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Why Venezuela?

By Anne Fischel

“To take democracy out of the hands of the liberal elites and reclaim it for the people is [our]... crucial task...”

Latin America is the center of the popular democratic revolution of our times...”
- D.L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution*

Our academic program spent 10 months studying Venezuela. We began in September 2008 and will finish our work in June 2009. In winter quarter we spent 8 weeks in Venezuela, and many of us remained for two additional weeks of travel and study. Our work in this final quarter is to write and teach about our experience.

Our colleagues, fellow students, family, and friends have asked us, “Why Venezuela?” Why focus on a nation that most in the U.S. know mainly for its rich oil fields and Miss Universe contestants—or as the nation governed by Hugo Chavez, whom the New York Times recently referred to as a “standard issue autocrat.”¹ What is it about Venezuela that compels our attention? Why, for many of us who traveled to Venezuela, has our goal expanded to incorporate not just understanding and analysis, but solidarity and participation? Why do we think our work in Venezuela can and should be useful to our

communities here at home?

We can begin to answer that question by recognizing that most of us do not understand how the rest of the world views the United States, or how fundamental are the global challenges to U.S. centrality and dominance. The geopolitical landscape is transforming rapidly. A decade ago it was commonplace to describe the fall of the Soviet Union as the definitive triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy. Most of the known challenges to our system had failed, had fallen into a rigid stasis, or were being incorporated into the capitalist orbit. Neo-liberal capitalism championed by the United States stood alone as a model for the world. We in the U.S. and globally were told that democracy and capitalism were inextricably linked—you could not have one without the other.

Today our proud claim to political, economic and moral supremacy is everywhere in doubt. Capitalism and the U.S.-style form of liberal, representative democracy that generally co-exists with it are everywhere in crisis. The government-funded supports that narrowed the gaps between rich and poor, however slightly, and made possible a dream of economic and social progress for all have largely been

rescinded. Full employment is no longer considered possible or desirable. The erosion of civil rights and civil liberties at home coupled with disastrous interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, and other nations have earned condemnation from millions of people around the globe and from all but our very closest allies.

The world faces a crisis which tests our ability and willingness to establish just and equitable relationships, both nationally and globally. Increasingly, it is the economic system modeled and championed by the U.S. that is seen as the source of this grave and systemic crisis. The declaration of Cumaná, authored by the member nations of ALBA—Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Honduras, Dominica and Nicaragua—states, “Capitalism has caused the current environmental crisis, by submitting the necessary conditions for life in the planet to the predominance of market and profit... the global economic crisis, climate change, the food crisis and the energy crisis are the result of the decay of capitalism, which threatens to end life and the planet.” The ALBA nations call for a global system based on “solidarity...not competition...” harmony with our mother earth and not plundering of human resources...cultural diversity and not cultural destruction, peace based on social justice and not on imperialist policies and wars.”²

Hunger, unemployment, growing inequality, global warming, privatization of resources needed to sustain life, corporate appropriation of indigenous and popular knowledge—these are widely recognized as consequences of global capitalism. It is no wonder many nations are turning away from the U.S. and towards new leadership and models.

Meanwhile, in Latin America political, social and economic experiments proliferate, driven by a commitment to social inclusion, political participation, equality, and national sovereignty. The most significant, influential, and articulate of these national experiments is occurring in Venezuela, where President Hugo Chavez has denounced the “unipolar system dominating the world”³ and celebrated the fact that, “a new world, a multipolar world so

much dreamt of, is rising.”⁴ President Chavez took office in 1999; today, 10 years into his administration, there is ample evidence that the Bolivarian Revolution is meeting popular needs and eliciting popular participation on an unprecedented scale.

Some examples: while we in the U.S. struggle for a viable health care system, Venezuela’s oil profits are funding one of the most comprehensive, high-quality and accessible systems of free health care the world has ever seen. While the quality of public schooling here is falling and the cost of higher education is skyrocketing, Venezuela is developing comprehensive literacy and educational programs; through these *misiones*, millions of adults are developing literacy skills, and millions more are enrolled in free community programs to provide high school and college education. Where 70% of Venezuela’s colleges were once located in its principal cities, the new educational initiatives are inverting this trend, decentralizing and democratizing public education.⁵

Venezuela’s innovative programs are organized around a model of “endogenous development”—development based on the needs of the population and the nation’s internal resources and capacity. The new programs in education, health, job training, land reform, and urban planning, to name just a few, are not just social services provided by an oil-rich state. Rather, they are mechanisms for integrating excluded and oppressed sectors of the population into a participatory process of community and national development. They are not only providing skills and resources, but developing collective capacity for political participation, cooperative economic development, and citizenship.

Our program read about these developments in fall quarter, but it was only in Venezuela, where we had the opportunity to visit local communities, talk with students, teachers, workers, farmers and government officials, and observe schools, health centers, community media stations, local community council meetings and other expressions of participatory democracy, that we began to truly understand and appreciate the vibrant and highly energized social process that is taking

place in Venezuela.

In our travels through Venezuela many people opened doors to us. We lived in peoples' homes, visited schools, workplaces, farms, and factories, and volunteered in *misiones* and cooperatives. Venezuela is an impressively open society; no one placed restrictions on our movements; no topic was off-limits, and people in all walks of life cheerfully helped us make contacts, solve problems, and arrange meetings and site visits. In return we were assured, "This is your revolution too," and we were asked repeatedly to inform our neighbors, friends and political representatives about what we saw and learned in Venezuela. In a community meeting space under a Caracas highway where we spent a day with community members, talking, eating soup, and learning about their work to serve and improve their community, women held our hands and shouted, "Tell Obama! Tell him about Chavez! Tell him Venezuela is a democracy!" In Barquisimeto, where I lived in the home of a community activist, neighborhood organizers who dropped by to visit would quietly tell me, "we know what your media says about us; please tell your people what it is really like here. Tell them how hard we are working for the community. Tell them we are a democratic society, a society of inclusion." And finally, repeatedly, we were told, "We hold your government responsible for Iraq, for Afghanistan and for failed policies in Latin America, but our quarrel is not with you. We welcome you to Venezuela, and we hope that our relationship with you can continue and grow."

Fundamentally, our study of Venezuela was driven by a need for new visions of possibility. Often, our imaginative horizons are limited by the system we live in. We need help creating new visions and forming democratic collectivities to articulate goals, structures and strategies to enable us to realize them. Venezuela is not only challenging global capitalism and our limited forms of democracy, it is creating alternatives we can learn from. Venezuela offered new ways of thinking and working for change.

We need to be able to link ourselves respectfully and effectively to Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution and to other movements

throughout the globe that incorporate values of sustainability and justice. To do this means recognizing that the United States is no longer a model others should aspire to—and that we in the U.S. can no longer see the world primarily in terms of our needs and interests. Rather, we must establish relationships of reciprocity, mutuality and respect with the world's peoples, and most especially with those pioneering new and transformative forms of social, political and economic life. Venezuela has been the ideal place in which to begin this process.

Endnotes

1 "Horrors, a handshake!" New York Times editorial, April 24, 2009.

2 "The Declaration of Cumaná."Venezuela Analysis, April 23, 2009 <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4390>

3 "President Chavez pleads for a multipolar world." Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, Jul2 22, 2008, http://www.abn.info.ve/go_news5.php?articulo=141877

4 "Chavez says 'A new world, a multipolar world so much dreamt of is rising.'" VHeadline, April 7, 2009, <http://www.vheadline.com/readnews.asp?id=79070>

5 Personal communication, Edgardo Ramirez, Ministerio de Educación Superior, Caracas, March 13, 2009.

Student Movements & Moving Students

By Charles Hardy

Twenty-four years have passed since my feet first touched Venezuelan soil. Recently as I watched a group of students march in a protest against the current government, I realized that they were not even born when I arrived here. More importantly, they have none of the memories that I have of the years of supposed “democracy” before the arrival of the government led by Hugo Chávez in 1999.

My collage of memories from those years would include: looking at the bodies of naked dead youths strewn on the floor of a hospital morgue because there was no place else to put them; sleeping in a cemetery as an act of solidarity while sixty-eight bodies in garbage bags were being exhumed from a pit the government denied existed; watching helicopters pass overhead and hoping that no protesting students would be shot that day; wondering what the newspaper journalists wanted to share on the blank spaces that had been censored; raising my hands in the air as I and the people of my neighborhood faced a soldier with his automatic weapon aimed at us; having the police raid my barrio shack when I was meeting with other clergy from the area; defecating on a newspaper on the floor because the barrio had no running

water or sewers; staring at children with bloated stomachs full of parasites. The list could go on and on.

In recent years, Venezuelan university students have become probably the most significant opposition force in Venezuela. The old political parties have lost almost all credibility and the new ones have been mostly centered around their founders. The reporting of the private mass media is questioned by the majority of the people. In my opinion however, the students unfortunately have been manipulated by leaders of these parties and by those who control the private media.

An example might be the student who was never politically involved in any cause. One day in 2007, he arrived at his university and observed a protest because the government was not renewing the license of a private television channel. He said he became aware that day that freedom of expression was being threatened in Venezuela and so he became involved with the other students in rejecting the government’s action.

In 2002, the television station he decided to defend had encouraged people to overthrow the legitimately elected government. When

it was overthrown the channel celebrated the event and was proud of its collaboration in the overthrow. Had such happened in the United States, the channel would have been taken off the air immediately. However, in Venezuela, the station was permitted to continue for five years until its license expired in 2007. In some ways, it seems incredible that anyone would run to the defense of this station and its multi-millionaire owner. But they did, especially the students.

To me, it would have been a more sensible idea for the students to march so that the government would give them the channel for their own use rather than fighting for the rights of a multi-millionaire to have control over a part of the public airwaves for another twenty years. In the end, the channel became a public service station. But the multi-millionaires' station is able to continue broadcasting through cable.

The successful gathering of people for these demonstrations put the students in the forefront for organizing protest marches against constitutional reforms that President Chávez was proposing. But when people got up to speak at such events the podiums were dominated by the old time politicians and not by the students.

It is good to see young people becoming involved in political concerns. At the same time I am a bit frightened by the possibility of them being manipulated. They are more knowledgeable than older people in using the Internet and therefore have a great deal of power.

The Internet has definitely opened the lines of communication. But it has also opened the possibilities for abuse. When Colombia crossed international borders and bombed in Ecuador, there was a call through the Internet for people to attend a concert for peace. The concert was to be held on the Colombian-Venezuelan border. It should have been on the Colombian-Ecuadorian border. Yes, there was concern in Venezuela because of the violation of sovereign rights of another nation. And Venezuela had a right to be concerned because it also shares a border with Colombia. As a result it did send additional troops to its borders. However, the call for the concert on the Colombian-Venezuelan border diverted attention from what

Colombia had done and made Venezuela look like an aggressor.

I believe that the Internet plus student movements will equal one of the most important factors in determining many decisions in which way our world will go. But as Superman Clark Kent was told, with great power comes great responsibility. That's where I think programs such as the one from Evergreen College that concentrated on what has been happening in Venezuela in recent years are of extreme importance for the future of our world. In their months of study in Olympia and the several weeks that many of the students spent in Venezuela, they were exposed to a variety of views that will be helpful to them in evaluating U.S. relations not only with Venezuela but with the whole world. The skills that they have developed should have opened their minds to seeing the multiple factors that enter into what shapes our opinions. That would include the influence of the mass media, the wealthy, and the powerful. The wealthy and powerful are not the majority in the world and it is a small group of individuals that decides what is presented through the mass media. That is why it is so important that the Evergreen students were able to mingle with ordinary Venezuelan citizens.

I extend my congratulations to the students and their families, to their professors Anne Fischel and Peter Bohmer, and to the Evergreen State College. May more people and institutions follow your example.

Editor's Note: Charles Hardy is a native of Cheyenne, Wyoming and a columnist for Narco News. He has more than 20 years of experience as an international correspondent in Venezuela. His book Cowboy in Caracas was read by the class and we met him in Caracas. If you would like to contact him, he can be reached at:

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Modern Venezuelan History, Politics & the Rise of Hugo Chávez

By Ryne Maloney-Risner

Introduction

During the last one hundred years, Venezuelan history has been intimately entwined with the development of the petroleum industry and tumultuous grabs for political power amongst various military and civilian forces. Since the break up of *Gran Colombia* in 1830, Venezuela has been a Republic governed by 27 different constitutions and 42 heads of state¹. The *caudillo*, or political military leader, is a recurring figure in Venezuelan history who has either championed the cause for democracy or brutally clung to power. A tradition of violent coups and uprisings, as well as strong democratic tendencies, has resulted in many periods of major economic and political restructuring throughout the 20th century. The abundant availability of petroleum has created unique developmental circumstances in Venezuela which sets it apart from other Latin American nations. The historic struggle for the control of the state and the use and development of the petroleum industry has defined modern Venezuela, as well as set the stage for its current political phenomenon, the Bolivarian Revolution.

Currently, Venezuela is undergoing a major transition towards a more just political

and economic system, characterized by the massive mobilization and participation of millions of people who had been historically excluded from society; this process is known as the Bolivarian Revolution. Since his election in 1998 Hugo Chávez has been the figurehead of this movement. Chávez is often characterized in the United States and western media as dictatorial, while the democratic nature of his rise to prominence is carefully ignored. Chávez was elected because he embodied a break from politics as usual in Venezuela, which had been dominated for decades by corrupt elites and dictators, all claiming to share the tremendous oil wealth of the nation with the people, and all of them falling far short of their promises.

Though Chávez is certainly different from Venezuelan politicians of the past, his rise to the presidency fits in with a larger pattern of strong civilian and military alliances which have worked together in the past to reshape the political landscape. However, unlike his predecessors, Chávez has shown a strong commitment to democracy, placing the needs of the people before the military and political elites. A look into Venezuelan history of the last 100 years provides important insight into the

circumstances and causes of Chávez's massive popular support and the important events that have allowed the dynamic Bolivarian process to come to life.

