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A DISPOSABLE STATE?

GENESIS OF A RENTIER MICRO-STATE IN THE MINING ZONE OF LAS CLARITAS (VENEZUELA)

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Abstract

In Venezuela, numerous armed groups known as *sindicatos* have taken advantage of the weakness of the central state to control mining areas. In so doing, these groups have established forms of rentier micro-states by maintaining sovereign functions (police, tax, customs, etc.) and taking over public services (water, electricity, health, education, transport, etc.). In this contribution, we provocatively ask to what extent such rentier micro-states can be deemed disposable. Through an ethnographic and documentary study of the Las Claritas mining area, we consider that, if they are indeed disposable, it is not so much because the Venezuelan state can dispose of them at will (although a coup de force by the Venezuelan army should not be excluded), but rather because the political organization required for mining can cease to exist once the subsoil resources have been depleted, thereby turning these areas into vulnerable and potentially ephemeral rentier micro-states.

Keywords

State, ASM, Mining, Venezuela, Armed group, Rentier

Introduction

In his publication on “degrees of statehood”, Clapham points out that some entities we consider as states in international relations lack the characteristics of a state, while others that are not recognized as such can still have those qualities (Clapham 1998, 143). Both the literature on artisanal small-scale mining (ASM)¹ and the one on areas under the control of armed groups question the status of the territories they study. According to some research, these are deviant or rebellious spaces over which the central state has lost control (Collier and Hoeffler 2005, 626; Allal, Dorronsoro, and Grojean 2021). They are said to have emerged where the state is “absent” (López 2017), “failing” (Le Billon, Roa-García, and López-Granada 2020, 21), “weak” (Aliyev 2016) or in “crisis” (Mawowa 2013, 921), in a form of “parallel state” (Leeds 1996; Goldstein 2003, 200), of “para-state” (Tull 2005, 127) or an informal “shadow state” (Peluso 2018, 12). In other research, those who govern these territories appear on the contrary as allies on whom the central state relies, in a form of externalization, of “subordination” (Andres Antillano, Fernandez-Shaw, and Castro 2018, 168) or “delegation” of its prerogatives (Carey, Mitchell, et Lowe 2013, 250; Grajales 2017, 347). In still other research, and possibly in a complementary way to the above, collaboration is not calculated but established, *de facto*, little by little. This results in mixed forms of exercise of authority, sometimes called “hybrid state” (Jaffe 2013, 735), “complementary governance” (Idler et Forest 2015, 3), “crimilegality” (Schultze-Kraft 2016, 34), “relative dissidence” (Grajales 2017, 333), “twilight between state and society” (Lund 2006, 686), “symbiotic relationship” where both parties benefit from each other (Ebus and Martinelli 2022, 109) and occasionally “criminal peace”, i.e., a peace maintained paradoxically by those whom the official state designates as bandits (Bobeá 2016, 73).

In this contribution, we aim to untangle the threads of sovereignty in such areas, in other words to assess “who controls whom”. In particular, we seek to understand to what extent we can speak, about this kind of territory, of “puppet state” (Abdullaev 2004; Ivanel 2016), or on the contrary of “proto-state” (Ebus and Martinelli 2022, 107), seen by the central state as a thorn in the side, of “embryonic state” (Olson 1993; Kingston and Spears 2004; Mampilly 2011, 38; Péclard and Mechoulan 2015, 17) where “bandits” are becoming “princes” (Diderot 1751, 898; Tilly 1985, 172-73), or even, provocatively, of “disposable state”, a state that each of the stakeholders could get rid of at will.

Inspired by the definitions of previous authors (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940, 7; M. Sahlins 1968, 6; Wright and Johnson 1975, 267; Weber [1922] 1976, 29; Gailey 1985; Bourdieu 1993, 51-52; Godelier 1999, 20; Bouchard 2011; Balandier 2013), we understand here the state as the sovereign political institution specific to a population in a given territory², an institution reflecting both the concentration of power in the hands of one or more individuals, called the government,

¹ An acronym from the scientific literature that stands for “Artisanal and Small-scale Mining”.

² Many anthropologists consider that there is a critical mass above which a society cannot exist without a form of state (Fortes et Evans-Pritchard 1940, 7; Sahlins 1968, 6; Godelier 1999, 20).

and at the same time the delegation of this power to an administration that successfully uses coercion (physical, psychological, symbolic, legal, etc.)³ to maintain the primary concentration of power.

To answer our question, we focus on the Las Claritas area in Venezuela. On the border with Guyana and Brazil, this area, named after the same city, covers 6,820 square kilometers⁴, with a population estimated at 25,000 at the time of our survey⁵.

As early as the 19th century, the Las Claritas area was the object of artisanal mining by the local indigenous population and by Venezuelans from other regions (Koplan and al. 2009; Lozada 2016; Romero and Ruiz 2018). According to the public policies undertaken, several national and foreign companies have since continued to coexist along with small independent productions. However, a 2011 decree reserved "mining exploitation and exploration" for the state (Presidencia de la República 2011). Without sufficient resources to take over the entire foreign extractive industry, the government finally allowed a few companies, mainly Chinese and Canadian, to intervene at the margins, but above all left the field open to an expansion of small- and medium-scale artisanal mining in the country, and in Las Claritas in particular.

In 2013, the death of Hugo Chávez and the fall in the price of oil led Venezuela into an economic, social and political crisis in which the country still finds itself today⁶. In the hope of regaining financial sovereignty, diversifying its resources and evading U.S. sanctions, the Venezuelan government launched in 2016 an open-pit mining mega-project called the Orinoco Mining Arc on a surface covering 12% of the country, including the Las Claritas area (Presidencia de la República 2016). While the president "Nicolás Maduro has [not yet] provided information on the companies operating in the Arc, [nor on] the amount of gold produced and exported" (Ávila García 2021, 228), many armed groups have asserted their presence on the same Orinoco Arc (Lozada 2016; Matamoros 2016; Gabbert and Martínez 2018; Rosales 2019; Ávila García 2021).

