The New Energy Imperialism in the Caribbean

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The New Energy Imperialism in the Caribbean

The Caribbean has some of the highest utility rates in the world. Decades of fossil fuel dependence, foreign profiteering, and domestic debt made it so.

"Grenada... that tiny little island; it isn't nutmeg that's at stake in the Caribbean and Central America. It is United States' National Security." So spoke Ronald Reagan in March of 1983. In October of that year, hundreds of U.S. Army Rangers, Delta Force Commandos and U.S. Marines stormed the "tiny little island." Backed by artillery and the murderous firepower of AC-130 gunships, the Americans—despite a number of blunders—seized control by October 29 of that year.

Reagan pitched his illegal invasion as a battle against the Soviet and Cuban threat. It was also cast as heroic humanitarianism. Several hundred U.S. students were studying at two medical school campuses on the
island, and Reagan argued that they needed to be rescued by U.S. soldiers. As Steven Volk wrote in the pages of NACLA late in 1983, the U.S. media rallied behind Reagan to gin up a story of imminent threat.

Grenada was in the midst of a political revolution. In 1979, Maurice Bishop and his New Jewel Movement (NJM) party had taken power from a corrupt governor, the United Kingdom's viceroy. The NJM was a revolutionary vanguard party (Jewel stood for Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education, and Liberation). The Bishop government nationalized banks and the national electric company, while women's and workers' rights moved to the forefront. Relations with Cuba grew stronger as it sought to help the young revolutionaries consolidate control. But by 1983, internal splits over ideology led to Bishop's arrest and execution. Soon after, Hudson Austin, the commander of the armed forces, who had helped oust Bishop, dissolved the civilian government and installed a military council. This internal coup created the pretext for a long-planned invasion. The U.S. had a significant military presence in Barbados and was able to cajole the support of a number of the smaller English-speaking Caribbean islands.

Beyond the medical students of course was the threat Grenada posed to U.S. hegemony in the region. The 1979 Sandinista victory in Nicaragua had challenged the U.S., and there was a rising tide of revolution in El Salvador. And so Grenada became a testing ground for a new wave of U.S. interventionism. Sure enough, after a few transitional years, a centrist party won power in Grenada, which pursued full-scale privatization efforts, backed by the U.S. This cemented the country's role as a U.S.-playground, in this case for remedial medical training, tourism, and U.S. capital accumulation. The national electric company that Bishop had bought for the state stayed in state hands until it was privatized again in 1994.

Now, more than three decades after the invasion, as increasingly intense hurricanes devastate the region, the legacies of U.S. capitalism and its assault on the Caribbean islands' sovereignty are coming into focus. Not so much about nutmeg, sugar, bananas, or bauxite, the Caribbean struggle for sovereignty is today defined in large part around a battle over energy. The struggle pits the prospects of renewable energy against a geopolitics shaped by U.S. financial interests of the fossil fuel industry, the U.S. assault on Venezuela, and now, the rise of a new rhetoric of “national security” attached to the expansion of exports of U.S. fracked gas.

Fossil Fuels in the Caribbean

For much of the mid-twentieth century, as U.S. utilities reached peak growth, U.S. engineers and capitalists fanned out across Latin America to create Northern-style rural electric cooperatives and monopoly utilities—often without any regulation—with U.S. capital and technology. This development ensured local dependence on fossil fuel-based energy that also generated returns to U.S. investors. Once companies could control the sourcing of primary fuel, generation of electricity, and distribution to the infrastructural grid of wires and electric poles, they could maintain reliance on imported fuels and secure ongoing returns on capital. Outsized electrical consumption meant high profits in small places.

Utility expansion went hand-in-hand with the fossil fuel industry, in places where alternatives were scarce or where U.S. companies could profit most by fueling the grid. Under U.S. tutelage and multinational influence, the Caribbean became a peripheral consumer and processing hub for U.S. oil interests. Barbados has a bit of oil, and Trinidad and Tobago is a natural gas exporter. But all the other countries in the region have little or none. Yet their electric grids have been built up around deep reliance on heavy fuel oil or diesel. Puerto Rico of course, devastated at this writing, is no exception, with an oil-dependent, heavily-centralized and now largely destroyed electric grid. The Caribbean islands must import oil to fire the grid as well as refined petroleum products like gasoline.