Discovery of Oil

At the beginning of the 20th century Venezuela shared characteristics with many Latin American nations of the time. It was a traditional agricultural society based primarily on the production of coffee, cocoa, sugar, cotton and tobacco². Politically, Venezuela existed in a continuing state of *caudillismo*; transfer of power from one military ruler to the next. Within this system existed a frail and limited democracy in which voting rights were restricted to literate males over twenty-one years of age. Eligible voters were only allowed to participate in municipal consul, state legislative, and national senate elections. The national senate selected the president (though quite often presidents would seize power by way of military coup or revolution).

Juan Vicente Gomez seized the presidency with a coup in 1908, and would not relinquish power until his death in 1935, despite twenty armed revolts aimed at ousting him from office³. This would be the first of many successful military coups carried out during the 20th century. The Gomez dictatorship was defined by a push towards industrialization and modernization, fueled by the discovery of oil in 1910.

The first oil exploration concessions were granted in 1910. The first operational well for commercial purposes was constructed in 1914. The outbreak of World War One in the same year highlighted the importance of oil in industrial society and caused a spike in the global demand for petroleum products⁴. From 1919-1922 Venezuela expanded its production capabilities and became a major exporter of oil. To increase income, Gomez granted almost infinite incentives to foreign companies such as Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell for exploration and production⁵.

With enormous revenue coming in from petroleum exploitation, Gomez initiated massive public works programs and paid off foreign

debts, as well as accumulated incredible wealth for himself and a circle of ruling elites⁶. Gomez would be the first of many Venezuela leaders to indulge in widespread corruption relating to nearly unrestricted access to petroleum incomes. Gomez also expanded and strengthened the military, and established a vicious secret police force which was used to imprison, torture and murder thousands of political opponents⁷. Demands for a more open and democratic society grew despite harsh oppression.

The rapid industrialization that grew around the petroleum industry created unique circumstances for Venezuelan development. Venezuela changed from an all-agricultural economy to one based around commerce and service. By 1920 agriculture only accounted for 1/3 of Venezuela's GDP; by 1950 it had dropped to 10%⁸. A new urban middle class emerged as more and more people moved from their traditional rural homes to cities. As a result, no group of land-holding elite emerged into positions of power, as was the case in many other Latin American nations. The absence of domestic industry meant that Venezuela lacked a strong entrepreneurial class, present in many northern industrial nations. With petroleum production under the control of foreign corporations and regulated and taxed by the state, no private domestic oil barons emerged to dominance. Therefore political and economic power in Venezuela was centralized in the state itself and its ability to profit from petroleum exploitation rather than private enterprise⁹.

Despite huge revenues from petroleum exports and royalties, the heavy reliance on the oil industry would produce some major problems as well. The condition of having an economy dominated by the exploitation of one natural resource and therefore causing other sectors of the economy to decline, as well as heavy reliance on imported goods, is referred to by economists as "Dutch Disease". The term was coined to describe the decline of Dutch manufacturing after the discovery of natural gas reserves in the North Sea. In the case of Venezuela, heavy reliance on petroleum revenue resulted in a steep decline in agricultural production and largely undeveloped domestic industrial production;

neither of which could keep up with growing consumer demands and population increase¹⁰. As a result, Venezuela turned to imports for even the most basic of food and industrial products which came at cheap prices because of Venezuela's strong currency and government subsidies. These circumstances would emerge as highly problematic when oil prices dropped in late 1970's and 80's, which will be discussed later on. Diversifying the economy would also become a major concern of the Chávez administration, also to be discussed later on.

Rise and Fall of Democracy

When Dictator Juan Vicente Gomez died in office in 1935, the next president, Gen. Eleazar Lopez Contreras (1935-1941), was selected from the same circle of powerful military generals as Gomez, by the Senate, without any input from the Venezuelan people. His successor, Gen. Medina Angarita (1941-1945) was selected in the same fashion, despite an ever growing and more outspoken left demanding direct elections, universal suffrage and secret balloting. During this period the military loosened its stranglehold on politics by legalizing the formation of civilian political parties, and with tremendous pressure from the left, extended voting rights to women. In 1941, the Communist Party of Venezuela was legalized and *Accion Democratica* (AD, Democratic Action) became a legitimate political party. AD promoted itself as a leftist nationalist social democratic party, and campaigned for election reform, authentic democracy, and the reinvestment of oil revenue into social programs.

The appeal for a more open democracy struck a cord with millions of people disenchanted with the current system of elite military rule, and AD quickly grew into a large and influential political party. AD also found allies within the military. The *Union Patriotica Militar* (UPM, Patriotic Military Union), a group of discontented military officers joined with *Accion Democractica*, forming a major civilian-military alliance (an arrangement which continues to play an important role in Venezuelan politics and society). On October 18, 1941 AD with the military backing of UPM, overthrew the government of Angarita

in a coup d'etat, establishing a temporary government entitled *Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno* (Revolutionary Government *Junta*), led by charismatic AD leader Rómulo Betancourt. During this period the *Junta* swiftly initiated reforms such as the institutionalization of universal suffrage, direct election of the president, and a 50-50 agreement between state and private companies for petroleum profits. The new *Junta* also promoted unionization, attempted land reform and redistribution and in 1947 created a new constitution.

In December of 1947, Venezuela had its first truly democratic presidential election, nominating AD candidate Rómulo Gallegos and electing a majority of AD candidates into congress. Despite widespread popular support, the relation between the military and AD began to break down, and far reaching left leaning reforms created a strong right wing backlash. Political tensions also arose from within the left as smaller parties resented the fact that AD controlled every branch of government. In November of 1948 a right wing military coup swept AD out of power and immediately reversed the democratic progress of the previous three years.

The coup was orchestrated by right-wing general Pérez Jiménez, who would officially become president through a blatantly fraudulent election in 1952. Almost immediately, the new military government nullified the 1947 constitution, denied electoral freedoms to large portions of the population, and dissolved AD and other political parties. Party leadership was exiled or arrested. With the official election of Jiménez, a new constitution was adopted, which greatly expanded executive power, re-established presidential election by national assembly vote, and reinstated the appointing of state governors by the president. Labor unions were outlawed and the press was censored. Thousands of dissidents and opposition politicians were arrested, tortured, and murdered. Jiménez gained the support of the United States for his strong anti-communist stance.

Economically, Jiménez adopted a policy of state centered developmentalist state capitalism which relied on massive state

spending on transportation and communications infrastructure, military, and urbanization. During this time, the state developed capital intensive industry, such as Sidor Steel, as well as carried out huge projects such as the construction of hydroelectric dams. This period saw a large growth in GDP as well as an increased presence of US oil-drilling companies¹¹.

Opposition and guerilla groups had formed in secret amidst the repression of the decade, and began plotting against Jiménez. In 1957, an alliance of the old AD, the Communist Party, COPEI (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*, Political Electoral Independent Organization Committee, a Christian democratic party) and radical student groups formed the *Junta Patriótica*; by the end of the year they began openly calling for strikes against the government. By mid-January 1958, Caracas was engulfed by rioting centered at the Central University, where nearly a decade earlier demonstration had been violently suppressed. Rebellious sects of air force and navy, along with members of the civilian press, joined with *Junta Patriótica* in a movement to overthrow Jiménez. On January 21st, major street fighting erupted in Caracas and on January 23rd military officers forced Jiménez to resign. Once again the alliance of civilian and military forces, which in this case became known as the *Movimiento 23 de enero* (23rd of January Movement), was successful in ousting a repressive dictatorship, paving the way for democratic reform.

***Punto Fijo* Pact**

After the overthrow of Jiménez, a new round of democratic elections took place with the now reformed *Acción Democrática* winning most of the votes, along with COPEI also receiving strong support. AD founder and former revolutionary Rómulo Betancourt won the presidency. In order to avoid a situation similar to 1948, when one party's supremacy brewed political turmoil, a truce was signed prior to the election to share power amongst the three largest centrist parties, respect the results of the election and establish a representative democracy based on the model of the United States. This was called the *Punto Fijo* Pact,

named for the geographic location of the meeting.

The repercussions of the *Punto Fijo* Pact would shape the political and economic development of the next three decades; limiting pluralism, dissent, and democracy. The basic frame of the agreement was to create a coalition government where each party would share political and economic power roughly equivalent to its share of received votes, through negotiation and conciliations. This consensus was limited to the ideological vision held within the dominate parties of the time (AD and COPEI): to create a system where the state would develop the economy and regulate the private sector which was operating it, while maintaining political stability and economic control through the exclusion of radical groups on both the left and the right. This resulted in the consolidation of power within the elite circles of party leadership who for the next 30 years would share national leadership roles and dominate elections.

Accompanying the pact, and following the 1958 elections, COPEI and especially AD systematically exerted control over nearly all of Venezuela's political and economic institutions. The massive state controlled sector of the oil industry, which employed roughly 45% of the formal working sector and the extensive bureaucracy that had developed to run most of the economy, was now in the hands of primarily AD party insiders¹². Control of the state also allowed AD and COPEI to install party militants into the leadership roles and bureaucratic positions of all major public organizations such as the Engineering Guild, trade unions, and the Peasant Federation. Military support for AD and COPEI was ensured through the use of oil revenues to funnel generous salaries to a new class of politicized and sympathetic generals and officers¹³. This practice of buying support was also applied to organized labor leadership and potential political opponents¹⁴. The stability of the two-party arrangement relied on the success of the oil industry revenue to keep the general population content with relatively high standards of living and to broker support amongst powerful military and civilian interests.

Boom and Bust

The new democratic regime, in terms of economic stability, functioned fairly smoothly throughout the 1960's. However, radical leftist groups, including the Communist Party of Venezuela, fought on-going guerilla wars in the mountains and jungles of Venezuela. The fear of communist upheaval, which at the time was taking place in Cuba, led to an increase of government political repression and the creation of a new counter intelligence agency with collaboration from the CIA, in an attempt to systematically dismantle the left¹⁵. The AD and COPEI governments would increase their repression throughout 1970's and 1980's as political and economic stability unwound, eventually resulting in thousands of disappeared, tortured, and killed¹⁶. Despite violent political repression, Venezuela had the largest per capita GDP in South America and the large middle class enjoyed a high standard of living, thus continuing their support for the *Punto Fijo* parties¹⁷.

During the 1970's Venezuela would experience a tremendous increase in oil wealth spurred by a worldwide increase in prices. AD president Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974-1979) experienced a quadrupling in the price of a barrel of oil immediately prior to his term in office. Pérez pushed forward a strong program of state-sponsored development entitled "*La Gran Venezuela*" (Great Venezuela)¹⁸. This included the funding of new infrastructure, import subsidies and substitution, and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1976. The creation of *Petróleos de Venezuela* (Petroleum of Venezuela) or PDSVA came with the promise to "sow the oil", to distribute the wealth to fight poverty, and diversify the economy. Though massive state spending did occur, most of it was used primarily to the benefit of wealthy portions of the population, and accusations of corruption swirled around the presidency¹⁹. The tremendous wealth accumulated by party insiders and elites became more and more publicly apparent, leading to a COPEI victory in 1979.

The next two presidents of Venezuela Luis Herrera Campins, COPEI, (1979-1984) and Jaime Lusinchi, AD, (1984-1989) would preside over a period of severe economic deterioration

and increasing public discontent with the two-party system. A combination of increasing oil production costs, declining world prices, heavy foreign debts, combined with increasing population and consumer demands caused the economy to stagnate, and began a 20 year decline starting in 1979. Poverty levels increased significantly from 17% in 1980 to 65% by 1996²⁰. From 1979-1999 per capita GDP fell by 27%; no country in South America had before seen such a rapid decline²¹. Decades of importing more goods than producing, or sustaining a balance of payments deficit, had finally begun to take a toll on Venezuela's economy, which by the end of the 1980's showed a deficit equivalent to 9% of national GDP²².

The inefficiency of the *Punto Fijo* parties helped to amplify the negative effects of the economic downturn. The ideological cross-party consensus lacked innovative ideas which made the creation of new approaches to handling economic and political change nearly impossible. The system had become rigid, plagued with insider cronyism, and much more suited towards meeting the needs of the political elite rather than meeting public demands for change. The two parties began to lose the funding needed to continue buying support (which resulted in ever more visible corruption to secure funding) and increasingly turned to violent repression as a means of securing patronage²³.

In the late 1980's Venezuela's government was faced with the prospect of introducing major austerity programs (reducing state spending to repay foreign debt). In spite of this very real prospect, Carlos Andrés Pérez re-ran for election on a campaign based on returning Venezuela to the prosperous times of the late 70's, where nearly limitless state funding fueled development. His rhetoric strongly criticized neo-liberal policies being imposed all over Latin America, referring to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as "a neutron bomb that killed people, but left buildings standing" and World Bank economists as "genocide workers in the pay of economic totalitarianism"²⁴. Almost immediately after his election Pérez introduced a sweeping package of neo-liberal reforms, which would send the nation into chaos and begin the final unraveling of the *Punto Fijo* system.