³ We have not taken up the idea present in Weber's definition of the "claim" of legitimate physical coercion in order to be able to include in our definition Bourdieu's "symbolic violence" which, in our view, is not necessarily claimed. Nor could we retain the idea present in Weber, and later in Bourdieu, of legitimacy that goes hand in hand with claim. Indeed, opposition movements can also claim legitimacy for the physical or psychological coercion they exert, but without success, these movements cannot achieve statehood.

⁴ It corresponds approximately to the parish of San Isidro in the municipality of Sifontes.

⁵ According to the health authorities on site.

⁶ In less than ten years, the price of the bolivar has been divided by 8 billion ([according to https://www.donneesmondiales.com/amerique/venezuela/inflation.php](https://www.donneesmondiales.com/amerique/venezuela/inflation.php), taken between 2013 and the end of 2022), more than 6.8 million inhabitants, nearly a quarter of the population, and in particular the upper and educated classes, have left the country (according to <https://www.r4v.info/es/document/r4v-america-latina-y-el-caribe-refugiados-y-migrantes-venezolanos-en-la-region-agosto-2022>), the unemployment rate has risen from 6% to 50% (according to <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/794694/taux-de-chomage-venezuela/>), and public services are failing (water, electricity, health, education, etc.). These statistics paint a picture of a country in which poverty and vulnerability have played a major role in recent years.

Most of these groups, including the one present in Las Claritas, are called *sindicatos*. They take their name from a struggle in the years 2006-2008 between the trade unions of major companies to benefit from national investment in large-scale infrastructure works (hydroelectric plant, bridge, stadium, residential complex, etc.) (Romero and Ruiz 2018, 111). Attracted by the potential income, individuals from Venezuelan banditry and Colombian armed groups (among which some were disbanded by the 2016 FARC peace agreement) joined these trade unions. But as the number of major infrastructure projects and the windfall from them dwindled, the *sindicatos* gradually looked for other outlets. Taking advantage of an increase in the price of gold and diamonds, of the inefficiency of state institutions in the field of extraction, of the "security breakdown" in the country (Polga-Hecimovich 2022, 157;168) and of an historical corruption culture in Venezuela⁷ (Gates 2009), the leaders of the *sindicatos* redirected from 2011/2012 (when the country nationalized the exploitation of the subsoil) most of their activities towards illegal mining (Romero and Ruiz 2018, 113). This redirection was thus made possible not only because the central state was happy to benefit from the collusive exchange with these armed groups, but also because the Venezuelan authorities failed to take the place of the *sindicatos* in the daily social organization of the area. In other words, the *sindicatos* perceived and continue to regard the central state as "weak" or "fragile", i.e. "[lacking] institutional capacity and political will" (Gurses et Mason 2010, 145), facing difficulties to "achieve state goals, [such as] security and development" (Kassab 2015, 2), dealing with a "capacity to exercise effective control over its territory and subjects [...] severely impaired" (Aliyev 2016, 502).

From a methodological point of view, our approach is mainly ethnographic, in the sense of "a study [...] of social interactions, and behaviors of small societies, involving participation and observation" (Naidoo 2012). It is based on our on-site presence for a humanitarian mission in August and September 2022. However, this did not constitute a cover for a research field, or a means of reaching an otherwise inaccessible field of investigation. We did not anticipate our inquiry: it was not the subject of a prior research protocol, nor was it validated before by an ethics committee. The opportunity to collect testimonies and to analyze data took shape during our presence on the scene, through the richness of the exchanges, and is a collateral result of our humanitarian work. Our responsibilities allowed us to access the mines, to observe, to talk to families who lived there, as well as with members of the *sindicato* of Las Claritas. We interacted with many of our colleagues, who themselves lived in the area and were familiar with local social dynamics, and we were careful to daily record our observations. The reliability of the collected testimonies depended on the status of the reported facts: direct observation or rumor. If it was a rumor, it was either further investigated and cross-checked by other statements or documents, or eliminated. However, we felt that using this ethnographic material was of scientific interest. Our colleagues were aware of our parallel status of researcher in our own country, but when it came to other interlocutors we met, we generally did

⁷ According to Transparency International, Venezuela had the highest corruption score among 180 countries in 2023, surpassed only by Somalia : <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/index/ven>

not have the opportunity to mention it. On the other hand, specifying our dual status could have been dangerous, undermining the organization that employed us, and we only made it explicit when a sufficient climate of trust was established, or on the contrary when we felt that referring to it would allow us to open mental or physical doors. The attitude we have adopted is not without ethical questions, but it seemed to us the only possible way to approach this kind of field (Cefaï and Costey 2009; Siméant-Germanos 2022). In so doing, we are following a path that places us among those researchers who consider that prohibiting the study of certain objects for moral, security or administrative reasons indirectly plays into the hands of the powers that be and runs counter to scientific duty. Moreover, we thought it was possible to do so because our interlocutors were not put at risk. The information they shared with us was known to the population of the area, and as such not sensitive. The pseudonymization in this contribution adds, if it were necessary, a layer of protection for the individuals concerned.

Our approach is also documentary and based on NGO reports, investigative journalistic articles and academic writings. Those documents remain fragile in their reliability because they do not systematically cite their sources (among other reasons in order to protect these same sources), not always recontextualize the origin of their interlocutors, and, without necessarily having been able to access the areas in question, often rely on indirect testimonies. In this kind of territory where rumors circulate quickly, where access is highly controlled, where suspicion is strong, being able to count on first-hand observations is a privilege.

