sup>5</sup> and Pompeo to characterize the situation in Venezuela as one of excessive and intolerable human suffering, though, was countered by supporters of the Maduro administration, as can be seen, for example, in the tweet of Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel on 30 April 2019 as well:

We reject this coup movement that aims to fill the country with violence. The traitors who have placed themselves at the forefront of this subversive movement have used troops and police with weapons of war on a public road in the city to create anxiety and terror (El Comercio, 2019).

Díaz-Canel, through his words, attempts to invoke a counter-narrative of the international humanitarian efforts of his fellow leaders as one of violence and increased suffering, thus articulating the agency and bodies of Venezuelan individuals in yet another manner. Thus, the situation in Venezuela gives all parties an opportunity to present themselves before their people as the "true" defenders and protectors of human rights and humanitarian interests. Moreover, their present political stance in defense of the Venezuelan people could possibly be used in the future, by any of these leaders, from Díaz-Canel to Duque, as a tool to legitimize their curtailing of civil liberties or violating human rights in defense of

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<sup>5</sup> Chile, Ecuador, and Peru have all moved recently to make it more difficult for Venezuelans to enter their national territory and to obtain legal work permits, while simultaneously championing the humanitarian cause of Venezuelan refugees.

Venezuelan, or another group of people. Likewise, these all-encompassing humanitarian narratives leave out the hierarchies and differences that exist within and between Venezuelan migrants across Latin America and the U.S., and that are based on race, gender, class, etc. Left out are also the words and personal feelings of the Venezuelan people and how they interpret and respond to these humanitarian discourses that are being placed upon them by various local and international political actors. These discourses in turn create a common center and identity around which all Venezuelans, and their agency, can be read and decoded, temporarily constituting them as oppressed people in search of freedom; yet the possibility for a shift in those discourses and a securitization of Venezuelan bodies still lingers.

The point is not to degrade the humanitarian efforts of any of these leaders; in fact, a recent Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) report (Ramsey and Sánchez-Garzoli, 2018) has lauded many Colombian and Brazilian officials for their humane responses to Venezuelan migrants. Instead, my aim is to underscore the internal contradictions these discourses hold and to deconstruct them in order to show how they give temporary stability to the public image of certain individuals and to the national identity of these countries, by extension. Venezuela provides Colombia, Peru, Chile, and so forth (and their respective citizenries) with a political center around which to rally and achieve specific (inter)national aims, such as increased standing or increased spending. Meanwhile, Venezuela also provides the same impetus for Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia as they draw upon the image of an anti-U.S. and anti-imperialism crusade to justify their public policy actions. In short, Humanitarian discourses lead to greater discourses in terms of space and time that serve to order how political processes are conducted.

### Space-less

To illustrate my argument about “space” and its function within the current situation in Venezuelan, and more broadly within IR, I reflect on a specific incident that occurred in the Brazilian town of Pacaraima, which sits close to the border with Venezuela. In August 2018, a mob of furious Brazilians went into the tenement housing built by Venezuelan asylum-seekers and set it ablaze, proceeding to violently chase the migrants back across the border into Venezuela as they chanted the Brazilian national anthem (Tsavkko Garcia, 2018). The then-governor of the state of Roraima, where Pacaraima is located, Suely Campos of the conservative right-wing Progressive Party (PP) in turn called upon the Brazilian federal government to close the border with Venezuela in an effort to stop the flow of asylum-seekers and institute “security” and stability (Tsavkko Garcia, 2018). For the case in point, let us examine Governor Campos’ tweet<sup>6</sup> on 18 April, 2018:

I was in Pacaraima today inspecting the border with Venezuela, after the motion I filed with the Supreme Court [to close the border]. 600 to 800 immigrants come in daily and less than 1/3 get a measles vaccine. The Union [Brazilian federal government] has not made this mandatory and so far has not manifested itself about making the vaccine mandatory (brackets mine).