From World War II through the 1980s, multinational oil firms set up refineries on several islands to process crude coming to and from the United States and points south. For a time in the 1980s, the world’s largest oil refinery was in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Ports, depots, infrastructure, and terminals were set up to supply local consumption. Oil-burning electric grids were built. When refinery capacity increased in Mexico, Venezuela, and on the U.S. Gulf Coast, much of this refining industry downsized or moved. Yet oil dependence remained.

Today nearly 90% of the region’s electricity comes from imported oil. Latin America’s average is about 25%, with a higher proportion of natural gas (about 20%) and hydro-electric energy. Because of oil’s recent price spikes, ameliorated somewhat since 2014, the islands pay some of the world’s highest electricity rates, up to 35 cents/kilowatt hour (kwh) as compared to around 12 cents/kwh in the U.S.
Electric utility companies—especially the private ones—raise rates as fuel costs rise. This keeps profits high, and largely repatriated, despite local economic conditions. State-owned companies often take on debt when oil prices go up, like in Puerto Rico to maintain affordability. Yet macroeconomic distortions afflict both because of oil dependence. Since oil prices are volatile, and have been high in recent years, electricity costs mean disproportionate spending on energy at the national and household scales.

In addition, in the tourism-dependent economies of the region, a significant amount of energy production and consumption is dedicated to serving the floating tourist population of some 25 million people. Tourism thus further distorts the region’s dependence on expensive (and dirty) oil imports. Barbados for instance, a country of some 300,000, generates electricity for another 500,000 or so that arrive each year, based on 2014 tourist numbers. Barbados’ average electricity consumption per capita is around 3000 kwh per year, while hotel guestrooms consume between 12,000 and 16,000 kwh per year, according to an Inter-American Development Bank-sponsored study. About 50% of this consumption is for air-conditioning and virtually all of that electricity comes from diesel or heavy fuel oil. Refined petroleum products are its largest import. This state of affairs distorts the trade balance across the Caribbean, deepening dependence on tourism and financial services. Barbados imports $240 million worth of oil per year, while its main export, jewelry, tops out around $80 million per year.

All of this seems quite remarkable, given that the region is drenched in sun and wind, which could serve as energy alternatives for decentralized micro-grids and smaller scale generation and storage of clean energy. But oil-fired electricity is good business, especially for foreign investors. For example, in Barbados, Emera Caribbean, a Nova Scotia-based firm, owns 80% of the country’s utilities, and also has majority interests in St. Lucia, Dominica, and Grand Bahama Power companies. The parent company, Emera Inc., has interests in North American gas infrastructures, utilities, and supplies. The company’s website, as with many American fossil fuel utilities, features much propaganda about renewables. But actual deployment of wind and solar is miniscule. The structure of supply relationships and infrastructures suggest incentives, if anything, to keep burning oil or, of late, to switch to fracked gas.

So why hasn’t the region turned more towards exploring alternative energy? The reasons behind this stem from forces trying to maintain fossil fuel dependence. Not only are oil-fired grids good business for U.S. capital and creditors, but the interests of the gas industry are coming into alignment with the militaristic impulses
of American foreign policy (as those of oil have been for decades). Examining these relations—and the forces that sustain them—can help us to better understand the links between fossil capital and U.S. energy imperialism in the region. For that we need to step back and think about Venezuela, the oil-rich elephant in the region.

Oil Resistance and its Limits: The Petrocaribe Case

From the Grenada invasion in 1983, fast forward to 2005, when Hugo Chávez launched the Petrocaribe initiative, which would expand Venezuela’s ring of alliances through the provision of credit-subsidized oil to Caribbean nations. As with Grenada and its truncated revolution, this act challenged U.S. hegemony. Amid skyrocketing oil prices, Petrocaribe offered oil to the islands and Central America on very generous terms of credit. Caribbean countries burdened with debt and strapped for fuel lined up to join.