In order to shed light on the balance of power between the *sindicato* and the central Venezuelan state, we propose to divide our article into three parts, which will take us into the day-to-day workings of Las Claritas. The first part describes the *sindicato*'s government and its relations with the Venezuelan authorities; the second discusses how the sovereign functions are carried out in Las Claritas; the third details the way in which the administration, through the provision of public services, works.

1 – Unofficially recognized government

According to several local sources, the *sindicato* of Las Claritas is run by three associated *pranes*⁸ ("los socios"): El Juancho, El Viejo and Humbertico⁹. By dividing up control of the territory and concentrating power, they constitute a form of government. How did they get there? What are the attributes of their power today (place of exercise and personal protection in particular)? To what extent is the institution they represent sovereign, in the sense that they are not subject to a higher authority? These are the questions we propose to answer in this first part.

⁸ *Pran* is an acronym for "preso rematado, asesino nato", which literally means "prisoner who has served his sentence, born killer". The term is commonly used in Venezuela's mining areas.

⁹ We have not anonymized the nicknames and, further on, the names of the *pranes*, as they are locally public figures. Explicitly mentioning them also makes it possible to maintain the link with other journalistic or academic articles on Las Claritas in which their name appears.

At the entrance to the largest mining area (towards the places called Cuatro Muertos, Mesones, La Draga, Siete Estrellas, etc.) stands El Mecate. This roadblock consists of a shelter measuring about five by ten meters, made of wooden posts and a simple roof. Beneath it, around tables, plastic chairs, walkie-talkies and a few motorcycles, are posted 24 hours a day a dozen or so individuals, nicknamed *los perros* (literally watchdogs), obviously between twenty and thirty-five years of age, some carrying pistols on their belts. As soon as they see a vehicle or a pedestrian, one of the *perros* stands up to stop them, ask them why they're passing, and decide whether or not they're allowed to continue. Opposite El Mecate stands a large white house, that of El Viejo (literally the old man, although he's only about 40). He is believed to be named Johan José Romero, aka Johan Petrica (Yajure and Sequera 2015; Acosta and al. 2022), later renamed Darwin Guevara, then nicknamed El Viejo or El Viejo Darwin (López 2017; Boon, Ramírez, and Meléndez 2022), active at this location since 2016.

At kilometer 88 of *Troncal 10* (the road leading to Brazil), you will find La Gallera, which marks the entrance to a housing estate. Behind a fence is a tiny wooden shelter, smaller than the one at El Mecate. Three or four young men stand guard over the first house, a large white pavilion with a terrace, the headquarters of El Juancho and Humbertico.

Humbertico, whom we had the opportunity to meet, outlines some of the local attributes of success. He drives an imposing white car, with tinted windows, wears a gold chain around his neck, and a few gold teeth. Like the other members of the *sindicato*, he is dressed in clothes similar to those of the general population. Confirming the fact that many *pranes* are believed to be former members of the FARC or ELN (American Enterprise Institute 2017; Martínez 2017; Polga-Hecimovich 2019), he claims, like El Juancho, to have been born in Colombia. Stating to be 40 years old and to have been in the country for 18 years, he is said to have inherited the name of his father, another *pran*, himself called Humberto Martes, who a few years ago managed the city center of Las Claritas (López 2017). During our exchange, he remains discreet, saying: "If I don't answer, it's not because I'm silent, but I'm observing." Cautious, he and his associates cultivate secrecy.

Like El Viejo, El Juancho also has several names. Born in Colombia, he is known as both Juan Gabriel Rivas Núñez (Ramírez, Poliszuk, and Segovia 2022) and Wilson Starling Aponte Rodriguez (Perdomo and al. 2019). This variety of identities indicates not only the need to erase the traces of the past, but also the ties that bind the *pranes* with the Venezuelan administration, which grants them official documents allowing them to travel in the rest of the country.

El Juancho is considered to be the most politicized of the three partners and, from this point of view, their main leader (López 2017). Often out of Las Claritas, he is used to "meeting with representatives of the regional government and the security forces in a normal way" (Transparencia Venezuela 2022, 102). If we consider that diplomacy is not limited, as some have argued, solely to relations between internationally recognized states (Bjola and Kornprobst 2013, 4), but that it includes all types of actors and at the same time merges with public relations (Signitzer and Coombs 1992, 138; Wilcox 2003, 378), then the *sindicato*, like other dissident or armed groups (Zartman

and Faure 2011; Coggins 2015; Yarchi 2016), maintains diplomatic relations with Venezuelan officials. In a "shopkeeper" approach (Nicolson [1939] 1950, 52), El Juancho is said to regularly travel to northern cities (such as Tumeremo, El Callao or Ciudad Bolívar) to negotiate or renegotiate the agreement that binds him and his associates with the official Venezuelan authorities and the leaders of neighboring *sindicatos*. Except at the cost of a lengthy immersion, trust built up with the players, or even participation in the activities (which we were unable to engage in given the duration of our investigation), it is not possible to know the precise content of this agreement, nor its form (oral or written). However, several concordant testimonies enable us to grasp its objective: to share the gold extracted from the mines.

This perspective implies first and foremost a non-aggression pact, or even reciprocal protection. In exchange for a lump sum of gold handed over to the governor of Bolívar state and other intermediary officials (Ebus and Martinelli 2022, 113), and perhaps the exploitation of one or more prolific deposits, the Venezuelan armed forces on the ground would be ordered to let the *sindicato* implement whatever policies it wished on the territory of Las Claritas, and thus manage the fruits of mining extraction. Reciprocal protection is also reflected in the support of the *sindicato* members to the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV), the political party of Nicolás Maduro. They encourage the population to vote for the candidates from this party, by managing, on election day, the operation of the polling stations, and by limiting opposition candidacies. In this restricted sense, the *sindicato* resembles the "pro-government militias" described by Carey *et alii* (Carey, Mitchell, et Lowe 2013).