Neo-liberalism and the Violent End of the Punto Fijo System

Pérez began his presidency by accepting a substantial 4.5 billion (US) dollar loan from the IMF and adopting a neo-liberal structural adjustment program which he titled “El Gran Viraje” (The Great Turn Around)²⁵. This package included major policy shifts such as trade liberalization, privatization, “macro-economic stabilization” and deregulation which would have a tremendous impact on the Venezuelan economy and society. The plan for “macroeconomic stabilization” established a single, freely floating rate for foreign exchange, removal of price controls on all private goods and services, increase in the price of public utilities, and an overall decrease in real public spending. The process of trade liberalization included the removal of all non-tariff trade restrictions, and reduced the tariff rate from 35% in 1988, to 10% in 1990²⁶. This also eliminated most restrictions on foreign investment as well as all restrictions on profit remittances (allowing enormous capital flight); completely opening up the economy of Venezuela for foreign companies. This allowed for a spree of privatization which, by 1992, included 4 commercial banks, the national air-line, telephone services, the ports and many sugar mills and other previously public enterprises²⁷. Finally the de-regulation of the economy meant slashing state spending for social programs, as well as cutting subsidies to private firms that kept prices for imported food staples affordable. The dire repercussions of these drastic policy shifts would be felt almost immediately, as public outrage quickly manifested into violent resistance.

This unabashed betrayal of campaign promises, coupled with widespread misery and decline in living standards as a result of the government’s inability to continue providing basic services for an increasing majority of the population led to the complete de-legitimization of the two-party system. Moreover, inflation skyrocketed as subsidies, that kept everything from black beans to interest rates artificially low, disappeared almost overnight. Widespread food shortages followed as private grocery store owners and distributors hoarded food awaiting

higher prices and frantic demand²⁸. On the morning of February 27th poor and working class commuters were appalled to find that public transit fares had nearly doubled as a result of a 100% increase in the price of fuel the day earlier²⁹. This was the final spark that ignited the brooding public rage that had been building in Caracas.

The city exploded into a frenzy of furious rioting, as angry youth, working class and poor people descended from hillside slums into the rich core of central Caracas, looting goods that could no longer be afforded. Pérez responded by declaring martial law, suspending constitutional rights, and unleashing the military on crowds³⁰. Over a period of three days the military indiscriminately gunned down an estimated 3,000 civilians. The event became known as the *caracazo* (translating roughly to “Caracas explosion”), and would symbolize the final collapse of the *Punto Fijo* system. It caused widespread disgust for AD as well as COPEI and served to embolden a growing opposition movement.

By the end of the 1980’s the economic crisis had also spilled over into the military. The army had at one point received generous state funding and provided soldiers and officers an opportunity for career development, university education and ample pay. In the wake of the fiscal crisis and privatization, the daily needs of soldiers and junior officers had become grossly under funded³¹. A major rift developed between well-paid, politically connected generals and senior officers who had benefited from protecting the political power of *Punto Fijo* parties, and lower ranking officers and soldiers who received poor treatment from the state and had no reason to support it. Eventually AD and COPEI lost the support of the military, a historically important factor for maintaining political power in Venezuela. Charismatic junior officer Hugo Chávez emerged out of this situation as a major leader in military opposition to the ruling political establishment.

The Rise of Hugo Chávez and the 1992 Coup

Hugo Chávez Frías was born in 1954 in Barinas, Venezuela’s poorest state. He joined

the military because it was one of the few available options for upward social and economic mobility. The military also provided Chávez with an opportunity to receive a university education. Venezuela's military is one of the few that allowed poor recruits and ordinary soldiers to rise through the ranks and receive a higher education outside of military academies. Many soldiers, including Chávez, were exposed to left wing theory at public universities. Chávez became increasingly disillusioned with the Venezuela political system during the late 1970's and was radicalized by the contradictions of unequal wealth and massive oil incomes³².

In 1977 Chávez and six other members began covertly conspiring against the government³³. In 1982 Chávez helped establish the Bolivarian Revolutionary Army, with like minded officers; the name changed to Bolivarian Revolutionary *Movement* (MBR) when they began collaborating with civilian groups³⁴. Membership was based on swearing an oath taken by Simón Bolívar (liberator and folk hero of Venezuela, as well as the namesake for the MBR and later the revolutionary process initiated by the presidential election of Chávez): "I swear before you and I swear before the God of my fathers, that I will not allow my arm to rest, nor my soul to rest, until I have broken the chains that oppress us ³⁵." MBR was guided by the principals of emphasizing the importance of education, the creation of civilian-military unity, Latin American integration, social justice, and national sovereignty³⁶. MBR began planning a military coup against Pérez.

The events of the *caracazo* had presented an opening for military action against the government; however the MBR was not ready to seize the opportunity. The *caracazo* did allow for increased recruiting into MBR as soldiers, disgusted by the orders to turn their guns on civilians, increased their distaste for the Pérez government and the *Punto Fijo* system³⁷. On February 4, 1992, MBR led by Chávez, launched a military coup to oust Pérez, demanding that the affluent and corrupt leadership be tried for their crimes³⁸. News of the rebellion had leaked and the attempt failed. Chávez encouraged his comrades to lay down their arms to avoid

bloodshed.

Chávez was arrested, but given a one-minute television appearance, in which he claimed responsibility for leading the coup but also said that the objectives of the coup had failed "*por ahora*" (for now)³⁹. This one minute TV spot was significant for two reasons: (1) Venezuelan politicians almost never publicly accepted responsibility for any of their failures, and (2) Chávez's statement "*por ahora*" implied that the MBR would continue its struggle to change the nation⁴⁰. Almost immediately Chávez became a folk hero. Chávez aside, the coup itself was seen as largely legitimate in the eyes of millions of Venezuelans, who for 12 years suffered from the results of severe economic decline, years of political corruption and repression, and increasing poverty despite Venezuela's image as one of richest and most democratic nations in South America⁴¹. In November of 1992 a second coup was attempted and failed, but it further accelerated demands for the impeachment of Pérez, which occurred in May of 1993 on the basis of corruption charges.

Rafael Caldera, an original founder of COPEI and former president from 1969-1974, split from COPEI and campaigned on a platform that denounced the *Punto Fijo* system, denounced neo-liberal economic reforms, and promised the pardoning of Chávez⁴². Caldera won the presidency in 1994 breaking the thirty-six year dominance of AD and COPEI, though he came from the same circle of political elites. Caldera kept his promise of releasing Chávez, but reversed his stance on neo-liberalism, adopting IMF loans and structural adjustments in 1996, and continued a visible and cordial relationship both with AD and COPEI⁴³. Poverty continued to grow throughout the duration of his presidency; by the end of the 1990's 80% of nation had sunk below the poverty line⁴⁴. During the Caldera presidency Chávez toured the nation and began to see prospects for revolutionary change through the electoral process.

With a coalition of smaller left wing parties Chávez formed the political party *Movimiento V [Quinta] República*, (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR). The regime of AD and COPEI was known as the Fourth Republic; the title of the party

indicated the desire to move towards an entirely new republic. Chávez campaigned on a promise to completely overhaul Venezuela's political system with the drafting of a new constitution. In the months leading up to the 1998 election, the *Punto Fijo* establishment could not produce a solid candidate; other candidates included former Miss Universe, Irene Saéz. On December 6, 1998 Chávez won the presidency with 56.2% of the vote.

The Chávez Presidency

Chávez received large support from the poorer sector of society, but overwhelmingly he was elected by the middle class, who had been sliding further into poverty throughout the 1990's. At the time Chávez had not declared his desire to create "Socialism for the 21st century" and his moderate rhetoric about fighting inefficiency and corruption rampant in the previous government attracted members of the middle class. The poor certainly supported Chávez, but had become accustomed to political marginalization and therefore showed low rates of voter participation. By 2004, however, support for Chávez came overwhelmingly from poorer people, as they benefited most from his increasing radicalization, which included massive state spending on new social programs, resource redistribution and a progressive new constitution⁴⁵. Almost immediately Chávez had made enemies with members of the former political and business elite, including Chamber of Commerce heads, corrupt union leadership and former AD/COPEI insiders who resented their loss of power and political influence. These groups formed an alliance with private media moguls to become what is known in Venezuela as "the opposition"; the right wing backlash to the leftist policy pushed forward by Chávez.

The first major step toward fulfilling the campaign promise of restructuring the politics and economy of Venezuela was the proposed referendum to draft a new constitution. On April 25th 1999, 92% of voters supported the referendum to create a constitutional assembly to draft a new constitution⁴⁶. The assembly had 131 seats available to be decided by an open election, the fact that the writers of the constitution

were to be elected democratically was a major first in Venezuelan history. Candidates ran as individuals without having to state allegiance to political parties, and people from all social and economic classes were allowed to participate. During the July 25 election candidates that supported Chávez won 125 of 131 assembly seats.

After four months of debate the assembly produced the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, an extremely progressive document that would come to symbolize the new participatory movement towards social and economic justice that was developing both within the national government and in the previously impoverished and excluded majority of civilian society. On December 15, 1999, the constitution was approved by 72% of voters. Copies of the constitution were widely distributed and can be purchased on almost any street corner in Caracas.

The new constitution includes basic civil rights, such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the right to political participation, but also includes social rights, such as the right to employment, the right to housing and the right to healthcare⁴⁷. These basic human rights, once a privilege in Venezuelan society, are now guaranteed to all as an obligation of the state. Other articles include extensive land and cultural rights to indigenous peoples, expanding anti-discrimination rights to women, as well as extending social security benefits to women working in the home, therefore acknowledging that caring, or solidarity work (as it is now referred to in Venezuela), produces social welfare and is an economic activity⁴⁸.

The new constitution also works to extend the democratic rights of the people. Four types of popular referenda were established to further include voters in important decision making. Two new branches of government: the citizen's branch, and the electoral branch, were added to the traditional legislative, judicial and executive branches of government. To emphasize bottom-up power the constitution introduces the creation of local public planning commissions, which would enable people to directly influence policy making unique to their individual communities.

The constitution also focuses on the economy, promising to redistribute idle private lands in an attempt to revitalize domestic agricultural production. The constitution also emphasizes diversifying the economy through the creation of cooperatively owned social enterprises. Finally, the constitution required the re-legitimization of *all* elected officials including the president, local and regional legislative officials, and members of the National Assembly, in a nation wide “mega election”⁴⁹.

Chávez and his supporters did extremely well in the “mega election”, where 6,000 offices went up for election in one day⁵⁰. Chávez was reelected with 59.8% of the vote. MVR candidates and other Chávez supporters on the left won 104 out of 165 seats in the National Assembly, and 17 out of 23 state governorships⁵¹. The National Assembly then elected leftist and political outsiders to high ranking and politically powerful positions in the judiciary and elsewhere in the government; the last remnants of the old *Punto Fijo* elite had been swept out of state positions of power. Chávez’s next move, a series of 49 major decrees, which included sweeping land reform, and major restructuring of the oil industry, was seen by the opposition as an attack on private property and served to further embolden their attempts to oust Chávez and reverse the progressive reform sweeping the nation⁵².

Between 2002 and 2004 the opposition carried out three major attempts at overthrowing and destabilizing the Chávez government (apart from their ongoing private-media misinformation campaign). In April 2002, a coup orchestrated by private media bosses, politically connected generals, CTV (*Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela* or Venezuelan Workers Confederation, the largest, AD controlled, union in Venezuela) leader Carlos Ortega, and the head of Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce or *Fedecámaras*, Pedro Carmona, with U.S. financial backing, managed to temporarily oust Chávez from office⁵³.

On April 12, 2002, Carmona seized the presidency, and in his 48 hours in office, dissolved the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, suspended all elected mayors and state governors and abolished the Constitution,

all while claiming to restore democracy in Venezuela⁵⁴. The private media claimed that Chávez had resigned the presidency. In reality he had been kidnapped and imprisoned on an island off the coast of Venezuela. Through the struggle of community media networks, and local word-of-mouth news, the truth that Chávez had not resigned eventually surfaced. This fueled already existing public rage over the coup and resulted in a massive uprising where millions took to the streets of Caracas, surrounded the presidential palace and demanded the return of their democratically elected leader. Members of the military loyal to Chávez managed to re-take the presidential palace, and release him from captivity. On April 14th, 2002, Chávez was flown to the presidential palace and before millions of his rejoicing supporters, he was returned to office. After just two days the coup had collapsed as a result of a strong alliance between soldiers and the people, a key aspect of the Bolivarian movement⁵⁵.

In December of 2002, the opposition once again attempted to destabilize the nation and oust Chávez by staging an oil industry “strike”. However, the event can hardly be considered a strike, as the main tactic used involved bosses and PDVSA management locking out workers, and sabotaging equipment to halt oil production⁵⁶. This resulted in widespread food and gasoline shortages, and hurt the economy. 19,000 of PDVSA’s employees, including most of the management, were eventually fired for abandoning their jobs, and the “strike”, or lockout, was defeated in March of 2003. Aside from general anger towards the opposition for creating an economic crisis, the opposition had lost one of their last strongholds of power as a result of the lockout: PDVSA leadership. Old management was replaced by Chávez supporters at the end of the lockout⁵⁷.

The third opposition attempt to oust Chávez came in the form of a recall referendum, a process created with the passing of the 1999 constitution which allows for citizens to organize to recall any elected figure by popular vote. The opposition had underestimated the popularity of Chávez. Despite a vicious media campaign, on August 15, 2004, they lost the referendum

with 58% of voters in favor of Chávez and 42% in favor of recall⁵⁸. Almost immediately, the opposition and private media declared the election fraudulent, although several international election observation agencies ratified the results⁵⁹. With this defeat it became clear that the opposition was in fact a minority of the population, despite private media claims and lacked coherent leadership.

With the opposition in decline and publicly discredited, Chávez began to further radicalize over the next few years. In late 2003, with the recovery of the oil industry, Chávez used the revenues to launch massive social programs entitled “*misiones*” (missions). These missions included literacy training (Mission Robinson), high school and university completion (Missions Ribas and Sucre), subsidized food markets (Mission Mercal) and community health care (Mission *Barrio Adentro*, Inside the Neighborhood). These programs began to fulfill the obligation of the state to provide human and social rights to the people. In 2005, Chávez declared that the government now sought to create “socialism for the 21st century”, which would mean greater state involvement in the economy in the form of co-managed and worker-run factories, industry nationalizations, and a focus on increasing the economic role of cooperatives, and promoting participatory democracy through communal councils⁶⁰. In 2006, Chávez easily won reelection, beating opposition candidate Manuel Rosales, with 62.9% of the vote⁶¹.