The U.S. government—and big oil—saw the initiative as a direct threat. The United States, via think tanks tied to militaristic and fossil fuel interests, often talks of “energy integration” and “energy cooperation” and “energy security”—terms that can be read to mean hemispheric domination of U.S. militaristic and private oil company interests. Petrocaribe was, through this lens, a counter-hegemonic integration and cooperation strategy. Petrocaribe positioned Venezuela as a direct competitor to U.S. fossil fuel companies, displacing both the economic interests as well as the political power that comes with fossil fuel dependency. It also meant that rather than borrow from Wall Street, the IMF or the World Bank, the islands would borrow from Venezuela, another direct threat to fossil-linked finance capital and U.S. hegemony. The U.S. response, perhaps a bit subtler than Reagan’s invasion, was quick, if initially ineffective.

Consider the case of Haiti. Haiti was one of the countries that took up Venezuela’s offer to get oil on better terms. In 2006, then-president René Préval struck a deal with Venezuela. The deal would save Haiti over $100 million a year and give them more freedom from the United States oil industry. Unsurprisingly, the U.S. government fiercely fought it, lining up alongside ExxonMobil and Chevron, which had refining and importing interests in Haiti. These and other oil companies had taken advantage of their infrastructural tentacles on the island—they controlled refining or distribution networks and balked at buying oil from Venezuela via the Haitian government to continue their operations. Yet the islands, even those run by conservative regimes, recognized that Petrocaribe was a good deal, and played Petrocaribe against the U.S. to their benefit. Haiti pushed forward to join Petrocaribe.

The solidarity of the Bolivarian revolution and Cuban socialism had come down to light bulbs and heavy crude, but such were the tactical and energetic instruments of struggle.

As Wikileaks revealed, reported by Dan Coughlin and Kim Ives in The Nation, the U.S. ambassador to Haiti was in a rage after Chávez visited Haiti, undoubtedly deepened when President Préval returned Chávez’ favor by attending the Bolivarian Alliance for the People’s of Our Americas (ALBA) meeting in 2007. Chávez responded in turn by promising to deliver 150 megawatts of electricity to Haiti. This electricity would come in part from Cuba, which offered two million energy-efficient light bulbs, and in part from Venezuelans, who planned to build new power plants that would burn Venezuelan fuel oil, rather than more expensive diesel. The solidarity of the Bolivarian revolution and Cuban socialism had come down to light bulbs and heavy crude, but such were the tactical and energetic instruments of struggle. In the end, despite big oil’s stonewalling, Haiti prevailed, at least for a few years.

The Wikileaks report revealed similar machinations between the U.S. government and big oil companies in Jamaica, Guatemala, and Honduras. Even so, between 2005 and 2014, some twenty countries signed up for subsidized fuel via cheap loans (a few, like Honduras, have withdrawn.) Not only was Hugo Chávez offering subsidized oil, but the plan also sought to establish a solidarity based in South-South connections in oil transport and processing. A number of countries established joint ventures. For example, Venezuela’s state oil company, PDVSA, acquired part ownership of refineries in the...
Dominican Republic and Jamaica, where Shell and Esso had retreated.

In Grenada, a venture with PDVSA led to a new company called PDV Grenada Ltd., which took over diesel imports and then sold them to the private utility Grenada Energy Services Limited (GRENLEC). Cuba and Venezuela set up a joint shipping venture, which, perhaps uncomfortably for today's ecological left, purchased a Panamax oil tanker called Sandino, named after the Nicaraguan revolutionary who stood up to the U.S. marines and gave his name to the Sandinista Revolution. The Sandino continues to make the run bringing heavy crude from Puerto Cruz in Venezuela to the refineries at Cienfuegos, Cuba. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, a refinery owned by Puma Energy, a Swiss-Angolan company headquartered in Singapore, similarly stands as an alternative to U.S.-based international oil company domination.

A map of Petrocaribe membership suggests a ring of oil-based trade alliances anchored by Bolivarian Venezuela. The only island nations not participating in Petrocaribe are Barbados, more firmly under the thumb of the United States, and Trinidad and Tobago, flush with its own natural gas. Within this ring, different countries barter other goods in exchange for oil. Nicaraguan black beans, Guyanese rice, and Dominican sugar have been shipped to Venezuela in partial exchange for oil. Analysts have pointed out that oil shipments and infrastructural development have given these smaller nations more room to make policy decisions about spending, a bit less hindered by the constraints created by historic dependence on a U.S.-centric oil commodity chain. Petrocaribe also helped countries shore up macroeconomic conditions against the spike in oil prices that ended in 2014. In short, Petrocaribe brought more energy sovereignty, albeit fossil fuel dependent, against the historical domination of private U.S. oil companies.