But this mutual protection is also a fool's game. At national level, Nicolás Maduro has launched, through a "necropolitical approach" (Ávila 2018; Hanson et Zubillaga 2021), operations to combat armed groups, such as "*Manos de metal*"¹⁰ in 2018 and "*Escudo Bolivariano*"¹¹ in 2022¹²¹³. At the same time, he declared on Tuesday, October 15, 2019 on national television, from the Miraflores presidential palace, that a mine would be assigned to each of the country's Chavista governors¹⁴, which is only possible by negotiating with the current owners, in this case the leaders of the *sindicatos*. This fool's game is sometimes accompanied by the encouragement of third parties such as the national oil company, the national electricity company, or foreign mining companies to set up operations so that all stakeholders can benefit from their industrial techniques. The Siete Estrellas mine in Las Claritas, for example, was home to a Chinese company whose discreet and

¹⁰ Metal hands.

¹¹ Bolivarian shield.

¹² The website of the Venezuelan Ministry of the Armed Forces itself states that this is an operation to "put an end to delinquent operations": <http://www.ejercito.mil.ve/?p=8590>

¹³ Ministry of Defense website: <https://www.defensa.com/venezuela/venezuela-lanza-simultaneamente-operaciones-roraima-2022-autana>, or <https://ceofanb.mil.ve/operacion-autana-destruye-pista-clandestina-en-el-amazonas/>

¹⁴ See, for example, <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/maduro-asignara-una-mina-de-oro-a-cada-gobernacion-chavista/>, accessed February 20, 2023.

logo-free presence could only be imagined with the backing of the *sindicato* and the Venezuelan government.

Depending on the evolution of the supply of goods, the drying up of certain deposits or, on the contrary, the increase in the quantities extracted, adjustments to the agreements and new meetings are regularly necessary. Isolated clashes between the *sindicatos* and the national army, between the *sindicatos* and indigenous peoples¹⁵ or between the different *sindicatos* themselves dot diplomatic relations on the ground. Although their objectives are not always explicit, these intimidations maintain pressure on the opposing parties and allow the Venezuelan government to justify the control operations it has announced. Once numerous - opposition deputy Américo De Grazia counted some thirty massacres in the region without an identified sponsor in twelve years (Risquez 2018) - these skirmishes have gradually become less frequent, marking a kind of normalization of the situation and reciprocal acceptance of a *status quo*.

Could the Venezuelan army shut down the *sindicato* any minute? Not only do the landlocked nature and meanders of Las Claritas protect the *pranes*, but the agreements they negotiate seem to be their best defense. If the central government were to succeed in making the *sindicato* disappear, it would more probably be, according to us, the consequence of a gradual dismemberment of certain areas and leaders, via financial arrangements and/or targeted raids. Thereby, the diplomatic meetings, agreements and skirmishes are not evidence of the subordination of the *sindicato* to the Venezuelan state, but on the contrary the indication, at least at that moment, of a balanced relationship and a permanent adjustment of each of the parties (as many states of the Westphalian international system do among themselves).

As will be discussed further in the following sections, the members of the *pranes* certainly collaborate with the Venezuelan state on several issues in a partially symbiotic relationship of interdependence, acting as the "state-parallel militias" depicted by Aliyev (Aliyev 2016). However, the *sindicato* also fight the central state on other fronts (as any sovereign political institution does with its neighbors). The three *socios* do not wait for orders and do not ask permission from Venezuelan officials to implement political measures in the territory they control. In other words, the *sindicato* is indeed the entity that, for the time being, "gives and breaks the law" (Bodin 1579), "decides on the exception" (Schmitt [1922] 2005, 5), and is sovereign in Las Claritas.

It is all the easier for the official government to recognize the three *socios* as trusted partners on certain issues since they do not defend a political ideology supposed to collectively benefit their fellow citizens, nor do they claim a right to secession in order to assert a cultural identity, a language, or a history. They are not rebel groups that seek to overthrow the Venezuelan government through a civil war. The members of the *sindicatos* aim first and foremost to personally derive material and

¹⁵ A term to be understood in its Spanish sense "*indigenas*", designating the indigenous inhabitants of the area, with distinct languages and anchored in the territory for several centuries.

financial benefit from the failure or absence of the central state in a circumscribed territory and as such remain more akin to autocrats or "sedentary bandits" (Olson 1993, 568) than insurgents.

2 – Working sovereign functions

In this second part, we aim to bring together the activities that effectively help to establish the *sindicato's* sovereignty (police, defense, justice, taxation, etc.) over the territory of Las Claritas.

In practice, the *sindicato's* main lever of power, inherited from the activities of Colombian armed groups and more broadly from a feudal mode of operation where taxes are due to the lord in exchange for his protection, is called the *vacuna* (the vaccine). Its other name, *la causa* (the cause), has its origin in the money which an individual sequestered in prison must pay for his peace of mind. But the principle is always the same: if you are vaccinated, you are protected (Andrés Antillano 2015, 27). The *vacuna* mainly concerns mine owners and traders. In Las Claritas, one can find mini-markets, bakeries, bars, restaurants, pharmacies, garages, drugstores, brothels, hairdressers, household appliances, clothing shops, care shops, repair shops, gold buying and selling shops, etc. all of whom must be "vaccinated". Kristof, a former gold trader in the city, claims that the amount of the *vacuna* was one gram of gold per week (about fifty dollars). Karol, a 1000 square meters mine owner, announces that she now has to pay two grams per week to have the right to exploit her mine. Others pay on a percentage basis. Juan, a former miner, says his employer had to pay 10% of his earnings. However, employees in shops or extraction areas are exempt from the *vacuna* since their employer pays it for them. Our humanitarian organization and other structures from the Venezuelan central state, due to the services provided, were not subject to it either.