Since 2006, Chávez has pushed forward with a more radical agenda, and the social missions have expanded to serve larger portions of the population. As a result there have been significant reductions in poverty and illiteracy, and huge increases in the amount of high school and college graduates⁶². As the elected leader of the revolutionary movement, Chávez is using the state to create a framework that everyday people can use to empower their communities and improve their own lives through new mechanisms of political participation. The strength of the Bolivarian Revolution lies in the coordination between grassroots popular participation building power from the bottom up, and the state government support from the top

down, working together to create a more just society.

Conclusion

Of all the movements that have occurred in Venezuela over the past century, that have combined the strength of the military with the political will of civil society, the Bolivarian movement, led by Chávez, is the most promising. The democratic expression of civilians initiated this process and has continuously been included in major decisions that shape the very structure of society. Elections, referendums and popular power now have the strength to crush coups, a truly inspiring departure from the past. For the first time the social welfare of even the poorest people takes priority over the whims of the free market and the greed of government officials. With the support of the government, creating and promoting new means of political and economic inclusion, the people of Venezuela are building and institutionalizing changes that cannot be swept away overnight by military intervention and economic sabotage. However, Venezuela is by no means a utopia, and the sustainability of this movement will depend on the government’s ability to learn from the past: to diversify the economy, protect the democratic rights of the people, fight government corruption and live up to the high standards set by the new constitution and the aspiration to social and economic justice.

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Los Angeles to Caracas: Examining Neo-liberal Policies Leading Toward Rebellion

By Aashiq Thawerbhoy

Between 1989 and 1992 both Los Angeles and Caracas, two of the largest cities in the United States and Venezuela, experienced intense rioting followed by intense government repression. On the streets of Caracas, scores of Venezuela's most impoverished citizens poured out of their barrios in the surrounding hills and descended into the city center looting stores for food and other necessities, and burning busses. In Los Angeles after the Rodney King verdict was released to the public, poverty-stricken African American and later Latin American communities started fires, ransacked businesses and engaged in standoffs with L.A.P.D. (though it was presumed that by the end, poor people of all ethnic backgrounds had joined in). In both instances the government called on army and National Guard troops to squelch out the uprisings. In South Central, Watts and Compton government troops paraded through neighborhoods and business districts imposing a mandatory curfew in an Orwellian spectacle of new world order. In Caracas, the military acted as death squads as they filed into the barrios, often firing at anything that moved, emulating an all too familiar aspect of human history. An estimated 3,500 Venezuelans were

discovered either dead on the streets or buried in mass graves, though twenty years later the real number is still unknown. The U.S. media unjustly labeled what happened in Los Angeles as merely a 'race riot', while the people of Venezuela labeled their uprising the Caracazo or, the "Caracas explosion."

Today, in regards to politics and economics, both nations are heading in very different directions. It is common knowledge that the events of 1989 in Venezuela were a catalyst for the Socialist changes being implemented by President Hugo Chavez and various coalitions of popular power within the country. Here in the United States, the riots of Los Angeles, rightfully coined as the 'justice riots' by Edward Soja, are still widely understood as a race riot and nothing more. However, if we look at the advancements and changes that have taken place in Venezuela since the Caracazo, and the policies that led up to such an event, we can draw similar parallels to the Los Angeles riots, and begin to question where we are at today. The following is an attempt to link the neo-liberal economic policies of the 1980's to a trend of uprisings, focusing specifically on Los Angeles and Caracas. The analysis shows the effects of the Reagan years

on the working class poor in the United States, and the extent to which similar if the not the same neo-liberal policies have transcended onto a smaller resource rich nation such as Venezuela and its poor and oppressed. During this process, the focus shifts back and forth between both countries, and once the historical context is set, I will begin to discuss the political and economic commonalities and aftermath of both events.

Phony Nationalization, Industrial Decline and Failed (Welfare) States

When examining the downfall of working class poor communities leading up to both rebellions, it is important to look at the gains and losses of working class and poor persons both before the neo-liberal era and during its beginning. In the United States this included social spending brought about by legislation and grassroots social movements (i.e. the civil rights and anti-poverty movements) in the 1960's leading to reforms in the 1970's. In Los Angeles this was also a time of industrial decline. As for Venezuela, the 1970's were a time of 'nationalization' (the reality of which will be discussed later), though leading to similar trends in slow growth and stagnation (at least in free market terms) that became an excuse for the dismantling of the welfare state in the United States. The introduction of neo-liberal policies in regards to the Los Angeles' job/welfare situation and Venezuela's 'nationalization' process would lead both places into working class turmoil.

United States/ Los Angeles: Social Welfare & Industry

In the United States during the 1970's, the poor and elderly had been benefiting from Medicaid and Medicare under the Social Security act of 1965. As an extension of FDR's 1935 New Deal welfare state, this act would go on to be amended several times. However, it is imperative to know that money going towards poverty "never exceeded 2.5% of all social welfare spending". Despite this, the poverty statistics of 1964-74 show a reduction in poverty from 17.4% to 9.9%.¹ Contrary to the beliefs of the neo-liberal president, Ronald Reagan,

social spending took up very little of government money in comparison to the results. Other legislation during this time period such as the Economic Opportunity Act further expanded the benefits for impoverished peoples in the United States. Another program proposed (that was eventually botched by congress) during this time was the Family Assistance Plan, "a proposal of a guaranteed annual income."² Though it cannot be said that these programs were perfect by any means, the very idea that social spending on the poor existed at such a large scale is enough to argue against its decline under Regan. This trend in spending would more or less continue throughout the administration of Jimmy Carter before Ronald Reagan and his team stepped in to dismantle it.

Subsequently, in the wake of this increase in welfare spending, the industrial centers of Los Angeles had already begun their decline (though Los Angeles would maintain some semblance of an industrial metropolis until the late 80's). Mike Davis points out the closing of "321 [industrial] firms since 1971,"³ though most of these were lost in an accelerated closing process between 1978 and '82. It is for this reason that we can mark the end of the 70's as the beginning of neo-liberalism, attributing the rapid industrial decline to the penetration of Asian imports into the U.S. Knowing this, it is not surprising that many low-income families in black communities that once had jobs were taking advantage of government social services by the turn of the decade.

Venezuela: National Oil+Crisis=National Debt

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, President Carlos Andres Perez was becoming popular with the public during his first term in office. His economic plan, formerly called "La Gran Venezuela", was concocted to "sow the oil" through a combination of "fighting poverty via price controls and income increases" and the diversification of the economy "via import substitution."⁴ Along with the nationalization of the iron industry, Venezuela's oil reserves through the creation of the national oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) in 1976, were supposed to fund this plan with hopes

of turning Venezuela into a developed nation. Wilpert argues that the form of nationalization was not nationalization at all, stating that the oil industry “continued to be run by the same management under the same goals and principles as it did before it was nationalized” maintaining an “anti-statist and transnational corporatist management.”⁵ The sentiment not to “play ball” with the government was reflected in PDVSA’s focus on production and sales, instead of profits to be allocated towards state plans. The development plan proved unsustainable, and Venezuela remained solely an oil exporting country.

Perez’s plan may have been seen as great balance of government intervention into the market place. It is noted that oil, during and after Perez’s first term, was supporting “government subsidies, price controls, exchange rate losses, and the operations of more than 400 public institutions.”⁶ The trend in government spending continued with the next president, Luis Campins (1979-84), though it was seen as completely inefficient during the 1983 oil crisis, when the price dropped, and the trend in high spending led to an increased national debt. Jaime Lusinchi stepped in as president in 1984 with a plan to reverse the effects of the 1983 oil crisis, and the negative GDP growth that came with it. By imposing “devaluations of currency” and “a multi-tier exchange rate system” to protect imports, as well as “increased attention to agriculture and food self-sufficiency,”⁷ the state intervened economy was able to sustain itself for another period of time through currency exchange control. The overall goal of paying back the nation’s debt by stimulating growth fell again with the price of oil in 1986. The price dropped by 50% and the inability to turn high revenues off of oil, as well as the need to import due to a lack in development of other industries created a twin deficit for Venezuela. The people of Venezuela invited Carlos Andres Perez back as president, however this time he had a different plan that did not include nationalization.

Reagan: Spending Cuts and Industrial Endgame in L.A.

Looking back to the United States in 1981, Ronald Reagan had developed an economic plan of his own. In the years to come, his promises of stimulated growth in the economy would turn out to be at the expense of working class peoples. In Los Angeles this meant Black and Latino communities that had already suffered immense job-losses. Shaped by supply side economics (popularly known as trickle-down economics), Reagan’s economic policies included income tax cuts as well as extreme social spending cuts. These policies were said to reduce the double-digit inflation rates the U.S. economy had been suffering from at the time. These cuts, as will be discussed, greatly affected the economic well being of the working class poor. In Los Angeles, the effects of these policies were felt in the impoverished communities that were still continuing to lose what remnants of industry they had in their parts of the city. Working class poor communities suffered from the lack of government intervention while the job market declined to nothing.

The basic idea behind Regan’s supply side economy was that if taxes were cut, especially for the wealthy, the rate of investments would rise. It is important to note that by 1980 the inflation rate of the dollar was climbing past 14%,⁸ and there was a notion that the way out of it was higher production to drive prices down. Frank Ackerman, author of Reganomics points out that the goal of tax cuts is so “workers will work more” because the money saved by the wealthy on income taxes will cause “investors to invest more”, thus raising production.⁹ However the reality of the tax cuts do little justice to the working class poor’s annual incomes as a 23% tax cut (as imposed by Reagan) will save \$4,140 for a family with an income of \$60,000 a year, but only \$460 for an average family making \$20,000 dollar a year.¹⁰ The money saved by wealthy CEOs must have been absurd.

Further effects of tax cuts on working class Black and Latino communities can only be assessed by examining the counterpart of the tax-cuts for the rich: welfare cuts for the poor. Though social spending on the elderly,

such as social security, was safe, the social programs for the poor were under attack by the Reagan administration. As reported by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) dropped by 11.2% by 1988, while the food stamp program lost 5% of its budget. There is a connection between the small amounts of money saved by low-income families through tax cuts (though often this meant more money spent) to the amount not received through social programs. These cuts obviously affect those living in poverty in all cities, but perhaps the spending cut that put Los Angeles over the edge was the 54.9% decrease in unemployment compensation.¹¹ This cut couldn't imply that there was less unemployment; Los Angeles was still in the midst of industrial decline.

If the plan to cut social spending and raise taxes was at all a move to open jobs by creating investment, it failed horribly in the metropolis of Los Angeles. Mike Davis points out that unemployment went up 50% in South-Central neighborhoods by 1982.¹² With jobs moving from Los Angeles to other industrial sites (as well as overseas), certain 'manufacturing' jobs took their place. However, these jobs were mostly "minimum-wage sweatshops, super-exploiting immigrant Latino labor in the production of furniture... clothes and toys."¹³ Latino community poverty was on the rise by the end of the 80's as well with a rate increase from 21.6% to 28.2%¹⁴ by 1987. In 1985, according to Davis, a survey of the public housing projects in Nickerson Gardens showed "120 employed breadwinners out of 1,060 households."¹⁵ For those employed, weekly income for the entire country had gone from \$366 to \$312 over a 10-year period by 1987. In a similar time frame, annual income for black families fell 63% by 1991.

In 1989, the year Venezuelans said they had had enough, the industrial job sector of Los Angeles began to drop by 1/3.¹⁶ In working class poor neighborhoods in Los Angeles, drugs manifested themselves as an extension of the free market throughout the decade, and all other hopes of making money had been virtually destroyed. By the end of March in 1992,

unemployment in the greater L.A. area would be at 8.6%,¹⁷ just days before the mayhem in the city began. The economic plans of the 80's had slowly worn down the city's poor, and the final catalyst to the riots was to be announced a few years later. In Venezuela, the turmoil had already come and gone.

Perez and the IMF: Bait and Switch

Reagan believed that high government spending lead the country into periods of high inflation and slow growth. In Venezuela, neglecting to build industries and infrastructure, as well as high government spending left the country debt ridden, and the infamous Carlos Andres Perez would take office again in 1989. This time however, Perez had neo-liberal plans rather than his original "nationalist" stance. Coaxing the population to vote in his favor was not difficult, though it eventually led the country into a period of political deception.

