

2 Tercermundismo and Chavismo

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Popular approval ratings for President Hugo Chávez do not fully reveal the sources of support for and opposition to the controversial Venezuelan leader. In part, Chávez's appeal taps into cultural and racial divisions that were obscured by the modernizing project of the old regime. The cultural, racial and class fissures in Venezuela find expression in a discourse that appeals to fears of exclusion and a desire for social inclusion. I label this discourse *tercermundismo* because it has much in common with preoccupations throughout the global South, much to the dismay of opponents who believe the country's future lies with linking itself culturally and economically with the developed world. Oil policy is, as always in Venezuela, at the centre of the debate.

Key words: Chavismo, tercermundismo, inclusion, exclusion, Venezuela

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La aprobación popular del presidente Hugo Chávez no revela completamente la fuente de apoyo y oposición al controversial líder venezolano. La atracción de Chávez en parte penetra divisiones culturales y raciales, opacadas por el proyecto modernizador del viejo régimen. Las fisuras culturales, raciales y de clases en Venezuela, se expresan en un discurso que incita al miedo de exclusión y a un deseo de inclusión social. La etiqueta que asigno a este discurso es *tercermundismo* porque tiene mucho en común con las preocupaciones del Sur global, en gran medida por el desaliento de los opositores que creen que el futuro del país está en la conexión cultural y económica con el mundo desarrollado. Las políticas petroleras están, como siempre en Venezuela, en el centro del debate.

Palabras claves: Chavismo, tercermundismo, inclusión, exclusión, Venezuela

Introduction

In August 2004, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez won a resounding victory over a coalition of opposition forces determined to remove him office through a revocatory referendum (recall), an accountability mechanism found in the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999. Opposition prospects appeared favorable in late 2003, when polls showed that Chavez's approval rating had fallen below 40 percent. Yet partisans of "No" (to reject the recall) won 59 percent of the vote in an election that generated nearly 10 million votes and the lowest rate of abstention in an election since 1960s.

What explains the durability of Chávez? Was it merely high oil prices that allowed him to recover from the decline in his popularity and low approval ratings evident in 2003? Part of the answer certainly lies in the decision of the president to launch massive new initiatives to deliver health care, education and affordable groceries to the poorest of Venezuelans. These programs were made possible in part through a surge in prices for the country's main export, oil. However, the thesis of this article is that the basis of *chavismo* goes deeper than mere patronage.

What the public opinion polls may have failed to capture is the deep, cultural divide evoked by the *chavismo*. What has become evident in Venezuela is the failure of the project of modernization and national integration launch by Bertancourt and the political generation of 1928. The political discourse of President Chávez, which has on the one hand thoroughly alienated the middle and elite sectors of society, draws upon a sense of Venezuelan national identity more closely tied to the "Third World" orientation that has warred with positivist notions of progress since independence. This national fissure is part of a larger gulf in the global world order articulated in the discourse of the President. What sustained the president's popularity after his election in December 1998 was his ability to tap into the deep reserve of popular resentment toward the old political class and his ability to pursue an independent foreign policy that reinforced his revolutionary credentials.

Puntofijismo: from inclusion to exclusion

The legitimacy of the Venezuelan political system associated with the Pact of Punto Fijo (1958-1998) was based upon a strategy of "sowing" capital accumulated from oil export rents in a project of modernization. The prime author of the project, Rómulo Betancourt, theorized that only a state built upon the foundation of mass, universal suffrage would have the political will to implement such a project. Early (1935-41) in his career, Betancourt advocated that a government backed by mass suffrage would have the will to confront the foreign oil companies (*imperialismo petrolero*) and wrest back control of the subsoil wealth. Similar, a directly elected government would utilize the resulting fiscal gains for the benefit of the entire nation, not just the elite (Sosa 1981). His plan involved not merely distributing revenues more justly between rich and poor, but investing ("sowing the oil") oil revenues in projects to enhance the human capital and infrastructure of the country. Hence, the goal was social modernization and national integration.

An abortive experiment with such a state between 1945 and 1948 (the *trienio*) failed to achieve stability, but in 1958, after the overthrow of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the key political actors agree to constitute a state built upon universal suffrage. However, they also pledged to respect each other's vital, corporate interests. Thus was born the Punto Fijo system, which linked oil nationalism, modernization, and democracy to one another.

The apogee of the system came in 1976 with the nationalization of the oil companies and ambitious attempt by the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez to industrialize Venezuela overnight ("*manos a la obra*"). This project ended in a spectacular disaster that was first revealed by the devaluation of the *bolívar* in 1983. By 1989, when rioting in major cities greeted the announcement by Pérez (then in his second term) of his acceptance of a structural adjustment ("*el gran viraje*") package (pejoratively called, "*el paquete*"), all three pillars of legitimation of the Punto Fijo regime were crumbling. With nationalization of oil, struggling against *imperial-*

ismo petrolero no longer could serve as a populist rallying cry. Corruption and inequality were now associated with democracy, not with military rule. Far from advancing into the core as a modern society, Venezuelans felt themselves receding into the periphery.

After 1993, challenges to the Punto Fijo system gestated among three sectors: (1) social movements and the organized working class (2) the middle class, oil executives and business sectors, and (3) the military. The first two were visible, the third formed clandestinely. None, fully succeeded, but the military conspiracy formulated by Hugo Chávez and his comrades would eventually deal a decisive blow to the old regime. In short order they were able to sweep away many of the key political institutions of the old regime. The traditional political parties associated with Punto Fijo crumbled before his political offensive, undertaken to write a new “Bolivarian Constitution.”