Despite the reputation of a fixed and compulsory tax, its amount actually is variable and, partially, negotiable. It depends on the times, the places and, more broadly, on a more or less threatening balance of power individually established between *sindicato* members and owners. In fact, apart from the indigenous people, most of the resident population of Las Claritas has only arrived in the last few months or years (as evidenced by its doubling in ten years). Unlike the inhabitants of the Colombian countryside who were subjected to the presence of armed groups in a captive manner (Aristizábal and al. 2012), the *Clariteños* (demonym of Las Claritas) mostly have no family, material or sentimental ties, and are free to come or leave the area. Elisa, a resident affirms that "if someone lives here, it's because he or she wants to", and another inhabitant uses the metaphor of "open prison" to describe this presence of freedom in constraint (Ramírez, Poliszuk, and Segovia 2022). When the *vacuna* became too expensive for Kristof, he decided to leave before returning a few years later for another job. By increasing its rates, the *sindicato* had temporarily lost the equivalent of a citizen-client and therefore an income streamline.

Moreover, those with whom the *sindicato* has the most difficulty are the indigenous people who, having nowhere else to move, continue to safeguard their territory and preserve a form of independence. Within the parish of San Isidro, there are several reserves, such as Inaway, Araimatepuy, Warumapate and Joboshirima, officially protected by multiple national laws and

decrees (Presidencia de la República 2003; 2005), but above all defended by the courage of its members. Lissbeth Boon's team tells the story of how Cecilio Bigott, an indigenous leader, did not hesitate to remain under the yoke of a gun to save his community (Boon, Ramírez, and Meléndez 2022). Rimo¹⁶, another indigenous person, confirmed that his people owed their strength to the fact that they did not fear death. These reserves are still inhabited today by individuals with different languages and traditions, sometimes from neighboring Guyana or from Gran Sabana, but often referred to as Pemones. Despite the desires of the *sindicato*, some mining enclaves in the parish of San Isidro, such as La Tapaya, remain controlled by the indigenous people themselves and out of reach of the *vacuna*. From our observations, the relationship between the indigenous people and the *sindicato* is reduced to a bare minimum, the indigenous people seeking as much as possible to escape the control of the *pranes*.

Police, justice and, ultimately, security - through the handling of weapons and the control of physical violence - are the core business of the *sindicato*, the *raison d'être* of the *vacuna*, and the original know-how of the *pranes*. In the territories controlled by the *sindicatos*, there are numerous accounts of physically violent justice (amputation of fingers and hands for some, even chainsawing of whole bodies for others) (Jiménez 2020). Whether these testimonies are real or fantasized, the mere fact that the inhabitants of Las Claritas can imagine that the situations reported are true is enough. In a way, security is ensured by the deterrence that such imaginings convey. In recent years, the situation seems to have stabilized. According to several interlocutors on the ground, the *sindicato* is increasingly avoiding making the headlines on social networks for the sake of their image as a responsible actor. Whether it is because they dispense justice in a less violent way or simply in a more discreet way, the fact remains that several people told us during our presence that Las Claritas has become one of the safest areas in the country. While the people of the parish of San Isidro have long lamented the disappearance or murder of their loved ones, today Venezuelans come from all over the country not only to get a job but also to enjoy the calm of the area¹⁷. Thus, according to an indigent in a nearby town, "you can leave your car open and your belongings inside. Nothing will happen to them. Here, it's not like anywhere else." (Andres Antillano, Fernandez-Shaw, and Castro 2018). Yet justice exists: summary, without a lawyer and without witnesses. It all takes place in a house called *Casa de Justicia* (House of Justice), behind La Gallera.

With no desire to assume the attributes of a nation (no anthem, no motto, no flag in Las Claritas), the *sindicato* and the inhabitants of the area nevertheless have their own currency. Neither a local official decree nor a police force imposes it - and some shops accept the US dollar (marginally the Brazilian real or the Venezuelan bolivar) - but daily trading is dominated by the presence of gold. There is no regulation, since its price is dictated by international financial exchanges, but the ore

¹⁶ While the names of the public figures that are the *pranes* have been preserved, the first names of our other interlocutors have been pseudonymized.

¹⁷ According to Idler, the same phenomenon was occurring a few years ago on the Colombian border (Idler et Forest 2015).

extracted is used directly, without refining, as a currency. In a context of devaluation of the bolivar, most of the local shops, even the smallest, have electronic scales allowing precise weighing: the *punto* refers to the tenth of a gram and the *milesima* to the hundredth¹⁸.

Some of these shops are gold buying and reselling counters, the equivalent of dollar/gold exchange offices. As their public display announces, these same counters are often connected to international private banks such as BBVA or Banesco. To open a loan, the inhabitants of Las Claritas can contact these counters. If their requests are refused, it is possible, as several residents told us, to take these requests directly to the members of the *sindicato*, and in particular to one of the three associates. Provided that part of the profits is shared with them, the latter can thus financially support the opening of businesses. The *pranes* then serve as lender of last resort, a role usually held by a central bank.

In addition, perhaps to simplify its supervision of trade in Las Claritas, the *sindicato* has set up several monopolies. Whatever the commodity, the operation is similar. In exchange for a high *vacuna*, a wholesaler earns the exclusive right to import its products into the area. This applies to petrol, medicines (apart from those supplied by humanitarian organizations and those delivered by the public health institute), red meat, chicken, cheese, fruits and vegetables. For example, every Tuesday, all the grocers in Las Claritas buy from a single supplier at the Ciudad Dorada market. Similarly, all pharmacies buy their medical products from Victor, a specialist in pharmaceutical logistics. In the case of the Internet, a major provider also charges for bandwidth to those who subscribe to its connection. In other words, a large part of the daily economy is indirectly organized by the *sindicato* and subject to his authorization.