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<sup>6</sup> The original tweet in Portuguese is available at the ex-governor’s twitter account: @SuelyCamposRR



The purpose of these anecdotes is to showcase how important conceptions of space have been for determining the actions of some individuals in response to Venezuela's current situation. As presented earlier, IR is a field primarily concerned with security and who is the proper object upon which to enact said security, whether that be individuals, states, etc. Socially conceived notions of space are inherently tied to this process, as IR attempts to establish coherent and finite delineations of space through imaginary boundaries. These boundaries then extend towards which bodies are allowed to take up space within the (in-ter)national space and how they are allowed to do so, for example stereotyped notions of diseased outsiders v. non-diseased insiders, as the governor's words above seem to suggest. Secondly, the preoccupation with spatial integrity and security is an extension of concerns about the human body and destiny, as argued by Nietzsche, and it circuitously gives agents and states a feeling of security in terms of their identity, standing, and future (see Der Derian, 2009, p. 155-159).

Therefore, millions of Venezuelans leaving a predefined space that has been ontologically predetermined as "theirs" and entering other spaces inherently arouses (in)security threats and discursive practices as was outlined above in terms of humanitarianism. Furthermore, "responding" to the influx of Venezuelan migrants gives individual states an opportunity to (re)assert their borders, their sense of self, and their ontological completeness. Thomas Nail defines borders by stating: "The border is 'a process of social division.' What all borders share in common, following this definition, is that they introduce a division or bifurcation of some sort into the world" (2016, p. 2). "Sense of self" can be taken in this context to mean possessing control over a parcel of space that a group inherently feels ownership and/or protectorship over. Thus, Governor Campos, despite being a woman, did not employ any humanitarian or feminized discourses to support her policy stance towards Venezuelan refugees, many of whom are women and children. On the contrary, to rationalize her actions, Campos called upon masculine conceptions of the nation-state and homeland as a territory that must be defended from outside intruders. The demonstrators who burned down temporary housing units and sang the Brazilian national anthem as they chased Venezuelans out of "their" space also invoked this same line of reasoning. I present here examples from Brazil, but similar xenophobic incidents, stemming from gendered and fixed notions of space, border, and nation, have been noted everywhere Venezuelans have sought refuge.

By "space-less" I mean that space possesses a continual and inherent quality in the way it drives the human psyche to partition the world and enact social divisions that must then be defended through violent practices in the creation of "self" and "other", or "insider" and "outsider". This process, though, is not universally encompassing and is subject, ironically, to changes across space. For instance, the legacy of white settler colonialism in Latin America has purposefully left blurry and difficult-to-defend borders that function to obfuscate social inequality. Historic problems around land demarcation and border fixing in Latin America even caused tension among the region's right-wing military dictatorships during the Cold War and have sparked numerous inter-state conflicts (see Centeno, 2002; Mares, 2001). From the Treaty of Tordesillas, to the diplomatic efforts of the Baron of Rio Branco at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the current situation in Venezuela, Latin American politics has been marked by an incessant and cumbersome need to make sense out of space.

The well-televised clash in February 2019 at the bridge between Colombia and Venezuela, where humanitarian aid was prevented from going into Venezuela is yet another example of how space and its representation plays a role in shaping Latin American political processes (Casey, 2019). The bridge incident gave both Colombian and Venezuelan leaders an opportunity to demonstrate their masculinity, draw upon their national identity, and *temporarily* enact a well-defined border between the two countries. Much of the debate about the situation in Venezuela also carries out these objectives, while reiterating the centrality of “the state” within global politics and giving it a concrete and perennial appearance, despite its abstract and imaginary state of being. IR, and in general diplomatic efforts, can be taken as a continuous process through which society reiterates its commitment to states as the proper way to divide space, and to individuals, from each other, thereby consecrating imaginary differences that are taken as central and determining of policy and politics. But as Nail argues, “the border is not reducible to space” (2016, p. 9), implying that time and other social constitutions play a role in the creation of states, bodies, and social division.

### Time-less

Similarly to how space and its concurrent effects for IR are often-ignored variables within mainstream scholarship, the same reading can be made of “time”. Within most positivist approaches to IR, time is taken as just there, running its course across the face of a clock with little effect on the framing and outcomes of human events. As R.B.J. Walker (1993) has pointed out, time is infused within IR theories typically as either marching towards a Judeo-Christian notion of salvation and redemption (neo-liberalism), or as functioning in a cyclical manner of repeated Greco-Roman tragedy (neo-realism), both stemming from a Western psychoanalytical basis. Our understanding of the “development” of time greatly shifts when one begins to view it as a socially constituted discourse that works to regiment how human beings experience and decipher events. Time has the ability to *appear* static, progressive, and/or cyclical, all at once – thus scaffolding our perception of politics.