With the collapse of the old party system in the December 1998 elections, *Chavismo* came to dominate the state apparatus. However, the political terrain was less favorable than it appeared. Promises to create a more participatory (“protagonistic”) democracy and address the needs of the poor proved less tractable to the new regime than demolishing old political institutions. Opponents were in disarray, but they remained entrenched in key parts of civil society, especially in the media. After 1999, polls began to record a steep decline in the president’s popularity ratings. By 2002, he seemed vulnerable to an overthrow. A massive protest march of April 10, 2002 seemed to confirm Chávez’s change in fortunes. Internationally, ultra conservatives in Washington signaled their displeasure with the regime. After the mass demonstration was *apparently* violently repressed (versions of who was responsible for the violence have yet to be investigated independently), the opposition convinced military sympathizers to detain Chávez and demand his resignation. However, the coup attempt generated a backlash of protest that contributed to the restoration of the president to office, leaving the political climate more polarized than ever. The

subsequent period saw an upsurge in organization of Bolivarian Circles, while the opposition moved again to force a presidential resignation or second coup attempt by launching general strike in December 2002. By the end of January it was obvious that Chávez had weathered the storm once again, but the political situation remained far from stable.

Chavismo as an ideology

Various ideological influences shaped the worldview of *chavismo*. Because of the program of placing cadets in civilian universities, Chávez and his fellow conspirators came in contact with leftist intellectuals, some of whom would be given important posts in his administration. *Chavismo* reflects not only Venezuelan nationalism but ideas drawn from an eclectic range of leaders and thinkers from Fidel Castro to Tony Blair (“third way”) and Norberto Ceresole (1999), a self-exiled Argentine sociologist who offered a neo-fascist critique of the post-Cold War dominance of the United States, tinged with anti-semitism. Chávez has eschewed the latter but found in the ideas of Ceresole (who has since broken with Chávez) validation for his conception of a fusing of civilian and military components in defense of national values and interests.

Opponents have made much of the relationship between Chávez and leaders of countries that the United States labels “rogue states,” his refusal to cooperate with the U.S. drug war on Colombia, allegations that his administration tried to harbor Vladimir Montesinos (the renegade Peruvian strongman), and his friendly relations with Colombian guerrillas. After devastating floods destroyed the transportation infrastructure along the littoral, Chávez refused to allow American military engineer units to deploy and help in the rescue and rebuilding efforts. At the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001, Chávez refused to endorse the resolution that called for conditioning membership in a hemispheric free trade zone on electoral democracy.

What these actions all have in common is resistance to uni-polar domination of the world by the United States. Relations with countries like Iraq and

Libya might be explained purely on a pragmatic basis – the need to coordinate oil policy. However, the *chavista* offensive to revitalize OPEC was undertaken to achieve geo-strategic, not just economic goals. Chávez, much as Bolívar and Martí before him and Castro today, perceives the United States as a threat to a unified, free Latin America. Like Ceresole, he is particularly wary of Washington's desire to refashion the Latin American military into an instrument of hemispheric defense of U.S. hegemony under the guise of defending democracy.

This independent foreign policy has, like everything else, deeply divided the country. Opponents came to routinely accuse the president of leading the country toward "*Castro/comunismo*." The government restored shipments of oil to Cuba on favorable terms, and in exchange Cuba provides human resources (most notably, medical personnel and athletic coaches). During the short-lived opposition government of April 11, 2002, opposition mobs attacked the Cuban embassy. After that time, the U.S. government became circumspect in official pronouncements on the character of the Chávez administration, but ultra-rightist sectors in the United States began to link Chávez, Castro, and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the newly elected president of Brazil, as a new "axis of evil" in the Western hemisphere.

The contrasting visions of the "modern" middle class and the *chavistas* are reflected in the rhetoric surrounding OPEC. The most significant foreign policy accomplishment of the administration was the successful call for the Second Summit of Heads of States and Governments of the Member Countries of OPEC, which took place in Caracas in September 2000. Points 12, 13 and 14 of the "Declaration of Caracas" issued at the summit reaffirmed OPEC's commitment to leadership of the entire underdeveloped world and called for substantial reduction of the developing countries' debt, and called for the "just and equitable treatment of oil in the world energy market" in negotiations over environmental, fiscal, and energy problems. By contrast, the "modernized" oil executives pose the most articulate and powerful resistance with Venezuelan civil society to the Third World outlook championed by Chávez.

Well before nationalization, the foreign oil companies had "Venezuelanized" their management. Perhaps it is more accurate to say the companies had "westernized" the outlook of the native managerial strata. The generation of managers that embarked on the *apertura petrolera* pressed for Venezuela's departure from OPEC and privatization of Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) not only in economic but also in cultural terms. Andrés Sosa Pietri, former president of PDVSA, described membership in OPEC as nothing less than the rejection of Western modernity. "Our country was never a colony, not of Spain nor of any other power," he argued on the eve of Chavez's 1998 victory. For Sosa terms "discovery" or "encounter" pertain more to Venezuela than "conquest" because the country's territory was, he claims, thinly populated by tribes living close to a state of nature. The wars of liberation in Africa and Asia were to preserve cultures often thousands of years old, whereas the Independence War of Venezuela was more a civil conflict among a population with European ethical and religious values. Had it not been for OPEC, argued Sosa Pietri, "we could have aspired, because of our origins, cultural roots, and territorial wealth, to convert ourselves quickly into full associates of the so-called 'first world'" (1998).