The area of Las Claritas has its own customs system. In the same way as in rentier states dependent on the extraction and resale of a main resource, the industry of Las Claritas is underdeveloped or even non-existent. Although there are a few food and fruit crops and some cattle, one of the only local products is gold, and the result is a general subjection to imports, especially of everyday goods. On many items, the *sindicato* finds himself in a situation of dependence, and seeks to control the monopolies it has set up. It implemented not only checkpoints, called *alcabalas*¹⁹, at the entry points to the area, but also control barriers inside, especially at the entrance to the mines.

At the main *alcabala*, the northern one along *Troncal 10*, Venezuelan police and military officers, in agreement with the *sindicato*, are stationed to check the contents of vehicles and restrict the entry of "foreign" products. Inside the area, other barriers exist, all controlled by members of the

¹⁸ Mysteriously, *milesima* means one thousandth in Spanish, but the term has passed into the local vernacular to refer to one hundredth.

¹⁹ This term is used in Venezuela to refer to fixed or mobile road barriers, governed by a 2006 resolution (Presidencia de la República 2006). *Alcabala* has its origins in the main tax of the Kingdom of Spain at the end of the Middle Age. The terms *gabelle* in French and *qabala* in Arabic are said to have the same origin.

*sindicato*²⁰, to filter the access of individuals and goods to the mining areas where more than half of the inhabitants live and work. Renato says that when he wanted to bring a chicken he had bought along the *Troncal 10* to a mine, he was asked to pay an additional fee when passing through one of these barriers, and explained that he could have avoided paying a right of passage if he had bought his chicken from a supplier validated by the *sindicato*. Although we have noticed that the rules are marginally different from one barrier to another, the principle remains similar. Leaving an area is free, but there may be a charge for entry depending on the type and quantity of goods one wants to enter. In other words, each branch of *the sindicato* protects the domestic market of the area for which it is responsible by prohibiting the import of certain products and imposing a customs duty on others.

To ensure that the "tax collectors" and "customs officers" do not keep for themselves a fringe of the *vacuna* or the rent of the toll gates, that others do not divert part of the gold extracted from the mines for their own profit, or that certain miners are indeed affiliated to the social insurance system that we will discuss below, a multi-tiered administrative system of internal control exists. The first tier is that of population control. This is carried out by the *gariteros* (literally "hutters" from a workman's hut), often young individuals at the bottom of the *sindicato* hierarchy, whose etymology derives from the sentry boxes to which they are assigned. Each of these boxes, situated in a strategic location in the urban and mining territory of Las Claritas, is supposed to allow the *gariteros* to facilitate their observation of the comings and goings of the inhabitants and of the products in the territory under their responsibility. As several of our colleagues have explained to us, the *gariteros* are often in charge of collecting taxes on behalf of the *sindicato* and of controlling the amount of gold extracted from each of the mines in their territory²¹. Without a computer system, some rely on their memory to record the faces, the names of the inhabitants of their territory and the amounts collected. Others, as our colleague Monica directly observed, keep a small notebook in which they record the names, characteristics, activities and payments of each person. All *gariteros* and members of the *sindicato* in general, conspicuously communicate with each other via portable VHF radios. In this way, they are able to share information and track the movement of individuals or vehicles from one sentry box to another.

The second tier is that of the control of the controllers, in this case the control of the *gariteros*. This is achieved through a network of indicators. Among these, some motorcycle taxi drivers are, as attested by the friend of one of these drivers, paid to talk informally in the mines with their customers, their relatives, their family members, and to report to the hierarchy of the *sindicato* any deviations in the behavior of the *gariteros*. Among the informers are also women, companions of

²⁰ And if we exceptionally observed at the checkpoint between the Alcazar and Cuatro Muertos mining districts that both parties were present, the members of the *sindicato* are those manipulating the barrier and finally authorizing the passages.

²¹ Every 15 days or so, the *gariteros* are invited to witness the final stage of the mining process, which is the emptying of the *tanquillas*, the small open-pit reservoirs from which the amalgams of mercury and gold (the mercury used to precipitate the gold) are extracted.

members of *the sindicato*, who are responsible for using their network of friends, especially in the mines, to discreetly collect information about the *gariteros*. If, in the end, a *garitero* is considered by his superiors to be in breach of his responsibilities, he may be redeployed to a new sentry box and a new territory, or even removed from the list of *gariteros* and, if the fraud is deemed significant, possibly subject to corporal punishment.

3 – Attractive public services

According to Rotberg, "when a reasonable measure of security has been sustained", then "the delivery of a range of other desirable political goods becomes possible" (Rotberg 2003, 3). Not only because its internal sovereignty seems to be ensured, but also to make the area attractive, the *sindicato* has gradually become involved in the provision of the majority of public services. Whereas oil multinationals generally content themselves, in a form of modern evergetism, with donations and the implementation of development projects to facilitate their acceptance and ensure the sustainability of the operations (Sawyer 2004, 9), the three *socios* and their deputies have a relationship with the inhabitants that is akin to a clientelist relationship in the sense that the *sindicato* needs "clients" to live and enrich themselves, i.e. individuals who will appreciate the services rendered in exchange for giving them a share of their profits through the *vacuna* or other appropriate taxes.