With regard to the current situation in Venezuela, this process is being played out constantly. For example, time is static for the millions of Venezuelan migrants scattered across the globe who view the situation in their homeland as a constant scenario of hyperinflation, crisis, and destruction. For them, the “reconstruction” of their lives and self-images will be an arduous process as they attempt to integrate themselves into new societies. This process may ultimately prove futile as they may be permanently caught in a desire to return to a different time that does not exist: a pre-crisis Venezuela. For others, such as the U.S. government, time here functions in a progressive manner, allowing it to legitimize calls for regime change or violent engagements with/within Venezuela in an effort to bring about an “inevitable” alteration in the course of Venezuelan, hemispheric, and global history.

Finally, for many others time also appears simultaneously in a cyclical manner as it allows them to symbolically represent their stance *vis-à-vis* the situation in Venezuela in historic terms that have been previously utilized to discursively constitute Latin American realities. Specifically, a Cold War discourse has been employed to divide the debate here as between democracy/dictatorship, communism/capitalism, freedom/oppression, right/left, and so forth. Despite the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the red scare it jointly represents with Cuba has maintained a durable quality in its ability to galvanize political action throughout Latin America and set the parameters for what is, and what is not, acceptable behavior. To show this, below is the tweet of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, also on 30 April, 2019,

where he points out the support of Brazilian left-wing political parties for the Maduro administration in an effort to position himself both domestically and internationally:

Brazil sympathizes with the suffering Venezuelan people enslaved by a dictator supported by the PT [Worker's Party], PSOL [Socialism and Liberty Party] and their ideological allies. We support the freedom of this sister nation to finally live a true democracy (El Comercio, 2019, brackets mine).

The framing of the situation in Venezuelan as a Cold War struggle between polar opposite entities has been a ubiquitous feature of this on-going struggle because it conditions individuals on how to act, think, and respond to events.<sup>7</sup> Violent domestic clashes within Venezuela between the police and protestors then call to mind the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 or the Prague Spring of 1968, and in spite of the distance between these events in physical/linear time, they become closely related in the way people experience their temporality. The symbolic positioning of Venezuela within a Cold War discourse is not recent, though, as it has been employed since Hugo Chávez's early days in office and throughout the entire "Pink Tide" wave of governments, to explain the mentality of these Latin American leaders. The Cold War is both simultaneously over and still underway across the hemisphere as it can be deployed to discursively make sense of political events, even though it has technically been relegated to history books. The same line of reasoning is present, but from a contradictory perspective, in the words of Bolivian President Evo Morales from 30 April, 2019, as well:

We energetically condemn the coup attempt in Venezuela, by the right that is submissive to foreign interests. Surely, the courageous Bolivarian Revolution, headed by brother Nicolas Maduro, will impose itself against this new attack by the empire (El Comercio, 2019).

The word "empire" brings to mind multiple images and discourses of foreign aggression and intervention, and has been used widely since the Cold War against presumed foreign adversaries. The point in the preceding sections has been overall to delineate humanitarian discourses and then place them within a post-structuralist conceptualization of space and time to show how these variables come together to partially render Venezuelans as docile bodies within global politics. Docile bodies that can be used for political ends – by every party involved – as they further state-centric visions of (inter)national power and aid in the production of Shapiro's violent cartographies.

#### **4. Multilateralism and the Future of Global Hegemony**

Now I turn my discussion towards a closer examination of "multilateralism" in this context, to then place my arguments within the greater IR debate about global hegemony and power at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Multilateralism is generally seen as a positive force that seeks to reinforce the international liberal world order. When individuals conjure images of multilateralism in their psyche, they typically picture the United Nations, G8 meetings, or international conferences designed to address the "big questions" of global governance. According to neoliberals, multilateralism and its resultant cooperation are some of the

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<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Maduro's government is able to internally enact a cyclical discourse of U.S. imperialism and aggression to explain and decode the present situation.

key forces that work to cement global order. I, however, suggest that instead of viewing multilateralism as something of the center-left (think UNHCR) or a force that joins right and left (think BRICS), we conceptualize it as a force that can work from any point of the political spectrum, or across it, to achieve political aims.