Oil policy was not settled by the Constitution. Article 302 prohibits privatization of PDVSA but leaves open the possibility of privatizing subsidiaries. Chávez decreed (under authority granted by the National Assembly) a new organic law for mining and hydrocarbons in November 2001. The draft required the state to maintain at least 51 percent of the shares of the company's subsidiaries, which generated criticism from former company executives who intensified their public relations campaign in favor of liberal terms for investment and joint ventures. Chávez had treated the oil issue mainly in terms of alleged corruption in the company, especially in implementation of its internationalization policies, and as a matter of relations with OPEC. The important debate over regulating private investment was almost *sub rosa*, much of it on the Internet (e.g., www.petroleoyv.com and www.analica.com) where

the weight of middle class and professional opinion clearly leans toward some form of privatization. With the decree laws of November 2001, the need to forestall further undoing of the liberalization of oil policy became more urgent.

It is not surprising, then, that the eye of the political storms of April 11 and December 2002 swirled around the fate of PDVSA. Current and former executives of PDVSA became increasingly visible proponents of inducing the military to oust Chávez. Their vision of democracy included a “depolitized” PDVSA. The company would “modernize” itself by adopting international business models that would treat Venezuelan oil as a free gift of nature to capital, not, as in the earlier era, a potential source of capital for modernizing the country (Mommer 2003). For these executives and professionals, oil is the country’s lifeline to the modern values of the Western core states, the sole hoe for achievement and inclusion in Venezuela’s shrinking corner of the global economy. Venezuelans, rich and poor, who still hope to find their place in this global order feel threatened by Chávez’s leadership, but many of the poor see hope only if Venezuela’s oil remains under national control. Chávez reinforces this social division by repeatedly citing the huge gulf between the incomes of oil executives and those of the majority “employed” in the informal sector.

If the foreign policy of President Chávez has broken from the pro-Washington outlook of *puntofijismo*, his early domestic policies showed some continuity with the previous era through late 2001. In 1998 candidate Chávez attracted support from sectors of the business community, which provided indispensable financial help for the campaign. The degree and nature of the *quid pro quo* was unclear, but by some reports he owed much to insurance interests, public relations firms, developers and even fugitive bankers eager to return to Venezuela once Caldera departed (Ojeda 2001; Santodomingo 2000). Some parts of the MBR defected in protest of the way the loosely organized but tightly controlled *Movimiento Quinta República* (MVR), which had been created to contest elections and seemed destined to replace the MBR as the main organi-

zational expression of *chavismo*, designated candidates for legislative and local elections in the “mega-election” of 2000. The unseemly political dealing cost Chávez support from those professionals and middle class sectors hoping for a clear break with the corrupt practices of the Punto Fijo era (e.g., Ojeda, 2001).

The tension between mobilization politics and building an elite consensus was relatively subdued during the period in which the MVR was under adroit direction of Luis Miquilena. After the July 2000 elections the MVR leader offered the *Proyecto Venezuela* of Henrique Salas Romer, the chief opponent of Chávez in the 1998 presidential election, a vice presidency in the new Assembly in exchange for legislative support. In early 2001 the MVR reached out to a majority faction of *Acción Democrática* (AD), the party most associated with the discredited past, headed by Deputy Henry Ramos Allup for support on some legislation. Miquilena threatened the *Movimiento as Socialismo* (MAS) with expulsion from the *chavista* coalition if it continued to withhold support from some initiatives (e.g., in education) opposed by the middle class. Ironically, Miquilena himself would leave his leadership position in late 2001 as President Chávez attempted to arrest the calcification of his “revolution” by resurrecting the MBR as a movement.

This kind of alliance behavior belied the notion that Chávez, like Fujimori, intended to close Congress and execute an “*auto-golpe*.” However, it also threatened to undermine the legitimacy of a new system predicated on breaking decisively from the Punto Fijo era. Also, the bargaining undermined the ability of Chávez to move a more aggressive program of social and economic change. Eventually, the president resorted to use of congressionally authorized powers to issue decrees (including the new organic law for oil) without legislative approval. Such powers were often granted presidents during the Punto Fijo era, but critics condemned the decrees as a grab for dictatorial power. The use of these powers to issue potentially far-reaching changes in laws affecting land ownership, property rights, and oil policy was probably a major impe-

tus to the opposition's decision to launch the futile general strike of December 2002.

Although acting within constitutional boundaries, by issuing such far-reaching reforms by decree, Chávez acted more in the tradition of a populist *caudillo* than the architect of a more "protagonistic democracy," that is, one where deep reforms are designed and implemented within a participatory framework. By most accounts, the "Bolivarian Circles" that were to imbue the Chávez revolution with civic participation proliferated extensively in the aftermath of the April 2002 coup attempt. In the absence of sociological and anthropological research on the Circles, it is difficult to characterize their nature. Neither the MVR nor the MBR achieved the goal of institutionalizing participatory networks of people mobilized to grapple with Venezuela's deep and extensive socio-economic problems. In the absence of such a network, improving the economic condition of the poor majority might seem even more crucial to the political future of Chávez.