The *sindicato* was first engaged in the transport sector. Two motorcycle taxi companies, "Los manguitos" and "Mis viejos", have been endorsed by the *socios* to offer a travel service to locals. On the side of the roads, many pilots recognizable by their company's T-shirts are waiting for customers. As one driver explains, the principle is that each driver pays a fee to the *sindicato* in order to obtain the equivalent of a license, i.e. the right to practice and to get the fares. The *sindicato* also manages collective buses within the area, as well as coach transport to the outside. There is even an airstrip directly in the mines, which can be seen on satellite imagery sites. As far as gasoline and diesel are concerned, several systems have succeeded one another, but always in the form of a monopoly: first controlled by the "guardia nacional" (national guard), then by the members of the *sindicato* themselves, and finally by a consortium between the military of the *guardia nacional*, the *sindicato* and Petróleos de Venezuela (PDV), the national oil company. At the time of our departure, the petrol station that had been abandoned for years had just been put back into operation by individuals employed by these three players, illustrating their collusion and shared interests on specific issues.

In addition to transport, the members of the *sindicato* maintain the roads. While we were there, they rehabilitated a bridge leading to the Mesones mine, sealed a section of the *Troncal 10* that had been washed away by the rains, and brought in gravel trucks to fill in the most troublesome crevices on the road. If they do not take care of everything, since in the city center there are many potholes and inoperative sewers, they have also repaired the public lighting. They claim this with a large sign along the main road explaining: "Recovery of street lighting by the Maranatha and Black Lion alliances".

Alliances, also known as foundations, are the structures through which *sindicatos* of the various mining areas carry out social works. In Las Claritas, three foundations share the activities since, in addition to the two just mentioned, another one, named *Pintando sonrisa*²² has its registered office at the so-called *kilómetro 88*, at La Gallera. For Christmas 2021, the latter even officially organized the distribution of 500 gifts at the Ruiz y Páez Hospital in Ciudad Bolívar, the capital of the state of Bolívar, 470 kilometers from Las Claritas²³. In addition to sponsoring the local fitness club and funding the rehabilitation of sports fields, including the one in Ciudad Dorada, one of the neighborhoods of Las Claritas, the Maranatha and Black Lion alliances regularly organize sporting events²⁴. Some of them would be "for the benefit of children against cancer"²⁵. Humberto Martes, Humberto's father, said in 2017 that he had set up soup kitchens: "Here, every Thursday, we make a good fish soup and distribute it to everyone who comes" (López 2017).

On Mother's Day, Father's Day or the birthdays of some of the *socios*, other moments of communion are proposed. For El Viejo's anniversary, the streets of the city center were blocked for two days. Food and beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) were offered to all residents who wished to participate in the celebrations. Like lords, princes, or some heads of state or mayors, the members of the *sindicato* redistribute a share of the tax to their constituents.

In addition, since the end of 2021, and this is perhaps its main activity, the Maranatha Foundation, chaired by El Viejo's wife, has been providing material and financial support to the main health center in Las Claritas: the *ambulatorio* Santo Domingo. According to a former coordinator of our organization, this assistance began at a time when the center, like many others abandoned in Venezuela, was beginning to experience difficulties. Today, the *ambulatorio* again meets the standards expected for a center of this rank. It has 3 ambulances and enough staff to cover its activities. Whereas public service doctors earn the equivalent of \$15 or \$20 a month in the rest of the country²⁶, the doctors in Santo Domingo earn, according to a former cook working there, two grams of gold a week (about \$100)²⁷. Similarly, nurses and cooks earn one and a half grams a week, while cleaners and linen maids earn one gram. These salaries provide a correct living and encourage staff to come and work at the health center. According to the same source, the wife of the medical officer in charge of the *ambulatorio* is the secretary of the Maranatha Foundation and manages the administrative aspect of the structure (contracts, payroll, etc.). According to several other sources,

²² Draw a smile.

²³ <https://www.upatadigital.com.ve/2021/12/fundacion-pintando-sonrisa-realizo.html>

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=197267009478774&set=pb.100075864288037.-2207520000>

²⁵ <https://primicia.com.ve/deportes/celebran-torneo-de-kickingball-a-beneficio-de-los-ninos-con-cancer-del-ruiz-y-paez/>

²⁶ The salary is paid in bolívar, Venezuela's official currency. But with a volatile exchange rate between the bolívar and the dollar, estimating salaries in dollars is approximate.

²⁷ In Venezuela, doctors' salaries have become symbolic, many have left the country, others now offer private consultations, and still others rely on the community they serve to provide housing, meals and help maintain the health center they manage.

including a doctor working there, consultations are free (as they were when the public health system was functional), but medical tests, medicines, and ambulance transport are still subject to a fee. Simultaneously, the *sindicato* is the only interlocutor of Venezuela's malaria control and vaccination programs and of humanitarian organizations such as ours, from which, like many armed groups in this type of situation, it does not hesitate to benefit (Clapham 1998, 151). It is the *sindicato* that authorizes movements in the area and at the same time provides its own boats, pilots and fuel for these different actors to travel to the most remote river villages.

In an ambivalent approach, between increased profit seeking and the desire for protection, the *sindicato* has been offering since August 2022 a non-compulsory social insurance, adapted for the inhabitants of the mines. This covers, and that was confirmed directly by El Niño, a lieutenant of El Viejo, the transport to the *ambulatorio*, the medical tests, the medicines, and even, in the case of death, the funeral expenses (payment for the coffin, transport of the body, and burial). For it to be operational, such an insurance requires approval or, at the very least, an agreement with the person in charge of the *ambulatorio*. However, even though his wife is employed by Maranatha, he refuses, in an interview with our humanitarian organization, to acknowledge any link with the *sindicato*: "We are an infrastructure of the public health institute. I have nothing to do with them. I don't want to get into that. »

Such a denial echoes a sentiment present in Las Claritas: everyone knows that the members of the *sindicato* set the rules of the game, yet many locals act as if the *pranes* did not exist. Evoking them is often done in an allusive, half-hearted way, referring to "them", without being otherwise precise. In our opinion, this mistrust combines both the fear of potential reprisals on their part for misinterpreted comments or information that should not have been shared (atmosphere of suspicion), but also, for some, the personal conviction that the *sindicato* should not be legitimized, and that to mention it freely would mean, in a way, accepting that it has replaced the Venezuelan central state. Around this reluctance, the heart of the embryonic state is at stake: the recognition of the transition from one sovereignty to another.