This is not to say that Petrocaribe should be idealized as the ultimate tool of socialist solidarity. Beyond the links between oil and climate change, Petrocaribe is at root a fossil fuel-based debt relationship extended over the long term. Petrocaribe politically challenges U.S. hegemony, while its internal contradictions—dependence on a rentier petroleum dependent country—have multiple other weaknesses, as discussed in Miguel Tinker Salas' piece in this issue.

Nonetheless, Petrocaribe was and remains an affront to the U.S. military-oil-government nexus for maintaining hegemony in the region. Having failed to stop countries from signing up, U.S. strategies shifted. For many of the following years, the U.S. government worked to destabilize and defeat the Bolivarian process, efforts initiated during the Bush era and continued under the Obama government through today. Today the combined factors of the oil price drop and the expansion of fracking are playing a key role in the current configuration of struggle.

Fracking, Renewables, and Liquid Natural Gas

In 2014, the Obama administration launched the Caribbean Energy Security Initiative (CESI), which proposed a focus on renewable energy. Remember, 'energy security' usually means 'U.S. fossil capital interests' and it is hard to assess whether the commitment to renewable energy was real. What is clearer is that there was a configuration of political forces surrounding the Obama administration that were deeply invested in the promotion of fracking, furthering the propagation of the canard that fracked gas is a bridge to the renewable future.

In 2015, with oil prices relatively low, the United States hosted the first Caribbean Energy Security Summit, held not in the Caribbean but at State Department headquarters. Then-Vice President Joe Biden headed the summit. Shortly after, in April 2015, then-President Obama announced the creation of the Clean Energy Finance Facility for the Caribbean.
and Central America (CEFF-CCA) bringing together the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA), the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and USAID to offer a new mechanism of clean energy imperialism against the threat of Petrocaribe. CEFF-CCA offers loans to private companies who were exploring investments in renewables in the region. This credit fund, with a $20 million U.S. contribution, is relatively small.

But overshadowing all of this are the several billions of dollars wrapped up in the fracking industry. Despite Obama’s talk of renewables, what unfolded was a conjoined effort to push for Caribbean energy reform through fracked gas. This gas would be exported as LNG. LNG, liquefied natural gas, is gas chilled to a liquid state, shipped in rail cars or ships and then re-gasified for burning to produce electricity. Since distance is cost, the closest consumers, Mexico and the Caribbean, are the most profitable. In 2014, the Atlantic Council, a hawkish oil and capital-friendly think tank, urged the Obama administration to promote the export of natural gas to the Caribbean as an alternative to heavy fuel oil. Of course, LNG would also be an alternative to Petrocaribe. If Reagan could invoke “national security” to kill Grenadian and Cuban soldiers in 1983, national security could now be gasified. The Atlantic Council proposal was “to market U.S. supply to these nations” and to declare the export of surplus natural gas as in the interests of “national security.”

Whether or not the Obama administration’s proposals were that distant from positions like that of the Atlantic Council is unclear. Export licenses for LNG were granted starting in 2015, and many of the early ones were for companies planning to export to the Caribbean. The push for gas piggybacked on the Department of State’s Global Shale Gas Initiative, launched in 2010 to promote fracking, under then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. It was later renamed the more anodyne Unconventional Gas Technical Engagement Program. Obama himself, of course, came out in support of fracking. And the author of the Atlantic Council reports was David Goldwyn, a Clinton-era energy envoy, consultant to the natural gas industry, and member of the National Petroleum Council. While Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State, Goldwyn, who calls himself an “energy security advisor,” headed up the Department of State’s global fracking initiative. Beneath grandiose claims of offering the Caribbean a lower-carbon fuel (i.e. gas), the political intent was explicit. Venezuela had secured political loyalty through credit and oil, and the U.S. plan was to break it.