Perez's campaign came to be the model for "bait and switch" politics, as he did just that. In his 1988 campaign he promised that the burden of two decades of deficit would not be borne by Venezuela's working class poor stating that the IMF was "a neutron bomb that killed people, but left buildings standing." With promises of bringing Venezuela out of debt, Perez did just the opposite of what he was expected to do. He dropped a neutron bomb on his own people. After months of saying he would not go to the IMF, he pulled what is now called "el gran viraje" (the great turn-around), and unleashed what he named the "packet", Venezuela's new plan for eliminating debt.¹⁸

The International Monetary Fund, based in the United States, has a structural readjustment plan for third world debt. It has come to be known as the Washington Consensus, and is a bit more than just "debt relief." Perez employed the IMF and the Washington Consensus plan in early 1989, just days after he took office. The outline of the plan involved ten points including plans to slash social spending by "a curb to budget deficits" and "a reduction in public expenditure." Government protection of the economy was slashed with the plan of "liberalization, with interest rates determined by the market" and the

“abolition of import licensing and a reduction in tariffs.” Finally, the nationalization of any industry and the use of resources for the public good jeopardized with “a welcome to direct foreign investment” and the “privatization of state enterprises.”¹⁹ The packet was better outlined as an attack on the poor by Miguel Rodriguez, the minister of planning in Venezuela, as “a new social policy that would eliminate the system of massive generalized subsidies directed to the poorest segment of the population.”²⁰

Many Venezuelans woke up one morning in February to find that Perez’s plan might as well have been a neutron bomb. In a city such as Caracas, where the unemployment rate remains around fifty percent (not including the informal sector) at all times, the effects of neo-liberal structural adjustment were devastating. As Charles Hardy (a priest living in one of Caracas’s barrios at the time) notes, the price of bread had gone up six times overnight. The bus fare, the mode of transportation so many depended on to get to and from their barrios to work as much as they could went up 30% due to an increase in petroleum prices. People could not afford to get to work, or to get to the store, and even if they could, food was unaffordable. The morning of February 27th 1989, the streets of Caracas exploded into violence. All Perez had to show for it was yet another 4.5 billion dollar loan from the United States that was to be borrowed over a period of 3 years, increasing the deficit.⁽²¹⁾⁽²²⁾

El Caracazo

The rioting started with the burning of busses due to the price increase. Within hours thousands of people were in the streets looting stores for food and other necessities they were no longer able to afford. According to Hardy’s account of the Caracazo police had joined into the looting too, firing tear gas to disperse crowds while filling police vehicles with merchandise. Many looters went into stores to find that the scarcity of necessities was false, as much food had been stockpiled while owners waited for the price to go up. Hardy also recalls that he was told that in one barrio a local hardware store was not targeted due to the owner’s honesty in maintaining low prices and selling on credit, an

act of solidarity within the community that will play out in the Los Angeles riots as well.²³

In response to the intense rioting, the military was called into Caracas by President Perez to squelch the uprising. Their role in the rioting was indeed reminiscent of death squads that “shot anything that moved.”²⁴ The death toll, as a result of soldiers firing into stacks of shanty-like houses in Caracas’ poorest neighborhoods is estimated to be as high as 3,000²⁵ though the government would initially only admit to 276. Mass graves uncovered on the outskirts of the city proved a higher death toll than the government recognized number. Now the official toll is recognized as being much higher than 3,000.

The government went on much unchanged throughout the 90’s, and the Caracazo was unspoken of, though remembered, in fear of further uprising by Venezuela’s poor. Richard Gott describes the 90’s in Venezuela, following the Caracazo, as a “climate of hopelessness and political apathy,”²⁶ though by the end of the 90’s the Caracazo had really shown itself as a sign of change. In 1992, an unsuccessful coup attempt against Perez was carried out, a direct action in the wake of the rioting. In Los Angeles, 1992 was the year the disenfranchised poor would stand up.

King of Los Angeles

The economic disparities in Los Angeles had been growing at an increasingly more rapid rate for almost two decades. The effects had become a disproportionately heavy burden on poor Black and Latino communities. The repercussions of the dismantling of inner-city economy had led to higher repression. The relationship between outsiders in the community, especially police, and those living within the community were nothing short of shoddy.

In the South-Central neighborhoods, the Korean owned businesses had become a portal between the neo-liberal policies of the wealthy and poverty. Mike Davis characterizes this role as contributing to “the disappearance of local jobs to foreign competition.” Often selling their cheaper imported products and never employing Black or Latino workers, store owners

who did not actually live within the communities brought neither jobs nor investment into these neighborhoods. In March of 1991, a Korean storeowner murdered 15-year-old Latasha Harlins for suspicion that she was trying to steal a bottle of orange juice. After a verbal confrontation with the storeowner, Latasha, with money in her hand, placed the bottle of orange juice on the counter and walked for the door. The clerk shot her in the back of the head on her way out. Soon Ja Du, the shooter, pleaded the crime had be committed in self-defense. Despite video footage showing otherwise, she was given a \$500.00 fine, community service, and probation. The tensions created between Korean business owners and residents of these neighborhoods would play out in the riots one year later. However, the direct catalyst to the riots came from the result of an incident that happened 13 days before Latasha's death.²⁷

The infamous Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police officers after a routine traffic stop fueled the flames of contempt with life in the city to a point of explosion. A bystander named George Holiday filmed the incident on March 3, 1991. The video depicts the officers using excessive force, hitting King over the head with batons repeatedly and kicking him on the ground. King suffered with a broken leg, a fractured facial bone and numerous cuts and bruises. After being aired on KTLA, CNN picked up the footage and it became the subject of national outrage. The police officers involved were to be tried in court, though a judge moved the trial from the city where it happened, to a courthouse in Simi Valley, a predominately white and generally more affluent area of Ventura County. On April 29th, 1992 a mostly white jury found the officers not guilty, despite the demonizing footage that many thought would be self-evident enough for their prosecution. The verdict was aired on television all over the country. In Los Angeles, the anger of citizens in Black, and later Latino communities of Los Angeles erupted into the 'justice riots'.⁽²⁸⁾⁽²⁹⁾

The Riot

On the afternoon of the verdict, crowds of protestors had gathered all over parts of the city including the L.A.P.D. headquarters. On

the corner of Florence and Normandy in South-Central a large group of people gathered, and due to hostility from the crowd, the police were forced to retreat. The chaos on this corner grew to become the epicenter of the riots, and within hours people had begun looting stores and pulling drivers (mostly white) from their vehicles. By 6 p.m. rioters had set a local Korean owned liquor store on fire, and several more fires were set by the end of the night. At least eight people were reported dead from the mayhem by the end of the day, but the riot was just beginning. By midnight, the city was in a state of emergency.³⁰

The rioting continued into the night and the next day. The Los Angeles Fire Department was overwhelmed with the amount of fires started and many buildings were left to burn to the ground. Dozens of stores were looted and there are hours and hours of television footage showing Korean storeowners brandishing handguns and rifles to protect their businesses. The targeting of Korean stores reiterated the hostile race and economic relationships that had developed as one girl living in Los Angeles at the time remembers "most all stores were burned down, except for the ones with signs that said 'Black owned'... but those stores soon ran out of food as well." A power outage on the second day of rioting left many without food as the stores had been cleared and what food was at their houses would spoil in the days to come. Most public transportation in the city had been suspended by this time, and the government began its next plan to stop the rioting.³¹

By noon on the second day of the riots the National Guard was officially deployed into hot-zones of rioting. Despite their presence, the rioting continued and an additional 6,000 troops were requested by the end of the day. A dusk to dawn curfew was imposed by Friday. By mid-Friday, Rodney King himself appeared on national television requesting that the violence in the city stop asking "People...can't we just get along?" By this point, the riot had escalated beyond the King verdict and despite his plea, the rioting went on until as late as May 4th.³²

By the end of the riots, the death toll had reached 54 (including one man shot by the

national guard troops), and the damages were estimated at \$1 billion dollars. Seven thousand fires had been set, and over 12,000 arrests had been made. The city had been left in shambles, and like Caracas, would require years of rebuilding and healing. For the remainder of the 90's there were debates in both cities about how to move on from the losses. Strikingly, coalitions of popular power in both the U.S. and Venezuela had similar desires as to how they wished to relate to their governments both socially and economically. In the years subsequent to the mayhem, the results for both nations have come out to be very different.³³

Venezuela and Los Angeles: Revolution and Lost Momentum

The Caracazo and the L.A. riots were indeed both class uprisings, though this does not go without saying that the race politics between both were very different. In the years to come, both places began to decide what to do to fix their economic situations, and improve the lives of the impoverished that had come to a breaking point. In a sense, this is where Venezuela's poor and the people of Los Angeles, as well as both governments show the most similarities and differences. Various forces of popular power in Venezuela remember the Caracazo as the way globalization did not work for them. The momentum from this led to the election of a government that not only listens, but also passes many aspects of positive social development into the hands of the people. In the years following the Los Angeles riots, popular power would mobilize in ways unseen since the roots of the civil rights movement. This new movement of people, however, would not have the opportunity to elect a government synchronized with the demands of the people.

By the time the Los Angeles riots were underway in '92, a man by the name of Hugo Chavez had already attempted to overthrow the government of Carlos Andres Perez by leading a military rebellion. After mobilizing several high-ranking military officials, the plan to overthrow the government and "detain Perez at the airport"³⁴ upon his return to the country was underway. Met by heavy armed resistance,

the coup attempt failed. Chavez requested an appearance on television to tell the other colonels who had already "seized" targeted objectives throughout the country to surrender peacefully. In his one-minute speech he addressed the public and spoke of his reasoning to overthrow Perez. He was speaking to those affected by the "packet" and the Caracazo:

*It is difficult to ask people to sacrifice themselves in a struggle to defend liberty and democracy, when you know that democracy and the rule of law have not been able to provide them with food, or to prevent the exaggerated increases in the cost of living.*³⁵

He ended saying they had failed "por ahora" (for now), and he was taken off to prison. Another coup attempt was made without Chavez in November of 1992, though this too failed. The revolution in Venezuela was put on hold.

After the justice riots in Los Angeles there was no attempt to overthrow the government, though the movement of people cannot be overlooked. Another popular armed force, that was not the military, requested the rights to rebuild their city based on the voices, needs, and desires of the community. Following the Riots, the infamous Bloods and Crips gangs, the very same gangs that represented the free market in their neighborhoods through the lucrative drug trade for so many years, had "called a truce and produced a sophisticated planning proposal for the rebuilding of Los Angeles."³⁶ The proposal called for \$3.7 billion dollars of federal money to be allotted towards various social programs and construction projects and was characterized by the demand "gives us the hammer and nails and we will rebuild the city."³⁷ The detailed budget included "\$2 billion to reconstruct damaged and long-neglected areas of the city; \$1 billion for 'human welfare' programs that would bring hospitals and health clinics to South Central; \$700 million for an education agenda...and \$20 million in low interest loans for minority businesses". Disputes over police corruption, something all-too familiar in both Caracas and Los Angeles were to be taken care of through a gun-free "community based 'police-buddy' system" that would train former gang members to secure their own neighborhoods.³⁸ As for

the drugs, they promised to divert drug money into community investments alongside the government. The first Bush administration and a plethora of other politicians at all levels ignored the plan without consequence.

Daryl Gates, the LAPD Police chief at the time of the riots was invited to the white house where George H.W. Bush tagged him as an "All-American hero". At one point during the night, white house spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater explained that the "The Great Society programs of the 1960's and 1970's" (welfare state programs) were the cause of the riots. Benjamin Hooks, representing the NAACP fought back exclaiming that social programs had not caused the riots but "[i]t was because of Presidents like Reagan who went around looking for the welfare queens and let the savings and loan crooks get away that we now have problems in our streets."³⁹ The people's call to rebuild the city on their own terms never became a reality, and the government's attitude towards the citizens of Los Angeles was clearly hostile. In Venezuela, calls for community input into the development of their communities with support of the government would become a part of everyday life.

After a two-year stay in jail President Caldera pardoned Chavez in 1994. Over the next four years, Chavez built up support from the civilian left until he ran in the 1998 presidential election. In December of 1998, Chavez won the presidency in a landslide victory securing 56.2 percent of the vote.⁴⁰ Elected under the faith of his people that he would not lead the country back into the economic turmoil of the 1980's, Chavez has employed several ideas for development in Venezuela. The renationalization of the oil industry (as well as other industries over the years) has brought social spending up from its all time low of 4.3% in 1997.⁴¹ The money now funds social programs like the famous *misiones* of Venezuela, which provide educational, health-care, and subsidized food services (amongst others) to impoverished people all over the country. Mission Robinson, a program directed towards adult literacy announced in 2005 "Venezuela was [now] officially illiteracy free."⁴² The oil money was finally being 'sowed'

for an array of purposes that may sustainably modernize Venezuela. Upon further examination of this process, it is clear that the people are now just as involved as the government.

Along with the reform of the oil industry and a surge in constructive public spending, there have been further developments in land reform, a switch towards participatory democracy, and a new constitution. The people are working with the government to realize these changes; a relationship defined by the term endogenous. Endogenous development, according to the Chavez government, is economic development formed "from below towards above."⁴³ This completely counters the trickle down economics crafted by Reagan in the 1980's, as economic planning in an endogenous model also "motivates community participation in the planning of the economy, via new forms of organizations, such as cooperatives and social networks."⁴⁴ The very same plea for self-reconstruction by the peoples of Los Angeles after the riots has become imbedded in the rights of Venezuelans.

Conclusion

While Venezuela is entering a new phase of their movement towards socialism, the United States has changed very little economically and politically. The government of Venezuela recognizes the Caracazo as the time Venezuela needed to change, and this sentiment has been reiterated in the nation-wide ceremonies that have recently taken place on the 20th anniversary of the event. In the United States, the uprising of the people of Los Angeles has not been integrated as a part of history calling for serious societal changes, even as we begin the leadership of Barack Obama, the U.S.' first African American president. It is very possible, and to some probable, that the lack of change in the aftermath of rebellions will only allow tensions to build up to another breaking point. The United States government has not only taken a different route to rebuilding cities in crisis (as has been seen more recently than Los Angeles in the New Orleans disaster) than Venezuela, but continues to internationally criticize and ostracize Venezuela as a reckless state. In the face of this global financial crisis,

it is not only important to remember past events triggered by such economic disparities, but to learn from countries like Venezuela who hold their misfortunes to be self-evident that the global financial system has mistreated the workers and impoverished of the world. The voice of the people, be it through revolt or election, is the voice that calls for change in the 21st century.