Thirty months into his presidency, Chávez could point to some evidence of progress in arresting the secular decline in wages and unemployment visible in various social and economic measures covering 1990 to 1998. A survey carried out in March 2001 showed that over nine hundred thousand Venezuelans had escaped extreme poverty during the previous year, equivalent to a drop of four percentage points. (*Venezuela al Día*, Miami, July 2001, www.venezuelaaldia.com) However, this hardly represented the kind of rapid progress many of his supporters hoped to see. One opposition think-tank, the Workers' Center for Documentation and Analysis (CENDA), claimed 90 percent of Venezuelan households had insufficient income to meet basic necessities, with 55 percent of the population in extreme poverty (*El Universal*, Caracas, January 30, 2001). However, both 2001 and 2002 brought further economic contraction. According to Central Bank statistics, inflation in 2002 reached 31.2 percent and the real income of workers fell by 13.5 percent. The year 2003 opened in the midst of general strike that greatly affected oil exports and portended another difficult year economically. By this

time, however, it was impossible to separate out the relative weight of political instability, international economic, and government policy in assessing blame (Provea, 2003).

As late as 2003, then *chavismo* had yet to institutionalize a democratic alternative to liberal constitutional structures. Nor did the president deliver rapid improvement in the standard of living of his supporters. However, the inability of the opposition to topple the regime, despite economic duress, suggested that *chavismo* was more deeply rooted than the individual popularity of the president. The poorest Venezuelans are those who most fervently placed their hopes in Chávez, but they also posed difficult dilemmas as Chávez tried to balance their interests against his desire to avoid a fundamental break with the rest of society and international capital. In the end, the president used the economic resources provided by a surge in oil prices to mobilize his supporters through the device of "missions." In doing so, Chávez opted for the more revolutionary path of backing symbolic inclusion, frequently voiced through his populist rhetoric, with material benefits that were delivered not merely through patronage structures but through political mobilization.

Mass media, clientelism

President Chávez relies extensively on his skill as a social communicator and highly personalized symbolic gestures in using government resources to cultivate his mass support. Therein lies his charisma. Many of the callers to his weekly radio program, *¡Aló, Presidente!*, seek to resolve problems in finding employment or obtaining a benefit from a particular social service agency. On the occasion of a presidential caravan to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the February 4 revolt, televised interviews with bystanders featured people pleading for redress of specific problems. The grievances were often attributed to the neglect or callousness of individuals associated (so said the speakers) with the old regime. The presidential office even created a special bureau to attend to thousands of similar petitions arriving daily in the mail, by way of telephone calls to *¡Alo, Presidente!*, and from people

waiting on line outside of Miraflores Palace or La Casona, the president's official residence (*El Nacional*, Caracas, January 26, 2001).

David Hernández Oduer, part of a team of anthropologists who have lived and studied *barrio* life for many years, summarizes how Chávez's actions and words resonate with the majority:

Who among the majority supporting Chávez does not feel the right and possibility of attended by him personally – even knowing that this is impossible? If we compare the distance between the masses and the political leaders of yesterday with the closeness they feel to the president and their loyalty to him today, we can see the difference (2002).

The elite criticizes the familiarity in the discourse of Chávez as “populism,” but for the majority this is the language of the defender of the excluded. Hernández argues that the formation of Bolivarian Circles is an authentic initiative to create a civil society corresponding to the culture and needs of the majority.

Hernández thus characterizes the formation of the Circles as a democratic initiative. Even sympathetic critics of Chávez, however, see them representing continuity, not a break from the centralized, clientelist structures of the Punto Fijo era. What both interpretations share is recognition that Chávez powerfully articulates the resistance of the poor to marginalization. This complicates governance in a society where the middle and upper classes see his policies and rhetoric as severely limiting their inclusion in the globalized world economy.

For example, in a speech commemorating the ninth anniversary (Feb. 4, 2001) of his coup attempt, Chávez referred to a highly visible and voluble conflict between *buhoneros* (ambulant street vendors) and municipal authorities. He repeated his promise never to send the security forces to assault them, “*el soberano*”, evoking bitter memories of the repression of the *caracazo*. Yet he also praised the mayor of this part of Caracas (Freddy Bernal, a close ally) and asked the *buhoneros* to be patient as the municipal government tried to resolve the differences

between the vendors and residents of a neighborhood in which a new market was to be located. He counseled patience to the vendors, who had been evicted peacefully from the popular Sabana Grande pedestrian zone and promised relocation to the market, to have patience. Their problems, said the president, are rooted in the failures *puntofijismo* and cannot be rectified overnight.

However, the patience of the *buhoneros* had worn thin. For days they had been occupying a weed-strewn, vacant plot where the promised market was to be located. Municipal police had surrounded them. Perched on a cement wall around the plot were young men in red berets. Banners proclaimed the vendors “right to work,” while angry neighbors milled around the vicinity. An agreement with municipal authorities had been reached, but the day after the Chávez speech, a group of vendors, frustrated with lack progress in resolving their grievances and without other sources of income, seized the Sabana Grande mall and had to be dislodged by mounted police, resulting in some injuries. The incident is just one of many that posed difficult decisions for Chávez and the MVR as it sought to negotiate an accommodation between those who have been marginalized and those struggling to avoid the same fate. The inability to find such an accommodation ultimately found expression in massive and increasingly violent confrontations in the streets of Caracas (and other cities) between April 2002 and January 2003.

Just as the MBR and MVR have proven somewhat chimerical, so also have the forms of mass organization fluctuated. The MVR in particular has always been envisioned more as a party entrusted with the usual task of such organizations – winning elections, moving legislation, etc. The Bolivarian Circles were supposed to assume the form of an organized movement. Originally, members of the circles were to work closely with the military to carry out the educational, economic, and health missions, but gradually they have been superseded by civic committees carrying out the missions themselves. In many areas of the country the circles seemed in early 2006 at least to have atrophied.