The usual entities weighed in. The Inter-American Development Bank launched a feasibility study in 2015 promoting LNG as the solution to the Caribbean energy conundrum. The documents talked of renewables, but the emphasis was natural gas. Meanwhile, military and fossil fuel industries had deeply penetrated policy-making. In 2015, even as Joe Biden spoke of renewables, John Kelly, then head of U.S. Southern Command—and now Trump’s chief of staff—stood with John Kerry, then Secretary of State, to predict that Petrocaribe would (and should) collapse. In its place, they suggested Caribbean countries sign contracts for U.S. exports of natural gas.

Biden, Kelly, and Kerry all trotted out the propaganda that fracked gas is a “bridge” to renewables. But fracked gas, as expert Anthony Ingraffea has written, is not a bridge to renewables, and may even be worse for the climate than coal and oil. It does, however, make a useful geopolitical weapon. It is also a useful capital accumulation tool. Gas, like oil, and unlike solar and wind, allows for much more long-term financialization as a commodity, with returns all the way up the production, distribution, and commercialization chain and debt dependence on the consumer side. Any infrastructural shift, with project timelines of 20 to 30 years, locks in gas supply and financing relations and further crowds out efforts or incentives based on renewables.

In relation to Petrocaribe, the push to LNG meant that heavily indebted Caribbean states would have to set up new relationships of dependence with largely U.S.-based LNG industries and creditors. American companies and their creditors are also trying to deepen Central American dependence on fossil fuels, also through the promotion of LNG infrastructures. As the Atlantic Council wrote again in 2016, the Caribbean and Central America should “fully open their energy sectors to private investors.” Now in Trump times, we have economic advisor Gary Cohn taking up the hyping of fracked gas as a virtual weapon against Putin, Iran, Venezuela, and myriad other countries deemed threats to national security.

As we watch climate-related devastation unfold, the tentacles of the LNG apparatus are expanding. When oil prices dropped in 2015, Petrocaribe and Venezuela took a hit. Countries have since no longer relied so much on subsidized oil, while U.S. exports of refined products, like gasoline and propane, have increased to Central America and the Caribbean. Limited renewable projects are happening, but gas interests prevail. New LNG
infrastructures are being sited in a number of countries, including Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. This includes sale of gas to large utilities as well as to industries or institutions that have off-grid energy production of their own. For example, the University of the West Indies is installing a gas-burning plant as a substitute for fuel oil. Red Stripe beer will also be made with U.S. LNG, most likely gas from fracking.

Investors and governments are overseeing the building out of new LNG facilities in Florida, along with the export terminals around the Gulf of Mexico, all areas recently swamped by Harvey, Irma, Jose, Maria, and whoever comes next. These investors are often hedge funds hoping to keep fracking debts paid by pushing for new, close markets efficient for LNG transport. For instance, Fortress Energy Company has an LNG facility near Miami and hopes to build out another LNG facility in Titusville, Florida. Along with Emera, the utility company noted above, Fortress, via its subsidiary, American LNG, wants to connect its vertical chain of pipelines and rail cars to shipping across the sea and LNG burning in Jamaica. At last check, much of Titusville, Florida was under water.

Local opposition to LNG facilities as well as an ongoing struggle against pipelines and fracking everywhere will be crucial to frustrating this new plan for America’s long-standing backyard. Caribbean publics and governments might also need to shake off the shackles of oil dependence in their own ways. Other initiatives exist in a Caribbean rife with acronyms and competing organizations. A number of non-profit organizations are promoting renewables in the Caribbean. And so are efforts promoted by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) itself. For example, the CARICOM Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency, not solely subject to the pressures of the United States fossil fuel-military complex, works in coordination with the United Nations and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) sustainable energy initiative. The CARICOM initiative has set a goal for 50% renewable power generation by 2033. Still shockingly modest, this will also require government commitments, as well as the unwinding of existing electricity generation arrangements. As in the United States, disentangling the people from privately controlled fossil fuel monopolies with entrenched assets and infrastructures will require a political struggle. A return to Grenada is illustrative.