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Moving Beyond Representation: Participatory Democracy & Communal Councils in Venezuela

By Katie Bowen and Caitlin McNulty

As two college students living and studying in the United States, we have long been frustrated and discouraged by the limiting form of political representation seen by the U.S. government and media as the only viable form of democracy. We traveled to Venezuela to learn about a more substantive form of democracy based on the values of inclusion and participation that has emerged during the last decade. This new model, referred to as participatory democracy, utilizes local entities of self-governance to allocate decision-making power and resources to the people themselves. While the U.S. system of representative democracy works to undermine true democratic values through excluding those without capital, participatory democracy goes beyond elections to place the power of the government and the country's resources directly in the hands of communities. We drew upon research and our personal experiences in Venezuela to make this exciting new form of democracy accessible to the people of the United States.

The United States prides itself on being a democracy, but what does that mean? Democracy is a term that can be used to describe a form of political representation or

used as a justification for military intervention abroad. It is a term with countless definitions and understandings worldwide that can mean anything from checking a box every four years to widespread participation in societal change and self-governance. The United States subscribes to a liberal, representative form of democracy, one that was created with numerous “safeguards” meant to prevent true popular control over the government. This allowed the elite governing class to maintain power and control while pacifying an entire electorate (at the time of the ratification of the constitution this meant white male landowners). These “safeguards,” though some have been modified, were never removed, and continue to prevent true citizen participation in their own government.¹

The electoral college is the most problematic of these safeguards, implemented to distance the electorate from the electoral process by having them vote on electors rather than candidates. It continues to hinder true democracy today. The candidate who wins the greatest number of electoral votes does not necessarily have a popular majority, as seen in the 2000 US presidential election where the Supreme Court, rather than the citizens, chose

George W. Bush over Al Gore. And who chose the Supreme Court? The President of the United States. Gore won the popular vote, meaning the American people cast more votes for him, but their voices were ignored and their votes were discarded because Bush “won” the electoral college. Was that democracy? The electoral college continues to rely on electors to vote for the president, and while electors are strongly encouraged to go with their state’s decision, they are not legally bound to and occasionally defy their state’s decision.² There is an absolute lack of accountability. Again, is this democracy?

Because each state receives a number of electors that represents the number of citizens plus their two senators, voters in small states have approximately 60% more power and influence than those in large states.³ This merely serves to amplify the power that small states have in the senate, where Rhode Island has the same amount of power and influence as California. In addition, because all electoral votes go to the candidate that wins the majority in any given state, over 90 percent of campaign money, time and resources as well as party platforms cater to the 15 “swing states” or states in which polls have not already predicted a guaranteed outcome. In other, predetermined states, opposition votes are not counted in the electoral college, and have no bearing over the presidential election results.⁴ This has led to widespread disillusionment with the system and abstention from the electoral process, at least partially accounting for the low voter turnout in the U.S.

Although the U.S. claims to be a pluralist system, there is no place for third parties. Third party candidates are scorned by the two major parties for “taking away” their votes. Those on the left, especially those in swing states, feel tremendous pressure to choose the more progressive of the two major parties rather than voting for who truly represents their views. The dominance of the two party system creates a narrow ideological range of debate, with the two parties representing nearly identical values. In our current system, this two party dominance seems to be inescapable, furthering the rates of disillusionment and abstention.

Our representative democracy functions to represent transnational corporations and their economic interests more than those of citizens. Individuals running for office rely on the contributions of corporations to cover enormous campaign costs. Based on this sponsorship corporations can expect politicians to represent their interests. Corporate lobbies are another form of this interest and undermine the power and influence of citizens.⁵

Although politicians are voted upon by citizens (or the electors in electoral college presidential elections), they end up accountable to corporations, not the people. If public officials are not living up to their campaign promises and are failing to represent the interests of their constituencies, there is no way for citizens to revoke their power.⁶

Not only is our representative democracy held captive by the interests of capitalism and corporate interests in the United States, but we are exporting the same model of “democracy” abroad to further global economic control.⁷

While the corporate voice is heard loud and clear in our representative democratic systems, citizens are increasingly excluded. For example, as an 18-year old college freshman eager to participate in our democratic system for the first time, I filled out a voter registration card at my college orientation. The day before election day, nearly two months after I had filled out the registration card, I received a letter saying the paper I had filled out had been a copy, and therefore was invalid. Then the next year I went to the polls with my voter registration card, birth certificate, driver’s license, and student ID. I was told I could not vote because, although I was a registered voter in the state of Ohio and attended a 100% residential college, I did not have “proof of residence.” This is just one experience, but it demonstrates the larger problem that elections are not facilitated to honor peoples’ right to vote.

So what is the solution? How can democracy function in a way that truly involves citizens and builds inclusive popular participation and governance from the bottom up rather than the top down?

Participatory democracy is a model that is

becoming increasingly popular in Latin America, taking many different forms in the region. This form of democracy creates a system that emphasizes the importance of direct and active involvement of citizens in political structures.

While in Venezuela, we experienced a unique new form of participatory democracy that has been created and implemented successfully in the last ten years. Venezuela had previously functioned under a representative governing model, directly imported from the United States. Like in the US, participation in politics was very limited, with high abstention rates, predominantly among the poor and working classes, who at the time made up 70% of the nation's population. A strongly limiting two-party system was in place for over 40 years before Chavez's election in 1998.

The first formal step towards participatory democracy was the re-drafting of the Venezuelan constitution in 1999. This progressive document was both written and ratified by the citizens themselves. The constitution outlines the new system of participatory democracy, giving a number of progressive, positive rights to citizens previously excluded from the political system. Reasoning for the move towards a participatory democratic system is quoted below;

"This regulation [in favor of participatory democracy] responds to a felt aspiration of organized civil society that strives to change the political culture, which so many decades of state paternalism and the dominance of party heads generated that hindered the development of democratic values. In this sense, participation is not limited to electoral processes, since the need for intervention of the people is recognized in the processes of formation, formulation, and execution of public policy, which would result in the overcoming of the governability deficits that have affected our political system due to the lack of harmony between state and society. To conceive public administration as a process in which a fluid communication between those who govern and the people is established, implies a modification of the orientation of state-society relations, so as to return to the latter its legitimate protagonism."⁸

With the constitution of 1999, Venezuelans

now have the right of popular recall of elected officials and the power to amend the constitution by popular vote. Civil society now has decision-making power in all levels of government. For the first time the constitution also stated that access to all levels of education, comprehensive healthcare, and meaningful participation in government and media are basic human rights rather than privileges based on one's resources, and the state has the responsibility to ensure that those basic human rights were met.⁹

A host of social programs, most famously the *misiones*, or social "missions" followed the constitutional revision to bring the language of these rights to fruition. The programs are seen as meeting constitutional rights rather than providing charity, and are centered around participation and empowerment. Because of this, the social programs have truly worked to equalize society rather than divide it.¹⁰ By addressing the fact that survival rights and economy stability are prerequisites to truly participating in government and democracy, the *misiones* laid the framework for participatory democracy.

Other efforts by the national government help to make horizontal decision-making part of popular culture. For example, there has been widespread promotion of cooperatives, co-management and worker-management of factories, student and workers' councils. This has initiated a mental and cultural shift in which people are beginning to see themselves as active participants in governing rather than governed people.

One of the most exciting and accessible examples of participatory democracy are Venezuela's communal councils. These are community or popular assemblies. In 2006, the Organic Law of Communal Councils was passed to help communities form and fund these governing assemblies, constituting a new move towards localized grassroots government. The goal? To give the decision making power to those who know the community best. This moves beyond electing people to make decisions about a community and instead gives control to the community itself. People can use their own experiential knowledge to identify and solve the problems in their community.¹¹

This new law was an effort to solidify popular power as part of the country's governing structure and to address corrupt and inadequate local authorities. Local governments such as mayorships, were not distributing funds to areas needing them the most, especially rural areas. They also oversaw intensely corrupt law enforcement agencies that were contributing significantly to crime rates in the country.

Communal councils do not replace mayorships but act as parallel local governing systems, where community members participate directly and horizontally in local decision-making. The most important part of the councils is that funds bypass local and regional governments, going directly to council projects. In 2007, only a year after the communal council law was passed, five billion dollars were allocated to communal councils directly from the national government without interference of local governments.¹² This exemplifies the re-direction of state funding, taking money out of the hands of governors and mayors and placing into the hands of the people themselves. In 2007, 30% of money allotted for local governments went directly to communal councils, and the National Assembly has proposed to increase this number to 50%.¹³

On a structural level, the councils, or popular assemblies, themselves are made up of 200-400 households in metropolitan districts, 20 households in rural districts, and 10 households in indigenous districts. In an effort to avoid hierarchy and domination, the Law of Communal Councils allocated all decision-making power to these all-inclusive popular assemblies. Anyone can attend assembly meetings, and all members above the age of 15 share equal decision-making power. Over 20% of the eligible community residents must be present in order for decisions to be binding.¹⁴

The communal councils are organized into *comités*, or work groups around certain issues affecting the community like clean water, sanitation, housing, etc. Many of these *comités* actually pre-date the existence of communal councils, having previously been set up to democratize the work of the social *misiones* within communities. The communal council also

incorporates a financial committee, the *banco comunal*, who manages the financial resources of the council. An oversight committee, the *contraloría social*, documents and legalizes all decisions made by the council and provides oversight to the financial committee to ensure that the money allocated follows the legal framework, avoiding corruption.¹⁵

Each *comité* has elected *voceros* and *voceras*, or spokespeople, expected to attend each meeting or assembly, and speak on behalf of the *comité* or, in the case of larger assemblies, the community's popular assembly. A *vocero* acts as a point-person for projects but they do not have extra decision-making power; all decisions are made in assembly form by popular vote. *Voceros* of a communal council meet periodically in assemblies with *voceros* from other councils in their sector. These larger popular assemblies, called *comunales*, give the opportunity for numerous councils to identify similar issues and do large-scale local and regional projects. Because a *comuna* contains several communal councils, they have a greater capacity to keep local government systems in check and unify neighboring communities than a communal council itself.¹⁶

What does this look like in practice? We had a number of experiences during our stay in Venezuela related to communal councils and participatory democracy. We'd like to share some of these experiences in story form to help paint a better picture of what this system means and how it affects real people. These stories are from four different communities in Venezuela; *Pueblo Nuevo*, *La Guajira*, *Palo Verde* and *La Paroquia San Juan*.

Pueblo Nuevo (Katie Bowen)

"Don't walk here", they said to me, "this isn't your place", the first time I got anywhere near *barrio Pueblo Nuevo*. The word *barrio* can mean a lot of different things. Directly translated, it means neighborhood, but in Venezuela, *barrio* usually refers to the poorer areas of town, slum communities, where people build their homes from scrap materials, whatever they can find. I was living in Merida at the time, a colonial city at the base of the Andes. I could see the *barrio*

under the bridge when I'd take the bus downtown from my house. For Venezuela, it was strange for the *barrio* to be right downtown, usually they keep to the outskirts. The next time I visited was on a tour to the ECOS community radio station of the *barrio*, an old school that the residents had taken over and begun broadcasting low frequency news, for the community, by the community. As part of a country-wide movement of the revolution, community media is a response to the corporate control of the nation's media. The station had a time slot reserved for the communal council's show every Monday night.

Communal councils were new for this community. After only a year, they had organized themselves around issues that were affecting the *barrio* the most. They had previously been neglected by the state and corrupt local governments, and money had been spent in more viable areas of town. Now the community itself was organizing to meet its own needs. It was difficult for a number of reasons. The *barrio* had no culture of political participation after being marginalized for so long. Most of the residents had known each other their whole lives. Not everyone had the same opinions or values, and making collective decisions with family and neighbors was hard. The communal council had been working to pave the streets and allow for public transportation in that part of the city. They fought for clean, accessible water, for a sewage system in the *barrio*, to fix broken electricity lines, and improvements within the local school to help keep children out of gangs and off drugs, a major issue in *Pueblo Nuevo* and surrounding *barrios*.

Slowly, the community was learning to organize at the grassroots level. Sometimes, they didn't need to turn to the national government for support, realizing they could meet some collective needs for themselves. They kept having trouble with the drainage for the street. After some unsuccessful bouts with the city government, they got together with supplies and tools they already had and fixed it themselves.

A central issue in the community was drug trafficking, and, very much related, gangs. The school system was the worst in the city, and because of the lack of resources there were not



Girl stands in new home built by neighborhood's Communal Council. Palo Verde, Venezuela. By Katherine Bowen

many options for young people.

"One of the biggest problems is the destruction of families. Lots of kids grow up without a father, or without a mother. Violence in the home happens a lot. Imagine having five children in a tiny space, and no economic resources. Oftentimes, the response is violence, for example, to a child who makes a big mess. What happens then? The school that the children go to is also very very bad. Realistically, the most concrete life that they have is one of gangs and dealing drugs. It's the most real, most tangible. We are trying to work with children of this age. This neighborhood doesn't have young people because they have died or left. These children, they end up in gangs and don't care about anybody," said Miguel, resident and communal council member.¹⁷

The communal council of *Pueblo Nuevo*

has focused much of their energy to organizing around these issues because they affect the community very deeply. Underneath the radio station they had created a small library and study space for students. Here, students from the university in Merida come to do service-learning, helping kids with homework, tutoring, mentoring and playing sports. They started a soccer team, with over 50 children who play in the community space. The communal council also started movie nights, for students to have exposure to documentaries and information, and to give space outside of the home or streets for recreation. School students have started making their own documentaries, about their lives in the barrio and issues that are related to them. These short films are shown before the main movies, for people who connect to them the most. Another project in process is the idea for a “*casa de ciencias*”, or little science building, where kids can come to learn computer-literacy and have access to science-related material.

The radio program helps to spread awareness about the communal council and their projects. They make announcements to the community, discuss local issues, and even make public statements to the local government.