Chavez between two worlds

Chávez seeks to represent the marginalized, excluded, and impoverished sectors, which form the majority, but he cannot simply ignore the power of the privileged, globalized few, both nationally and internationally. This dilemma underlay his handling of the conflict between *buhoneros* and neighborhood associations, and it has been visible in myriad other conflicts as well. Opponents are eager to seize on *tomas*, demonstrations, and strikes as evidence of lawlessness, but at the same time they are eager to portray enforcement as repression. This situation lends itself to opportunistic actions by (predominantly) young *chavistas* who are only loosely organized into the MVR and Bolivarian movement. The lack of organizational discipline makes the Chávez regime more vulnerable to destabilization by the United States. When Chávez articulates suspicions of outside interference, these are taken as signs of its paranoia, yet there are ample precedents in Latin America to justify his concerns.

It is tempting to attribute the mass appeal of Chávez solely to skillful manipulation of public opinion and his talents as a social communicator, but this is to devalue the importance of the message itself. In his discourse Chávez consistently privileges lower class interests over those of other social classes and sectors. This was not something artificially created by public relations specialists. As Alberto Muller Rojas, who served as chief of staff for the 1998 campaign, put it, the Chávez image is “self-constructed.” A significant amount of the MVR’s limited publicity budget in 1998 was devoted to mass distribution of posters immediately after the pronouncement of Chávez as winner. The text was carefully chosen: “Chávez, President, everyone for Venezuela now (*ahora*).” “*Ahora*” was an attempt to capitalize on the phrase “*por ahora*”, which Chávez pronounced in his short surrender speech in 1992, admitting that “for now” his plans had been frustrated.

The discourse of Chávez is disconcerting and infuriating to elites. The explanation, says Alejandro Moreno, a Salesian priest and social psychologist who has lived for more than a decade in a Caracas

barrio, is that the president addresses himself to “the people”, not to them. For Moreno, the enthusiastic response of the people to his message cannot be attributed to charisma, manipulation, or demagoguery. “What is important is not what he speaks but what speaks inside him. In him speaks the convivial relations of popular Venezuela, of convivial man. ...An elderly woman expressed it very well: ‘For me, it’s like my own son is president’” (Moreno, 1998: 5).

The uses of history and political culture

The nationalism incubated in the MBR-2000 drew upon a deep tradition of populist caudillism in Venezuelan history. The least known but most emblematic of the trinity (including Simón Bolívar and his philosopher/teacher, Simón Rodríguez) of heroes in MBR-2000 rhetoric is Ezequiel Zamora, a Liberal general assassinated in 1860, allegedly from within his own ranks during the Federal War (See Banko 1996: 169-183). During the 1960s leftists (e.g., folk singer Ali Primera) revived the mythic reputation of Zamora, even if most Venezuelans otherwise knew little of his history. Chávez, from the *llanero* region of Barinas, where Zamora achieved his greatest following, exalted the Federalist martyr and appropriated his anti-oligarchic rhetoric, which resonates in his mass rallies, televised speeches and weekly radio broadcasts.

Like Zamora, Chávez employs an egalitarian discourse that is often vague on specifics, laced with racial overtones, evocative of the resentment of the masses, and threatening to elites. “*Horror a la oligarquía*,” was a popular Federalist cry. Humberto Celli, a prominent leader of AD, lamented how far his party had drifted from the affection of the masses since the days of Betancourt. Celli took note of the tumultuous scene that greeted Chávez in December 1998 when he gave his victory speech, delivered from a window of the presidential palace, newly dedicated to his followers. “When I saw Chávez triumphant on the ‘People’s Balcony,’ greeting the multitude, and the TV cameras focused on those delirious faces, I said to myself, ‘My God, those are the *negritos* of *Acción Democrática*’” (Colomina 2001).

Celli's rueful comment on "*negritos*" evokes the manner in which the discourse of Chávez appropriates intertwined class and racial identities in Venezuelan political culture. Less appreciated was the manipulation of gender politics by both Chávez and the opposition. On the one hand, women occupied several high positions in the cabinet and for the first time, the Vice Presidency. The president's spouse, Marísabel (whom he later divorced), was a prominent advisor and public relations asset to the MVR. On the other hand, public opinion surveys showed that across all social classes men are more likely than women to support Chávez, which poses a significant political problem for the president's attempt to foster a network of grassroots Bolivarian Circles through the country. Women head many of the social movements frustrated by the administration's failure to implement fully consultation with civil society. As with earlier efforts to incorporate women into party organization (see Friedman 2000), the Bolivarian leadership seems intent on subordinating women's interest to other goals. Much presidential rhetoric is paternalistic, if not macho. The opposition also has not hesitated to appeal to baser prejudices in the culture, as it did when it sent women's panties to military officers, clearly implying that failure to rise up against the president brought into question their masculinity.

Chávez mobilizes subaltern sentiments against the privileged with appeals to themes deeply ingrained in Venezuelan history and national identity. A good example is his national radio and television broadcast of June 15, 2001. For several hours the president held a "conversation" with his audience, scorning his critics as "*los escualidos*". In a conversational style, punctuated by friendly asides to studio workers, he discussed several foreign policy initiatives, including his plans to attend several international conferences and visit several foreign capitals. In this way, Chávez portrays Venezuela as once again a player in world events, a country shaping them, not merely at their mercy. In both style and substance his addresses and conversational programs communicate to the economically marginalized that this president takes them into his con-

fidence. The very vocal annoyance expressed by opponents ratifies the perception that he is their voice in a world that otherwise seeks to discard them or sees their welfare as at best a residual product of economic policies that would immediately worsen their conditions. It would be naïve to think that ordinary Venezuelan citizens are any more captivated by discussions of presidential itineraries or details of domestic policy than are most other people. The middle class finds the programs especially tedious, but they are not the target audience.