The Grenada Case: Venture Capital Utilities and Resistance

After Reagan’s dirty “little” war, Grenada sidelined its socialist aspirations. The island quickly returned to the orbit of U.S. business interests. GRENLEC, the island’s electric utility, stayed in government hands until 1994, when it was sold to WRB Enterprises, a family-run capitalist venture of the

Like other private utilities in the region, today, the companies talk about going renewable and initiate relatively insignificant small solar projects. Money is made by keeping the generators burning.
Blanchard family of Florida and Ohio. The government signed a contract that handed over majority control of Grenada’s utility until the year 2073. WRB also has majority control over the electric utility in Dominica, at this writing, also devastated. Though a government regulatory body was under development in Grenada, it never functioned. Under the Blanchard operation, GRENLEC has burned heavy fuel oil and diesel for the last twenty-odd years, profiting regardless of global oil prices. Like other private utilities in the region, today, the companies talk about going renewable and initiating relatively insignificant small solar projects. Money is made by keeping the generators burning. Just as in the U.S., fossil utilities want to push out the renewable horizon as far as possible while seeking to control any and all renewable expansion, as minimal as it may be. The Blanchards and WRB are no exception.

By the mid 2010s, Grenadian officials had begun speaking of the need to retake control of the utility company due to high electricity prices, connected in part to the then-high price of oil. Signing up with Petrocaribe alleviated some of this pressure. With 40% of Grenada’s budget going to debt repayments, the country has been in an austerity mode even as WRB has continued to reap high profits. Two bills passed in 2016 sought to establish a very modest U.-style form of regulatory control. One called for the “unbundling” of generation and transmission. (The U.S. did this in the 1980s.) This would force GRENLEC to buy more renewable energy from customer-scale generators. WRB resisted. Renewables, especially when controlled by individual households, worker collectives, or communities, threaten fossil fuel based capital accumulation.

Another piece of regulatory legislation sought to force GRENLEC to diversify its own supply and subject itself to new conditions as a regulated monopoly. In the government’s terms this would “liberalize” the energy market from decades of monopolistic rule.” A far cry from New Jewel Movement and real “liberation,” this “liberalization” is not radical, but only a modest challenge to dependence. Grenada’s leaders still call themselves pro-privatization and pro-investor. (Indeed, SUV ownership in Grenada is skyrocketing, so neither is this a green revolution).

Yet Grenada recognizes that more renewables would mean more favorable macro-economic conditions. Grenada has even proclaimed its desire to go 100% renewable. Yet, as it had done in prior disputes, GRENLEC and WRB took the Grenada to the World Bank’s International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) to fight the regulatory legislation. WRB wants to force the government to buy them out. The government cannot afford this, so they take a modest middle ground, asking only for the right to regulate. The case is now in arbitration. One might wonder, had things gone differently back in 1983, what would Maurice Bishop have done?

After the Grenada invasion, NACLA writers assessed the situation of the region. As Tom Barry wrote in these pages in 1984, most of the Caribbean leaders had resigned themselves to “dependent capitalism.” Fred Halliday went a bit further, suggesting a generally low level of “anti-colonial sentiment” and, at least among leadership, a “strong affinity for the culture of the metropolitan powers.” While there was an underlying possibility of ideological resistance, then, as now, the moment was one of deepening U.S. militarization tied to the cultivation of pro-U.S. leaders. But U.S. power was and is always tenuous, and the islands’ own diverse internal positions complicate any kind of unifying direction.

That is to say, the most revolutionary act in recent years may well have been the construction of Petrocaribe, pragmatic perhaps, but nonetheless a thorn in the side of empire. After being hammered by this year’s hurricanes, which are inflicting heavy human and economic costs and will further deepen crippling indebtedness, it is unclear what political momentum might emerge.

Of course, going renewable on the islands won’t stop the hurricanes. But what is clear is the United States fossil fuel industry and its backers are not interested in renewables. The promotion of fracked gas as LNG, which should be opposed both here and abroad, is part of a wider strategy of the fossil capital and military complex to delay the transition to the future, a much larger scale effort that will most certainly exacerbate global warming. Here and across the islands, and across the hemisphere, this behemoth must be opposed. While Petrocaribe offered some respite from U.S. domination, breaking carbon lock-in will require a radically new kind of socialist imagination.

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