I went to the station with a friend to observe one of the council’s shows. It was called “*la voz del consejo comunal*”, or voice of the communal council. The program started by addressing the city’s mayor. “Please give us water”, they said, “all that comes from the faucet are tiny droplets. There are 800 families who live here and we haven’t had water for 15 days. Please send public transportation down our streets. You said it was because they weren’t paved, so we’ve paved them. We live in the city too and need to get around like everyone else. Look in the newspaper, people from the community are dying because they receive bad treatment from the city’s clinic. Give our school more money, we have 80 children in one classroom and our students in 5th grade can’t even read.”¹⁸

Their next message was a call to the community. The elections were coming up for an amendment to the constitution. They began analyzing democracy, taking it apart, reflecting on the differences between an active,

participatory democracy and a representative one. They were urging people to vote, still new for people in the *barrios*, but then saying voting wasn’t enough. It was a call to the community to take action, not just to wear red shirts and spit socialist propaganda, but to take an active role in building the community, building a new society based on the collective, based on justice. This is essentially what communal councils do, what democracy should be.

La Guajira (Caitlin McNulty):

One communal council I visited was located in the state of Táchira, Venezuela on Wayuu indigenous lands. I interviewed a woman named Angela, who had participated in the communal council since its formation in 2007 and was currently serving as a *vocera*. Angela explained to me that in the beginning, her communal council focused on meeting the basic needs of those in the community by building upon the *misiones* that had already existed. Their first project was the construction of thirteen new homes for families who lived in housing that was determined to be inadequate. This was followed by the formation of a community kitchen which provides free lunch and a community day care. A *Barrio Adentro* clinic which provided free comprehensive healthcare had already been established, along with adult basic education programs. The communal council made the decision that the next pressing need was the preservation of Wayuu culture, language, and traditions. Many felt that the local primary school was causing youth to become disconnected from their roots, partially because it failed to teach Wayunike, their indigenous language.

Through much organization, advocacy, and hard work, the community formed one of the first indigenous primary schools in Venezuela which instructs students in both Spanish and Wayunike, requires traditional Wayuu dress for uniforms, and actively involves community elders in the teaching process to foster intergenerational connections. The school also shares a building and works in collaboration with *Paraguaipoa*, the first indigenous community radio station in Venezuela. The school has two weekly radio programs in which students create their own shows. When Angela spoke of the

impact the school, completed in early 2008, had on the community, a tear rolled down her cheek. “My granddaughter now speaks with her friends in Wayunike,” she said; “children now see traditional dress as normal and are surrounded by people reaffirming the importance of their own culture. It has strengthened our community and our families.”¹⁹

Rather than depending on the municipal governments, whose indigenous and low income communities are largely underrepresented, to dictate the priorities of any given community, communal councils ensure egalitarian ideals. Angela explains “For so long, we suffered because the government did not care about us, our security, our roads, our schools. Now, we decide what is important.”²⁰ Although all people deserve the right to local autonomy and self-governance over matters that directly affect their communities, the right to self-governance and autonomy is especially important for indigenous communities whose culture and traditions are often in conflict with conventional structures of governance. In an attempt to respect the culture and autonomy of indigenous groups, the communal council law exempts them from the normal structural regulations. This ability to self-govern in communal councils, along with the right of autodemarkation of indigenous lands (the

ability of indigenous peoples to use traditional knowledge to determine boundaries on tribal lands) guaranteed in the 1999 constitution, is beginning to provide the autonomy the indigenous nations of Venezuela deserve. Jose Miranda, another *vocero* for La Guajira states that; “Because we are indigenous, we have a right to our culture, our principles, our values and our origins and the ability to protect those ourselves is urgent. We are beginning the process of regaining control and resisting manipulation though our participation in the councils.”²¹

The right to self-governance and autonomy on a local level is guaranteed to all communities in Venezuela. In addition to fostering community dialogue, cohesion, and organization, the councils are beginning to provide space and structure for cooperation among communities.

Palo Verde (Katie Bowen):

They were so proud. “Did you see the houses?” everyone would ask. They had just finished the basic construction of sixteen new homes for the community, and they had done it themselves. It was a small community, a little neighborhood, on the edge of a town of about 3,000. It was the poorer side of town. They really

New homes being built by neighborhood's Communal Council. Palo Verde, Venezuela.
By Katherine Bowen



needed the houses. Young people would start families of their own, but continue to live in the homes of their parents due to lack of resources. Sometimes it was grandparents' homes, if their parents had done the same thing a generation before. Almost everyone was related somehow, most worked seasonal jobs, planting and harvesting potatoes. Many hadn't finished grade school.

Their community council assemblies met outside, next to someone's house on the top of the hill. I counted almost 70 people there once, sitting on milk crates with half-naked children running everywhere, chasing the stray dogs. They were almost a year deep into their first project, building the homes. As a community, they were much more organized than other sectors of town, perhaps because of a greater necessity to meet their basic needs.

They had organized to receive funding for the homes. Sixteen homes had been built with the resources meant for only fourteen. The community had purchased tools, materials, and the services of a local engineer to help with the design and building. The rest they took care of themselves, to stretch the resources further and ensure the job was being done well. Houses went up in no time. Every time I walked through that part of town I'd see people working, laying roofs, installing windows, and painting the houses in bright colors. They met quite often to discuss the project as a group, almost once a week. Everybody worked, women, children, men, and people of the community who weren't even receiving new homes.

Having a communal council had changed the community. Not only by providing homes, but impacting the community in much more subtle, non-physical ways. First of all, neighbors were beginning to get to know each other, to work with each other and make decisions and agreements that would be good for everyone. There was a feeling of connection in the community, one that hadn't been there before. A lot of validation was also involved. Finally, people could do something bigger, something for themselves. They could, together, identify common needs and actually change them, meet them. Dreams and plans were already being made for new projects they

could work on, after the houses were finished. They knew they could pave the road entering the neighborhood, build a community space for meetings, tools and projects. They wanted a school, close by, for their children to attend, to learn things relevant to their community and their lives.

They could have clean drinking water in their homes. All of these things were needed, but the best part was, they were now possible. Everyone knew it. Anyone could participate, people who were illiterate, people who had never before organized anything, women who had barely left their own homes. The government had always overlooked them. Now, they had the opportunity to participate directly in politics, to have access to the vast wealth of a country which had systematically and historically neglected them. Who could be better to make these decisions? Who else could have the knowledge and experience to identify the needs of a community and how these needs should be met? Development was happening, not just for their neighborhood, but within in the people themselves. The national government was allocating resources, but with these resources also came power and validation of people, of their struggles, their needs and their ability to organize to create change that would affect them the most.

La Paroquia San Juan (Caitlin McNulty):

In *la parroquia* San Juan in the outskirts of Caracas, five communal councils came together in a *comuna* to create a social enterprise. They created a market to bring healthy fruits and vegetables to their community at low prices through direct cooperation with farmers outside of the city. Eliminating intermediaries and utilizing local production, this market fit into a nation-wide movement towards endogenous development, the concept of increasing production for domestic use through local control of production. In Venezuela endogenous development is promoted to address the country's dependence on the exportation of oil and importation of consumables, like food. Endogenous development also allows communities to take control over their own

production and consumption systems.

The social enterprise, the market, was jointly owned not by those who worked there, but by the broader community made up of those five communal councils. The profits went towards creating a space for community, one in which children could play and people could organize. The sector's communal councils have worked towards this project for two years, occupying the abandoned space below a large overpass until the title was expropriated by the government, not uncommon in the context of the rights guaranteed by the country's progressive 1999 constitution. Although these legal rights to land takeovers and self-governance through communal councils were accessible to all citizens, it was the responsibility of the communities themselves to organize and carry out these projects.

The communal market was just the beginning; the *comuna* has since developed a communal bakery and pharmacy, again with the goal of providing affordable services to the community on a sliding income scale with all the profits directly benefiting the communities. Other projects initiated by the *comuna* are a community radio station as well as a collective space to watch media created by the community because, as *comuna* member and *vocera* Elin Roja states; "the war is an ideological one, fought with cameras not guns."²² They have formed a "house for grandparents" in which old people without family to care for them have the support system they need. There is a *comedor popular*, a place in which community members can eat incredibly cheaply, or free if they have few resources. There is a school of community education where community members share what they know most about in a popular education fashion, again building community knowledge and cohesion.

The idea of a *comuna* is the next step in participatory democracy and co-governance; creating a place where the people go beyond depending directly on the government for all their funding, where there is cooperation among co-governing communities and where social enterprises are owned by, and meet the needs of, the community. It is seen as the next step in sustaining the political process begun

in Venezuela. Because *la comunidad* San Juan sustains all their projects through social enterprises, they are not dependent upon the financial support of the Venezuelan government. It is a new form of organization and support, one that can last through different political systems, through international financial crisis, etc. Roja sums up the importance of their organizing:

*We have created all this ourselves. Chávez created the framework, but we used our own hands, our own sweat, and minds, and organizing to make this happen. This is our community, created and governed by ourselves. We have changed the consciousness of those who lived here, showing them through our actions how much the values of solidarity and compassion can do for the community. I have faith that all communities can create this network of cooperation and we can make the next level of government participatory, that eventually we can make all the levels of government reflect the needs of the people. We are all members of our own communities but this has brought us together. It has broadened our struggle, but also our system of support and solidarity.*²³

Conclusion

Venezuela, through participatory democracy and communal councils, is revolutionizing the meaning of the state, taking what used to be reserved for the elites of society and allowing all to participate and share in the wealth and power they are entitled to.²⁴ For the first time, the vast wealth of the country is reaching the majority of the people, the people who need it the most. This doesn't come in the form of handouts. In Venezuela, basic human rights are guaranteed in the constitution. The national government is granting resources, but with these resources comes the power to make collective decisions and to identify and address problems affecting people the most.

Communal councils empower people and communities, positively changing the way in which people view their identities and roles in society. Because community members are carrying out the projects for their own communities, projects that will benefit their families, friends and themselves, each has a

triple benefit. Not only does each project benefit the community, it reduces unemployment as local labor is utilized, and ensures excellent quality because the workers are creating meaningful projects they care about and are deeply invested in. The councils foster cohesion and empowerment as communities decide what needs to be addressed and work together to bring the projects to fruition.

The councils function especially to empower women, who often make up the majority of active council members. Due to the feminization of poverty, women are often most affected by issues surrounding the lack of resources, as they are culturally responsible for caring for not just themselves but for their families. The councils give an opportunity for women to directly participate in their own communities' economic and governing systems, allowing them to create systems which ensure everyone's needs are met. Prior, there were few opportunities for women to engage in community organizing outside the home.

Another benefit of communal councils is their ability to function as a centralized, truly representative body for the community. This is useful in a number of ways. Community schools under the new Bolivarian curriculum, for example, work with the communal councils to develop service-learning projects that benefit communities and give students the opportunity to learn about and address local issues. Venezuela's *misiones* utilize the cohesion of the councils to further the local democratization of these social projects originally addressed by singular community *comites*. For example, *Barrio Adentro* doctors can simply go to the communal council to collaborate in addressing public health issues specific to the community or sector. Local law enforcement can also work with the councils in whatever way the communities choose. This could be anything from collaboration for workshops on self-esteem or drugs in schools to allowing and supporting a community to form its own way of governing and protecting itself.²⁵

Similarly, the councils play an important role in addressing local governmental corruption. Communities no longer need to depend upon municipal governments that have worked to

systematically exclude them because of their lack of resources. A community has the ability to dictate their priorities as a collective whole, rather than through a few privileged voices, resulting in projects that genuinely reflect the needs of the community rather than the interests of the representatives. Communities have the power to fix problems themselves, a power which is changing community consciousness.

There are over 40,000 communal councils across the nation.²⁶ This number is growing rapidly as societal consciousness and values in Venezuela change through the *proceso*. Strong local, grassroots movements are, for the first time, being incorporated into the country's leadership. This process is not easy. Like all transitions to horizontal group decision-making structures, communal councils have their fair share of struggles and opportunities to learn from doing collective work.

The movement that this collective work is forming, however, is stunning. All people are included and communities have the power to form change affecting them the most. It is the constitutional right of citizens to directly participate not only in their country's governing system but also in a peaceful, people-centered, truly democratic revolution that affects the entire world.

The stark contrast between Venezuela's participatory democracy and our own esteemed form of representative "democracy" in the United States acts as both a wake-up call to citizens in our country to define for ourselves what true democracy is, but also serves as a source for inspiration and examination, as a lived example of what a more substantive democracy looks like.

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La Revolucion Es Feminista: Reconstructing Gender in Venezuela

By Courtney Frantz

One of the most important aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution is also the most overlooked: that the significant majority—often 90% or more¹—of its participants, its leaders, and the beneficiaries of its social programs are womyn². The phenomenon of the feminization of poverty is particularly strong in Venezuela, and poor and working class Venezuelan womyn have a history of working together to alleviate the same symptoms of poverty that the Bolivarian movement has begun to eradicate. Their organizing strategy of fighting these aspects of poverty reflects an acute understanding of their own economic struggles as being gendered. The Revolution, along with the broader social movements that support it, can be seen as a form of popular—or working class and poor—feminism, in which these “popular womyn” alleviate the specifically gendered forms of poverty that they experience.

Although it is vital to recognize that much of the situation of Venezuelan womyn relates to those of poor and working womyn in every country, including the United States, it is also vital to place this movement within its own context. In Venezuela, classism and sexism are intimately intertwined. To describe

this phenomenon, scholars often use the term “feminization of poverty,” meaning that the burden of poverty increasingly falls on womyn. In many parts of Venezuela, to be a female adult (or female young adult) usually means to be a mother; between 60% and 70%³ of households in Venezuela are run by single mothers, many with several children or more. Economically, this translates into the *triple carga*,⁴ or triple burden, of womyn’s work: unpaid work in the private sphere of the home so that they can care for their families, paid work in the public sphere so that they can financially support their families, and community organizing across these two spheres so that they can alleviate and eventually eradicate these burdens.