Another use of the media is to convey of the *chavista* hermeneutics about history. In his June 15 broadcast, the president followed news of his foreign policy initiatives with an exhortation to his audience to read Ramón Velásquez's book on the fall of the "yellow liberal" regime in 1899. Displaying several photos of the troops of General Cipriano Castro, leader of the insurgents, he proclaimed,

These are the troops of the Liberal Restoration Army of General Cipriano Castro. ...They came from the Andes. ...Here is the camp. Venezuela is at war, ending the century at war because independence, as Bolívar recognized, managed to break the chains of Spain but not to complete the social revolution. [To someone in the studio.] Put the photo up again so that you can see ...here it is...this is a poor people. See them, with their banners, shoeless, with their old drums, their coronets, and their leader, Cipriano Castro, in front, a people seeking justice because after Independence they were betrayed, and today they continue seeking justice. We thank God that one hundred years later we are embarked on this course without a war; we are embarked on a peaceful battle, in a democratic battle. A God, the Virgin, and everybody is calling to the country to struggle to make this road victorious. It will be so in order to avoid that things turn out to repeat themselves as they have throughout Venezuelan history. (Chávez Frías, 2001)

Here Chávez takes as his model a controversial, often reviled figure evoking obvious comparisons to his own situation. Cipriano Castro, like Chávez, is depicted most often as a charismatic, nationalist

leader, often scorned as a tyrant with an unstable personality, in contrast to his own self portrait as leader of a movement of the poor against perfidious elites associated with a discredited form of liberalism. Displaying a photo of prominent bankers who financed a revolt against Castro, Chávez drove home a comparison to his own political enemies, but he was quick to claim that his enemies, “*los escualidos*,” were much less potent.

The politicization of history finds expression in debates over public holidays. For example, in an attempt to preserve the memory of January 23, 1958, the date of a popular uprising against General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, in 2001 the opposition introduced a resolution into the Assembly calling for a public commemoration of the date. For his part, Chávez characterized the anniversary as a sad reminder of the failures of the regime it inaugurated. In response to strong media support for commemorating January 23 date, the president promoted a major mobilization and alternative celebration of the anniversary of the February 4, 1992 coup attempt.

Three days before the February 4 anniversary events, the government staged an elaborate ceremony to commemorate the birthday of Zamora at the Pantheon, where the remains of Bolívar and many other national heroes are buried. Illness prevented the president from appearing, and the turnout was meager. In contrast, the event in Caracas on February 4 itself was high theater and massive. Yellow with red splashed across it, the colors of the MVR, were prominent throughout the event. In his speech Chávez referred to the turnout as a rebuke to the major media organizations and polls suggesting some slippage in his popularity. “These are polls that count,” said the president.

Chávez told the rally that intellectuals do not know history the way the people do. Although he acknowledged that January 23 uprising contributed to the flight of Pérez Jiménez, he went on challenge history as it has been written under *adeco* hegemony. He praised President Isaías Medina Angarita, overthrown in the 1945 coup inaugurating the *trienio*, as the greatest president of the century.

He characterized the *trienio* as a sectarian government that, along with the coup, paved the way for the return of dictatorship. He claimed the Bolivarian Constituent Assembly consulted the population in a way that the *trienio* one did not. He argued that the coup attempts of 1992 were justified, even though they were put down with considerable loss of life. By contrast, he said, Medina was introducing democracy but had surrendered rather than open fire on civilians and on young cadets supporting the coup. By contrast, the armed forces had been ordered by the leaders of the Punto Fijo regime to fire on the people to put down the *caracazo*.

Such competing claims and interpretations hardly generate consensus among Venezuelan historians, much less politicians. More significantly, the debate indicates how deeply divided Venezuelans are about the meaning of their own history, and how divided on what they want democracy to mean. During the Punto Fijo era the ruling elite in general refused to acknowledge that the Medina oil reform law of 1943 had restored sovereignty over foreign oil companies by forcing them to accept the legitimacy of taxes and the jurisdiction of Venezuelan courts over contract disputes. To do so would have been to acknowledge that oil imperialism had been dealt a defeat by an unelected government, sundering the ideological connection between nationalism and democracy. Now Chávez sought to revise history to his own ends, denying that the Punto Fijo system had in any way contributed to the advancement of democracy.

Modern and subaltern conceptions of democracy

There is little reason to believe that capitalist globalization holds much promise of being inclusive for most Venezuelans because social conditions offer minimal promise for investments that will generate employment. Wages are too high for labor intensive industries, but levels of education and skills are not adequate for capital intensive, high-tech industries. On a world scale capitalist globalization remains uneven, perhaps more so than ever before. Mounting rates of world poverty suggest globalized capitalism is marginalizing greater numbers than

it is incorporating into its circuits. It is customary for opponents to blame Chávez for the exodus of 150,000 Venezuelans, but the underlying cause of this reversal is runs deeper in the international economy.

The power and appeal of the Chávez message resides in his ability to articulate the deep resentment felt by the people. Few Venezuelans are versed in the history of yellow liberalism, the Federalist Wars, or the writings of Zamora, Simón Rodríguez, and Bolívar, but much of state culture (monuments and the national anthem, for example) celebrates the historical myth associating Venezuelan national identity with a popular, egalitarian struggle for freedom against a perfidious oligarchy. In this conception of the nation, its “people” refers not to the bourgeois meaning of “people” as a civil society composed of legal equals, sharing a common national identity, integrated into market society and modern culture. “People” refers to a majority of Venezuelans who live in that “other” society at the margins of civil society as it is known to the wealthy, the middle class, and parts of the working class. The project of Betancourt was to integrate poor Venezuelans into modern national culture, predominantly a Western, cosmopolitan, urban culture.