In downtown Las Claritas, there is no urban water network and water is supplied individually. As in many other mining, peri-urban or rural areas from which the central government has disengaged, each person has set up his or her own system: rainwater harvesting, connection to the river, a borehole or a nearby well, via a tank, a plastic reservoir and a possible pump system. For example, one of our organization's employees explains how he built his own personal well, which his neighbors use to fill their cans. However, in remote, dense or temporary mining areas, access to water is not always easy. In such cases, the *sindicato* offers its services for a fee: either in the form of regular tanker truck deliveries to which local residents can obtain water, or by digging boreholes (sometimes requiring advanced technical expertise and expensive submersible pumps) to which local residents can also go.

As far as electricity is concerned, there is an old urban network set up several decades ago, organized around the local power plant, itself fed by a line from the Macagua dam along the *Troncal 10* to

Las Claritas²⁸. According to several of our colleagues on site, the *sindicato* does not pay Corpoelec/Edelca, the Venezuelan national utility, for electricity, but is responsible for maintaining the plant and the network. The operation would then be similar to that of the health center. Civil servant engineers and technicians continue to live on site, maintain the infrastructure and receive a gold remuneration paid directly by the *sindicato*. For example, according to Renato, one of the employees of our organization, the agents who clean the ceramics on the electricity pylons are paid 6 grams of gold per task (a high amount, as the work is considered dangerous).

Most of the city's homes are connected to the electricity grid, but their inhabitants don't pay for their consumption, because, as in other parts of the country (Ocando Alex 2022), Corpoelec's offices have gradually closed and the official mechanisms for consulting each user's monthly consumption have disappeared. Renato nonetheless recounts that costs can be incurred. When his connection failed, he had to go to the nearest *sindicato* booth. The people there told him to go to the Corpoelec repairman and pay him one and a half grams of gold. Similarly, some lines (with cables, poles and transformers) were recently drawn at the request of the *sindicato* to supply some of the nearest mines. In these areas, residents generally have to pay a fixed fee to be connected. We don't know what precise arrangement has been reached between the *sindicato* and the national company, but the fact remains that the electrical service is also designed, organized and controlled by the *pranes*.

Education has not been forgotten by the *sindicato* either. Its members have not directly invested in curriculum content, but they have taken charge of the refurbishment of the area's two main elementary school: Juan XXIII and Fe y Alegria²⁹. Unlike the medical staff at the health center and the technical staff at the power plant, the civil servant teachers, whose official salary is again only around ten dollars a month, do not (or do not yet) receive any financial supplement from the *sindicato*. While education used to be free in the country, many schools have been since the crisis asking parents for a financial contribution at the beginning of the year, or even monthly, to encourage teachers to stay on.

Conclusion

In many respects, the political institution created in Las Claritas by El Viejo, Juancho and Humbertico, of which they form the government and with which the central Venezuelan executive must compromise, has over the years taken on the form of a state (in the sense given in the introduction of a concentrated sovereign power and of a functional administrative network). Externally, the *sindicato* has embarked on a number of processes to consolidate its sovereignty: normalization of diplomatic relations (over the years, it has become an interlocutor for representatives of the central Venezuelan state, neighboring indigenous communities and international organizations), control of borders, protection of the domestic market through a

²⁸ <http://www.corpoelec.gob.ve/normalizada-1%C3%ADnea-macagua-el-callao-las-claritas-400-kv>

²⁹ Other schools exist on indigenous reserves, but are independent of the power of the *sindicato*.

system of customs and import taxes, improvement of its public image (justice delivered out of sight, social action, organization of sporting events). Within its territory, the *sindicato* has launched other projects that reinforce its sovereignty: securing the area, introducing an income tax, choosing a stable currency, maintaining and even improving all public services (water system, electricity network, roads, health, education, etc.), organizing the economy, creating popular festivals, etc. The physical and symbolic coercion exerted by the *sindicato* in Las Claritas is all the more successful in that, compared with the rest of Venezuela, the residents are, as shown, mostly satisfied with the proposed social pact.

Like any sovereign political institution, the one of Las Claritas does not live in perfect autarky and still relies on its neighbors. The *sindicato* has retained some of the Venezuelan central state activities (e.g., the existence of a military post and the organization of elections), collaborates with it on several issues (including health, gasoline, customs and electricity) with a view to sharing the fruits of the mine, and remains dependent on imports (e.g., food, basic necessities and labor). Although forms of partial symbiosis persist, the *sindicato* increasingly supplants the central Venezuelan state on an ever-wider range of issues.

In so doing, the *sindicato* founders' opportunism to expand has resulted in the absence of a common horizon, a unifying discourse and a long-term social model, other than an increased exploitation of the zone's subsoil in the coming years. If we are to believe the "tragedy of the commons" or that of rentier states, the land of Las Claritas could run out and the resources dry up. In a short-termist vision, the three partners would be biting the hand that feeds them. If, as suggested in our title, the state were to be disposable, it would not be so much because the Venezuelan government disposes of it at will (although a coup de force by the national army should not be excluded), but because the state temporarily necessary for organizing mining operations may cease to exist once the resources have been "sucked to the bone". What's more, the *sindicato* remains marked by its leaders, and the disappearance of one of them could weaken the political institution they created, or even put an end to its existence, turning Las Claritas into a vulnerable and potentially ephemeral rentier micro-state.

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