For instance, Trump and his foreign policy approach have generally been seen as possessing a strong dislike and aversion towards multilateralism. This view though is myopic because, although Trump has shown distaste for specific types of multilateralism, mainly forums he perceives as leftist or presenting undue burdens, such as the Paris Climate Agreement or NATO; he has still been willing to participate in them or entertain efforts which he views as favorable to his personal standing. Venezuela is a good example of this, since Trump views regime change in Venezuela as having great potential and providing ample opportunities for U.S. strategic and economic interests, which include but go well beyond oil. To achieve regime change in Venezuela, the Trump Administration has joined right-wing leaders in Chile (Piñera), Colombia (Duque), Brazil (Bolsonaro), and so forth, displaying a cordial manner of engagement that he has not demonstrated towards Angela Merkel or Enrique Peña Nieto, for example. Multilateralism, done well, typically tends to present participants with certain discursive benefits: 1) presenting them as engaged world leaders that have “a seat at the table” in important decision-making processes, 2) providing them with a cover for domestic policy actions, and 3) allowing them to reassure their domestic political status because they possess some kind of information, knowledge, or credibility that others lack.

In other words, for individuals like Duque or Piñera, engaging with Trump on the perceived threat to hemispheric democracy and stability that is Venezuela, allows them to present themselves before their domestic constituencies in a masculine light as defender of noble causes and the physical integrity of the homeland. This masculine image could then be used discursively to push for other policy proposals or reforms, or even to justify violent domestic or international actions. Masculinity can also be translated from discursive into concrete advantages, as leaders who are perceived as taking “tough” stances are typically better assessed than those that are viewed as “weak”. Proximity to the hegemon and its military power also creates a certain image and possibility for spillover of technological, military, and economic benefits. Participating with the U.S. in its crusade to rid South America of a perceived communist menace allows these Latin American states and their leaders to reassert their core identity and view of themselves, while their extensions and peripheral boundaries extend discursively towards that of the regional hegemon creating a mixed self-image. Engagement in multilateralism blurs time and space, and leads to a semblance where it is increasingly difficult to separate the U.S. from Colombia, or Brazil, and so forth, in terms of who is acting or making decisions, and who is to receive blame or credit for outcomes.

Multilateralism shakes the apparent structure of states as it brings them closer to some states and individuals, discursively speaking at least, and creates the illusion of distance from others. Multilateralism, thus, holds the potential to make leaders and states feel encouraged in their ontological sense of themselves and their identity, and even more importantly it affords a fledging (but often intense) notion of security through the bonds and connections it tenuously builds (Mitzen, 2006). Through this case study of Venezuela, one can observe how multilateralism both shakes and stabilizes the imagined/abstract compositions of individuals, states, and the international system, and how it is one of many modes or types of discourses that are utilized for that end. My focus here has been on outlining how the Trump administration and its center-right allies have embarked on this process to

displace the Maduro administration, but the same analysis can be made of the multilateralism that has been inspired in Venezuela and its allies during the past two decades. For instance, through multilateral forums, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), Venezuela has also been able to engage in a discursive rendering of itself as closer to (and further away) from certain states, as well as defender of particular principles. This goes back to my initial point that multilateralism should not be viewed as having a partisan or ideological face, as it can be molded to serve numerous discourses and political objectives: some humanitarian, some non-humanitarian, and some even both of these concomitantly. Stated differently, the field of IR must decouple multilateralism from its traditional normative connotations and view it a political process whereby leaders and states frame particular narratives, while excluding others.