Chávez draws upon Simón Rodríguez for a vision of democracy in more radical, Roussian terms, one that envisions a strong democratic state working actively to transform society to lay the basis for republican rule. The opposition offers a more Lockean vision of polyarchy, characterized by checks and balances and consistent with the liberal,

Washington consensus (See Robinson, 1996). Both visions draw upon a plan to modernize Venezuela’s political culture that will be difficult to achieve given the cultural and economic chasm between the social classes.

The model of political modernization bequeathed to political science by the French Revolution and Enlightenment, suggests that Latin America will only progress once its traditional, personalist culture is replaced by a civic culture populated with rational, educated citizens capable of competing in both the economic and political marketplace. Consistent with the principles of democracy as polyarchy, citizens are to articulate their interests through freely formed organizations in civic society. Secular modernists like Betancourt, Rómulo Gallegos, Luis Beltrán Figuerola, and others sought to tame *la barbarie* and, aided by oil rents, build a modern, Western democratic society, but the system they created never fully transcended the cultural and class divide between this liberal ideal and a population oriented not so much to traditional so much as “solidaristic” relations.

The tendency toward caudillism is not restricted to *el soberano*. In a context of institutional void and instability, middle class and business communities were in search of a candidate with a strong personality, one who could fill the void left by the collapse of the parties. In mid 1997, *Consultores 21* asked a cross section of the population what model of president they preferred – Fidel Castro, Alberto Fujimori, another figure, or nobody (See Table 1). Although Castro was most popular among the most

Table 1

Preferred Model of President by Social Class						
	Total	Lower popular	Popular Middle	Popular Middle	Middle	Middle-Upper
Alberto Fujimori	43	10	32	53	49	50
None	18	27	23	14	15	27
Fidel Castro	16	25	17	13	16	4
Others	18	19	19	16	18	15

Source: *Percepción 21*, vol 2, no. 2 (Caracas: Consultores 21, June 1997), p. 6. (Percentages do not add to 100 percent in the original) (www.consultores21.com)

marginalized sectors of the population, his 25 percent paled compared to the enthusiasm of the lower middle to upper class for Alberto Fujimori. More than accomplishments, it was Fujimori's "strong personality" that most attracted the middle class.

The issue in Venezuela today may not be caudillism versus democracy, but what kind of caudillism, representing whose interests, will prevail.

The Punto Fijo regime integrated Venezuelan across class and racial lines (less so across gender; see Friedman 2000) into populist system of reconciliation, but the result was not the modern, Western civil society envisioned by its founders. Moreno captured the nature of the old system as follows:

The leadership is oriented to a modern model, but the popular base has its own manner of relating to one another. The two worlds co-exist in one party [AD]. The leadership has been sufficiently astute, perhaps because it is not as modern as it seems, in not forcing the people to enter into a rational model. Thus, severe conflicts are restricted to leadership circles but kept from dividing the party from its base. (1997: 25-26)

Moreno says that the national network of *adeco* party organizations consisted of local base committees connect by "family ties or by ties of godparentage, friendship, regional origins. They form a family tapestry." Kinship relations were "human bridges" within the party network (1997: 25). More of AD's "human bridges" were being marginalized from processes of social integration as the rents were siphoned from the economy overseas. The Bolivarian Circles are the functional equivalent of these bridges.

Chávez seems both to embrace and reject a portrait of him as a rogue statesman. Erudite and pragmatic, he eschews labels and repeatedly defines himself in terms of what he is *not*. This, of course, leaves open the question of what he really is. There is no *Plan of Barranquilla* (Betancourt's political manifesto of 1931) nor *De Una a Otra Venezuela* (the best known of Arturo Uslar Pietri's political writings) outlining a vision of the future. Chávez has yet to propose a coherent, alternative economic

policy framework to neoliberalism, but if he did so he would undoubtedly be accused of being doctrinaire. One political solution is to portray himself as the opposite of his enemies. But how can he portray his opponents as powerless ("*los escualidos*") yet hope to use them as a point of reference for organizing a movement? Another solution would be to raise the level of nationalist rhetoric against the United States, but this has other costs that the president, as a political realist, seems to understand. Even after Washington's endorsement of the failed coup of April 11, Chávez carefully avoided direct criticism of the U.S. in even his most vitriolic rhetoric.

Winning on the electoral battlefield

Having failed to remove Chávez from office by unconstitutional means, the opposition turned to the Constitutional mechanism of a recall referendum. In November 2003, the Democratic Coordinator, a coalition consisting of the national business confederation (FEDCAMARAS), the union confederation (CTV) linked to the old parties, the opposition parties (new and old), and various middle class civic organizations (most importantly SUMATE, a self-defined NGO that receives funds from the National Endowment for Democracy, funded by the U.S. government), submitted over 3 million signatures, well surpassing the 2,451,821 signatures needed to force a vote. The National Electoral Council (CNE) only accepted approximately 1,900,000 as valid, leading to protracted negotiations mediated by the Organization of American States and the Carter Center. Eventually, both sides settled on a "repair" process – essentially a opportunity within a limited amount of time for citizens to remove or validate the contested signatures. President Chávez called on his supporters to find 200,000 citizens willing to remove their names and also to gather signatures in an effort to recall opposition elected officials, but the effort, *Comando Ayacucho*, failed miserably on most counts. When in May 2004 he CNE validated enough signatures to proceed with the presidential recall, the Chávez was faced, therefore, with a formidable political challenge.

