

Interview – Tim Gill

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr Timothy M. Gill is an Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Tennessee. He has published on topics involving U.S. foreign policy, Venezuelan politics and human rights, and sociological theory. His work has been published in several academic outlets, including *Sociological Forum*, *Journal of World-Systems Research*, *Social Currents*, and *Sociology of Development*. He has also published his work in several public outlets, including *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *World Politics Review*, and *Contexts*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There is continually interesting work being done within the areas of political sociology and global sociology, within which I mostly situate my work. I'm particularly enthused by recent work that understands imperial formations, the U.S. as an empire, and contemporary, as well historical, forms of U.S. imperialism. Some social scientists who generally work in this area, include William Robinson, George Steinmetz, Zophia Edwards, Ho-Fung Hung, Richard Lachmann, Zine Magubane, Julian Go, Katrina Quisumbing King, Michael Mann, Ricarda Hammer, and Moon-Kie Jung, among others. Some of this work is comparative, and other pieces of scholarship look solely at the U.S.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As a high school and undergraduate student, I thought that U.S. foreign policymaking was mostly about garnering access to natural resources. The war in Iraq and the centrality of oil certainly played a role in that thinking. I don't disagree that there are government bureaucrats and corporate elites who are interested in creating favorable conditions for U.S. corporations and gaining access to resources and labor. Over time, though, I have come to realize that policymaking is a bit more complicated – including the role of political ideologies, the role of ideas, and the role of geopolitical power.

What are the main factors behind the economic and political crisis that Venezuela has been experiencing in recent years?

The main factors include a long-term economic dependence on the export of oil and corruption. Venezuela never diversified away from energy. As a result, it sailed through the commodity boom (2000-2014) quite nicely, but now that the boom is over and much money was stolen away through corruption, the situation is quite dire. U.S. economic sanctions have exacerbated this situation, but they are not the cause of it.

In terms of politics, we currently see both Nicolás Maduro and Juan Guaidó claiming leadership of the country. Maduro claims to have won a recent presidential election, and Guaidó and the opposition claim that the election was fraudulent and thus the head of National Assembly, Guaidó, must be the caretaker of the country until free and fair elections are held. While the U.S., Canada, and several European and Latin American and Caribbean countries have sided with the opposition, Maduro continues to have the support of China, Russia, Iran, and several other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. At this point, we largely see a stalemate between the two, albeit with Maduro maintaining control over much of the state and its agencies.

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To what extent has the project of building ‘21st Century Socialism’, spearheaded by Venezuela’s former President Hugo Chávez, continued under the current Presidency of Nicolas Maduro?

Maduro uses the rhetoric of socialism, but so much has changed. The government is now embracing private investment, and many socialist initiatives are crumbling. Community councils still persist and government programs remain, but due to evaporating revenue they are underfunded and lacking resources. Maduro has also resorted to authoritarian measures in ways that Chávez never did: jailing opponents, jailing protestors, detaining journalists. Chávez took aim at some individuals in the opposition – many of whom were indeed corrupt, but never to this extent.

Many of the left-wing governments that comprised Latin America’s “pink tide” have fallen in recent years, either through the ballot box, contested legal means, or outright coups, yet Venezuela’s Bolivarian government has remained standing. Why is this the case?

It’s an interesting situation. Maduro remains in power mostly as a result of his authoritarian manoeuvres. It seems rather likely he would lose in a truly fair presidential election or a presidential referendum. His government removed the latter option and facilitated a presidential election that was far from fair in 2018. Some have expected a military coup amid the economic crisis, but it is possible that many high-ranking military members understand that they might face prosecution under a new government. And so, they’ve tied their future to the continuation of the Maduro government. For the opposition to succeed in moving Maduro towards elections, they would need assistance from his main allies, China and Russia, in urging Maduro to do so. So far, however, they have largely looked to the U.S. government for guidance, and some members have even welcomed a military invasion.

How has US policy towards Venezuela developed under Bush, Obama and now Trump? Are we likely to see any shifts after the US presidential election?

All three governments have opposed the Venezuelan government. All three have used USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy to funnel money and support to groups in the opposition. Trump has really just made U.S. regime change operations more explicit, and he has brought “all options” to the table. There is continual rumbling about military intervention, but many see this as far-fetched. Nonetheless, no one spoke out loud about this under Bush and Obama. Given Biden’s win of the presidential election in November 2020, I would imagine that his administration will tone down much of the bellicose rhetoric under we have seen under Trump and perhaps reconsider the extensive use of sanctions. Nonetheless, a Biden administration would still prioritize regime change above all else.

What role have geopolitical rivalries between the US and the likes of China or Russia played in developments in Venezuela in recent years?

In terms of Russia, there is surely a geopolitical element. The U.S. has sought to turn governments away from Russia and towards the EU and itself. There is no doubt that the Russian government probably delights in their support for an anti-U.S. government in Latin America. It’s possible there are geopolitical elements involving China’s relationship with Venezuela. But, like elsewhere, China appears most interested in garnering foreign contracts and access to resources.

Some actors have attempted to map out a peaceful resolution to Venezuela’s political crisis, facilitated by third-parties such as the Norwegian government. What has prevented such initiatives from being successful?

There is so much distrust among the relevant parties. Many members of the opposition are reluctant to negotiate in what they see as bad-faith negotiations. It seems rather improbable that Maduro would leave power through a negotiated settlement. Finally, the U.S. is also rather recalcitrant in its support for dialogue. They have bounties now for Venezuelan government leaders. This can in no way move Maduro and his allies to negotiate.

What advice would you give to early career scholars who are pursuing sociological research?

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I think it's important to remember the public. Is there any serious contingent of folks who would be interested in your work? If not, what is the point of the work? Some might say "theoretical development" or something like this, but we're facing some serious issues in our lifetime – climate change, authoritarianism, war. I think it's important to make the work as relevant to the public as possible.