Turning towards the U.S. specifically, the current situation in Venezuela affords it some distinctive discursive and strategic opportunities to make up for losses elsewhere in terms of its identity and sense of place within the international system. Moreover, involvement in Venezuelan affairs allows the U.S. to smooth out, or paint differently, at least one small part of its violent cartography, which has become particularly gruesome since the beginning of George W. Bush's global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq. More concretely, in a world where the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the discourse it sought to enact have failed (due to Trump's own handling), but where the Chinese Road and Belt initiatives are thriving, the U.S. – simply put – needs a win. By “win” here I mean an area of the world where it can reaffirm its masculinity and hegemony and feel, at least temporarily and spatially, secure in its self-image and future. Latin America has historically been the place where the U.S. has tested its hegemonic capacities and strategies and where it has gone back to after setbacks in other locations to regain its lost sense of self. Or as Cynthia Weber writes:

Caribbean cases could be paired with other U.S. concerns, reading, for example, the Cuban case in the context of the Cold War generally, the Dominican invasion as “Vietnam writ small” (Wiarda, 1975: 835)... Grenada as a simulated success in light of the failures in Lebanon and Nicaragua, Panama as a preface to the Persian Gulf War, and Haiti as a diplomatic success to balance out the diplomatic failures in Bosnia (Weber 1999, p. 5).

Could Venezuela then be an opportunity to discursively make up for U.S. failure, or inability, to act in Syria, Crimea, or other places? If Obama unsuccessfully pivoted to Asia, could Trump then be pivoting towards Latin America as the place to remake the image of U.S. hegemony in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's multipolar world order? This pivot, though, may not be welcome by all in the region, as it holds the potential for violence; but it may become a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy initiatives nonetheless with an upcoming presidential election in 2020. Trump kicked off his last precedential campaign attacking Mexican immigrants and has made curtailing immigration from Latin America a central narrative of his administration. He is keenly aware of the utility that Latin America holds for advancing political narratives within the U.S.'s intertwined domestic/foreign political spheres. Trump's sudden empathy for the suffering of the Venezuelan people might at first seem paradoxical, considering his disregard for the thousands of immigrants pleading for help at the southern U.S. border, but both of these processes are deeply connected, because they function in tandem to legitimize policies, violence, and continued regional hegemony. Moreover, the U.S. is not the only global power involved, as both China and Russia are closely engaged with Venezuela through their multilateral efforts and will read the outcome of events there as a

measure of continued U.S. influence, or lack thereof, in the region. In summary, this section has focused on delineating how multilateralism can come from all sides and function in the production of global hegemonic narratives as it partially assists in the constitution of individuals, states, and the international system.

## 5. Conclusion, or “Chronicle of a Death Foretold”

In November 2005, Chávez famously declared at the Summit of the Americas meeting in Mar del Plata, Argentina that he was there to bury the Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement (Smith 2008, p. 353-354). Chávez might have been correct in the short-term as he and other Pink Tide leaders strategically and discursively out-maneuvered the Bush Administration and thwarted the negotiations; but they ultimately failed to upend U.S. regional hegemony. Latin America enjoyed a considerable level of egalitarianism in the early post-Cold War environment of the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992), which encouraged opportunities for (inter-)regional cooperation. However, the region’s long-term policy options might be curtailed by an anxious U.S. foreign policy community that increasingly perceives the global multipolar order as turning against it, with the apparent rise of China and other actors.

In this article, I employed Waltz’s three images and deconstructed them by arguing that they are not mutually exclusive levels, but rather discursively co-constituted entities that reinforce and affect each other. From there, my analysis outlined how individual Venezuelan refugees can be painted within grand narratives that exclude hierarchy and nuance, or within contradictory humanitarian discourses that demonstrate how bodies are at the fore-front of global power rivalries. What is more, this study nuanced our collective approach towards time, space, and multilateralism, as well as their subsequent impact on international politics and security. Returning to Hansen, she argues that a post-structuralism approach to security underscores a difficulty in political decision-making, because it does not lead to scant and diametrically opposed policy options that leaders can mechanically select from. On the contrary, post-structuralism challenges us to revisit our epistemology and ontology and leaves numerous policy options open (Hansen 1997: 384). In many ways, that has been my objective here as I described the paradoxes and incongruences that make up today’s “crisis” in Venezuela by focusing on the relations of power and identities that it helps to both stabilize and alter. Hopefully, the preceding sections have functioned to interpret the current “crisis” in Venezuela as not a singular event or series of events, but rather as the product of various and opposed discourses that shift depending on one’s vantage point. I do not claim to have clairvoyant abilities to decide what the future will hold for Venezuela, but we can be certain that the struggle for Venezuela will continue as part of various violent cartographies and processes that seek to reaffirm Latin America’s place within the global order.

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