Chávez dismantled Ayacucho and launched a

new effort, *Comando Maisanta*. Teams of grassroots *chavistas* combed the barrios to identify supporters, register new voters, and prepare to mobilize them on election day, August 15. The “electoral battle units” now carried out a more organized form of mobilization, but one similar to that which occurred during the coup of April 2002. Now they also had the advantage of a year of “missions,” a series of mass efforts to eradicate illiteracy, establish (with the help of perhaps 15,000 Cuban doctors) clinics in the poorest areas, and provide subsidized food in markets. Other programs included an urban land reform in which families were given legal title to their homes, but only after they carried out their own property census, and micro-credits for cooperatives, administered thorough a women’s bank and popular bank. Although these programs have been criticized for inefficiency and corruption, they reinforced the popular judgment that this President

put their interests before those of the wealthy.

By May, polls showing the president’s future in doubt began to reflect a new reality, and by June most polls were showing No, to reject the recall, winning. Polls done IMEDIOPSA in June and August (See Table 2) confirmed that the president’s support was by far strongest among the most marginalized sectors in Venezuelan society. Sector E, consisting of Venezuelans too poor to even purchase enough food to meet minimum nutritional requirements, returned the highest majorities. Without their support, it is doubtful that No would have carried Zulia, the most populous state and a key oil producing region (Lake Maracaibo). The D sector, also composed of Venezuelans living in poverty, also tended to support Chávez, though less strongly. It hardly surprises that the A and B sectors (upper and middle class) strongly favored Sí, but the particularly revealing finding is the weakness of Chávez

Table 2

Voter Preferences for Recall Election by State Type, Gender, Class, Summer 2004							
Type of State and Preference	Class				Total	Gender	
	A-B No. (%) ^d	C No. (%)	D No. (%)	E No. (%)		Men No. (%)	Women No. (%)
Urban ^a	19 (19)	148 (34)	581 (64)	584 (64)	1,329 (54)	641 (52)	642 (52)
No (%) ^e	62 (75)	256 (58)	365 (24)	223 (24)	906 (37)	442 (36)	493 (40)
Yes (June)							
Rural ^b	19 (50)	220 (44)	691 (64)	752 (71)	1,681 (62)	864 (63)	818 (61)
No	56 (69)	229 (46)	294 (27)	237 (22)	816 (30)	415 (30)	401 (30)
Yes (June)							
Andean ^c	15 (50)	74 (46)	183 (50)	185 (54)	457 (51)	258 (56)	199 (45)
No	11 (37)	71 (44)	149 (41)	122 (35)	354 (39)	163 (35)	191 (43)
Yes (June)							
Zulia ^d	3 (25)	17 (25)	89 (54)	120 (70)	229 (55)	118 (56)	111 (55)
No	8 (67)	49 (73)	73 (44)	47 (28)	177 (43)	89 (42)	88 (43)
Yes (Aug.)							

Source: IMEDIOPSA Survey for the CNE, June 2004, Aug. 2004 for Zulia. (Hellinger, 2005:23-27)

a. Anzoátegui, Aragua, Bolívar, Carabobo, Lara, Miranda, Vargas, Municipality of Libertador (central Caracas, in no state). Data for Zulia was unavailable for June.

b. Apure, Barinas, Cojedes, Falcón, Guárico, Monagas, Portuguesa, Sucre, Yaracuy

c. Mérida, Táchira, Trujillo.

d. Zulia results are for August.

e. Percentages do not add up to 100 because “Undecided” and “Not Voting” are included in the base total for June poll, “Undecided”(No report for “not voting”) for August poll (Zulia).

among working class and lower middle class voters in the C category, which revealed itself to be deeply divided. This sector might be characterized as the "precarious included," those who tend to have regular employment in the formal sector but perhaps fearful of falling into the ranks "el soberano." It also should be noted that the women's vote split relatively evenly. In contrast to elections in Chile during the Popular Unity era and Nicaragua in 1990, when Violetta Chamorro defeated Daniel Ortega, the Venezuelan women were not appreciably more likely than men to vote a conservative option.

Since the recall election, the government has continued the missions, but there are signs of a deterioration of its mobilizational capacity. Abstention rates soared in subsequent elections, reaching 75 percent in the December 2005 elections of the National Assembly – partly the result of an opposition boycott in the face of impending defeat, and perhaps reflecting a lack of urgency on the part of the president's most ardent supporters among the poor. As the president's popularity rating fell from their lofty 70 percent range in late 2004, it will not doubt become common again to read that Chávez is vulnerable to defeat in the December 2006 elections.

Conclusion

Those who think the supporters of Hugo Chávez will abandon him entirely frequently overlook the deep veins of popular resentment of oligarchy. Should Chávez fall by unconstitutional means, any subsequent regime will find it difficult to govern without exercising considerable repression, and some form of civil or guerrilla warfare is almost inevitable. However, the Venezuelan masses did not issue President Chávez a blank check. "If he doesn't do well, we'll replace him, the same as we put him in there," says one of Father Moreno's neighbors in the *barrio* (1998b: 5). The key word in this quota-

tion is "we." The legacy of 40 years of *puntofijismo*, the first extended democratic experience in country's history, is that today the Venezuelan people are less likely to accept any leadership, whether originating from government or opposition, blindly.

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