I spent most of my time in Venezuela with a working class family in the small, rural town of Palo Verde. My “mother,” Esperanza⁵, and many of her family members and friends worked at 8 de Marzo, a majority-womyn pasta- and granola-making cooperative. Every day, Esperanza rose before 5 A.M., prepared *arepas* for her two teenage sons, and went to work. After she returned from work, often at 6 or 7 P.M., she might attend a community, church, or school meeting. On top of this, she was the primary

caretaker of her sons, whose father lived in another town. This *triple carga* made it difficult to concentrate effectively on more than one aspect of her life, and I rarely saw Esperanza sit down without working on some task.

Besides facing these burdens on their own, womyn often find fewer resources to support themselves and their families. Particularly in rural areas, there are few “unskilled” paid jobs for womyn, and Venezuelan womyn are paid even less in proportion to Venezuelan men than womyn are paid in proportion to men in the United States.⁶ Womyn, even more than men, work in the “informal economy,” selling clothes on the street, working under the table as maids, or cooking and selling food out of their homes. These jobs provide no security, labor protections, benefits, or wage controls. Esperanza was lucky to have her job; outside of the local cooperatives and corner stores, there was precious little work in Palo Verde outside of the almost entirely male field of hired farm labor.

Borrowing from the idea of institutionalized racism, which describes the systematic nature of racial discrimination as it continually reinforces the poverty of people of color, we can describe some of the causes behind the situation of Venezuelan womyn. Though distinct from that of racism, their situation is also one of systematic exclusion and discrimination. Not only can they find fewer jobs and earn less money, but—even when financially supported by a partner—they tend to shoulder the responsibility of caring for their families, and therefore cope directly with the symptoms of poverty that their families experience. As they take on most or all of the responsibility of caretaking, womyn are often the last to have their own needs taken care of. Through the feminization of poverty, which we can thus conceptualize as institutionalized sexism, the symptoms of poverty affect Venezuelan womyn proportionately more than these symptoms affect Venezuelan men.

A local mother named Josefina, for example, relayed in a school meeting that she arrived home from work one Sunday night to find that her son had not begun his homework. Her son told her that he had been waiting for her to help him, but there was no longer time. As a separated

working mother and the primary caretaker of at least one child, her attendance at the meeting and her apparent anxiety clearly demonstrated that her son’s education was a priority for her. Because of her triple responsibilities of a paid job, involvement in her son’s school, and caring for her son, Josefina was unable to give her child the large amount of help that he needed. These caretaking responsibilities meant that the educational problems in her community directly affected her more than they did her son’s father. To deal with these gendered problems, poor and working womyn have developed support networks within their communities.

Venezuelan popular womyn have a history of acting collectively to fulfill their basic needs for survival. Womyn have historically organized together within their neighborhoods, supporting each other and fostering a culture of solidarity and action based on immediate practical needs⁷ such as healthcare, education, and land rights for themselves and their families. Mothers have formed supportive networks, both within their families and in their neighborhoods, trading or collectivizing tasks. During my time in Venezuela, I saw many small day-to-day instances of these supportive networks. One day, I asked Esperanza if she had a funnel. Rather than simply saying “no,” she sent her son from house to house until he found a relative or neighbor who had one. Her support network came through. On many days, these same family and friends came over to Esperanza’s house to eat squash soup; some might drop off their toddlers when they had other work to do. Just as Esperanza cooked and cared for others, they did the same for her; in this way, a small community of womyn collectivized the daily work that made up part of their *triple carga*.

These household tasks, including cooking, child rearing, and cleaning, are known as *trabajo solidario*. This term, while often translated as “caring work,”⁸ can also be translated more directly as “solidarity work,” reflecting both the strong history of collectivizing these tasks and the political nature of supportive work in the sphere of the home. As womyn in the Bolivarian Revolution further their organizing to fight the feminization of poverty and ease the burden of

*Womyn
breastfeeding,
Ocho De Marzo
Pasta Cooperative.
Palo Verde,
Venezuela.
By Katherine
Bowen*



the *triple carga*, they bring these tasks beyond the personal, recognizing the political nature of this systematic burden. Womyn working in a soup kitchen, or *casa de alimentación*, for example, expressed that their work was not “service... [but rather was] intended as a survival strategy to lessen the burden on women... who were not able to provide their children with nutritious meals.”⁹ Collectivizing this task not only helped improve these mothers’ lives, but it also helped them recognize that their struggles to fulfill the great responsibility of feeding their children were deeply political. Many of the other programs in which womyn organizers are heavily involved, such as educational and medical *misiones*, provide high-quality services both for womyn and for those in their care, freeing up mothers’ time spent caring for sick or school-aged children. By openly and politically collectivizing their private-sphere *trabajo solidario*, working and poor womyn thus begin both to address the triple burden of their work and to erase the separation between the spheres of home and community that has plagued other feminist movements throughout the ages.

Through this involvement, womyn organizers are mapping the traditional “feminine values” of caring, solidarity, and community onto the socialist values of the Bolivarian

revolution, and mapping the work of traditional family and community task-sharing networks onto the task sharing of cooperatives, social programs or *misiones*, and communal councils. The 8 de Marzo cooperative, although founded before the election of Chávez, is similar to the model on which the current co-op movement is founded, and most of its members are quite supportive of the Bolivarian Revolution. As in many cooperatives, the majority of the workers are womyn from one or two local families. I was lucky enough to participate in a session in which cooperative members evaluated one another’s work. In addition to how they performed their tasks, I was surprised to learn that female and male members “graded” each other not only on values such as collaboration, creativity, solidarity, and friendship, but also on how much time they spent with their children, how often they shared opinions in meetings, whether or not they let problems bother them, and the extent to which they organized in the community. No one announced any such criteria; rather, workers wrote about each member independently. This evaluation session demonstrated quite clearly both the cooperative’s erasure of the separate spheres of work, home, and community, and the fluidity with which the values upheld by womyn’s family and community networks transfer to the “socialist” cooperative setting.

Womyn's collectivization of *trabajo solidario*, as well as their involvement in mixed-gender community organizing itself, has begun to raise both men's and womyn's gender consciousness, albeit inadvertently at times. Through the involvement of men, the *misiones* and other collective social organizations confront *machismo*, or a culturally specific combination of male chauvinism and sexism. Sujatha Fernandes notes, for example, that "treating the soup kitchen as a collective responsibility, and not as the sole work of the women volunteers, had the effect of challenging the notion that cooking is the domain of women."¹⁰ I saw this firsthand at 8 de Marzo, where workers sometimes alleviate the burden of the *triple carga* by bringing their children to work. "Gustavo," one of three male workers and the only father, and "Julia," his partner, sometimes brought their children to the cooperative; I often saw Gustavo playing with or talking to them. During my interviews with workers, womyn often expressed that these changes were part of a long process, but female workers had transformed into opinionated leaders and had learned to value their own opinions as they became increasingly involved in community work. When womyn organize and share ideas outside of the often-isolating private sphere, and particularly when men and womyn work together in the community, both sexes gradually begin to directly address the problems of *machismo*, from the division of labor that furthers the *triple carga* to womyn's involvement in decision-making. Both the blending of the public and private spheres¹¹ by sharing domestic tasks with men and the act of organizing itself challenge the gender roles that further both the *triple carga* and the culture of *machismo*.

Nora Castañeda, a professional with a working-poor background, provides a rare glimpse into the popular womyn's movement's analysis of *machismo* in her interview with Michael Albert. She relates,

The work that women are doing is certainly changing, so what men are doing is changing too—but the machismo culture is still very strong. So now we are additionally working a lot on what is being called masculinity, on the new position of men in society... We still

*maintain that our enemy is imperialism and capitalists. Our enemy is not the men at our side. But we also have to resolve the problem of machismo.*¹²

This is where intersectionality comes in: capitalism is another reason why poor womyn stay poor, and they need male allies in that struggle, so outsiders may not observe as many direct challenges to sexism here as they would expect in middle class movements. Fernandes also notes that both womyn and men have begun to name and criticize *machismo* in the process of their organizing¹³. Corey Fischer-Hoffman quotes the Madres del Barrio mission, a program that pays poor mothers a stipend for housework and provides training in the formation of cooperatives:

*We do not see socio-productive inclusion as a mechanical fact that to start a women's economic project will immediately change their consciousness; it will be a dialectic process. For this reason, socio-productive inclusion will be accompanied by socio-political work, leading to a change from values of selfishness for those of solidarity... we see socio-productive inclusion as a strategic objective in a new consciousness for Venezuelan women.*¹⁴

Through collective social organizing both with and without men, popular womyn in Venezuela may have managed to begin a revolutionary transformation of gender consciousness based on socialist values. This organizing places importance both on the act of *trabajo solidario* and on the value of womyn in and of themselves¹⁵ while working towards a change in consciousness and the division of labor.

The Bolivarian government, including President Chávez, is an additional important component of the popular womyn's movement. The president's discourse of feminism has affirmed the importance of womyn to the larger popular movement and strengthened the womyn's movement itself. During an extemporaneous speech that I witnessed at the Worker's March for the Yes Vote, he proclaimed that "everyone should be a feminist,¹⁶" and that "to be socialist is to be feminist."¹⁷ The Chávez government, of course, backs this discourse up with the creation



Ocho De Marzo Pasta Cooperative. Gabriella, a founding member of the 25 year old cooperative, cuts and hangs pasta to dry. Palo Verde, Venezuela. Katherine Bowen, 2009.

and maintenance of social programs, laws, and other policies that support the grassroots fight against the feminization of poverty. In addition to the *Misión Madres del Barrio* and other *misiones* addressing education, health, and related concerns, the government has created several programs exclusively for womyn. Nora Castañeda heads Banmujer, a low-interest microcredit bank that trains, supports, and funds womyn starting small cooperative businesses. Inamujer, which has recently become Minmujer, or the Ministry of Womyn, is a distinct branch of the government created for the sole purpose of generating and changing policy on behalf of womyn. The Venezuelan government is one of the first in the world to recognize explicitly the need to support womyn's voices as a distinct political bloc.

Just as the Bolivarian state supports popular womyn's organizing, many poor and

working class womyn support the government and President Chávez. As Nora Castañeda recounts, during the attempted coup against the president, "people were organizing for battle, but at the same time they were... in mourning... especially the women,"¹⁸ because "*grassroots women have managed to survive conditions of terrible poverty and with the revolution they have gained so much that to lose it would be truly unbearable... 'They won't take our president away from us.'*"¹⁹ In her interview, she reminds Michael Albert that womyn head four out of five of the branches of the Venezuelan government, but she echoes the popular sentiment that "*we don't want to replace the president, not even with a woman... because he has a very strong commitment to women, and if we had a woman take his place we could end up with a woman who doesn't have a very strong commitment*

to women. Someone like Margaret Thatcher.”²⁰ This is the first time that Venezuelan womyn have been encouraged and supported by a government in their organizing, and they do not want to let that slip away.

The poor and working womyn’s movement in Venezuela still faces many issues. Despite the fact that community organizations are beginning to speak about and deal with *machismo* culture, men’s consciousness appears not to be changing as fast as womyn’s. An emphasis on the alleviation of the poverty that Venezuelan womyn face is clearly integral to their movement, but the great burden of the *triple carga* can not be completely solved until Venezuelan society encourages men to become involved in housework and incorporate “feminine” (now socialist) values into their lives. Especially as womyn are taking on increasing amounts of responsibility through community organizing and “socioproductive inclusion,” gender equality demands that men take on increasingly mixed roles as well. Furthermore, keeping socialist values such as solidarity and caring largely within the realm of the female encourages men not to be caring. Maribel, another local worker, served dinner to the father of her children when he came over; she explained to me that this was an act of caring for a family member. That he almost never thanked her or even put away his

dishes, however, signaled that he might not see this work as a humyn²¹ act of *trabajo solidario*, but rather that he was simply accustomed to his gendered role of eating and not cooking. This is not to say that popular men are more engrossed in the culture of *machismo*; on the contrary, men of all classes and nationalities can be quite sexist. Such anecdotes, however, do speak to Castañeda’s concern that the popular movement must also examine the role of masculinity.

Although there is room for growth within both the popular womyn’s movement and the Venezuelan government, the two have made enormous progress in their work together to fight the institutionalized sexism of the feminization of poverty and to change the gender consciousness of both men and womyn. This relationship with the state has helped many popular womyn to further formalize, politicize, and strengthen the collectivization of their *trabajo solidario*, transforming the “feminine” values of that work into socialist values. Venezuela’s recognition of the labor and experiences of doubly and triply oppressed people—Latina, Afro-Venezuelan, and indigenous womyn from the popular classes—is unprecedented and transformative, both for their own culture and for womyn worldwide. This movement, like all feminist movements, is relevant to the lives and immediate goals of its participants and leaders;



*Ocho De Marzo
Pasta Cooperative.
Palo Verde,
Venezuela.
By Katherine Bowen.*

it is located at the intersection of these forms of oppression, and it has grown out of the long-standing support networks that popular womyn's lives necessitate. An important difference between this feminism and almost every other, though, is that its members, leaders, activities, and ideology overlap so much with the larger, government-supported Bolivarian movement that the two are nearly one and the same. This has given Venezuelan popular feminism greater strength, but Sujatha Fernandes cautions that populist governments led by men often clash with womyn's movements and their interests in the long term.²² Although female leaders abound at some of the highest levels of Venezuelan government, there is no certain prognosis for the role of popular womyn in the Bolivarian movement. My interviews with Venezuelans have shown me, however, that womyn currently retain a protagonistic²³ and supportive—yet critical²⁴—role within both the state and the larger social movements. They are not merely followers of a male feminist president. On the contrary, all womyn's movements have an incredible amount to learn from Venezuelan popular feminists' keen, growing understanding of their own poverty as institutionalized sexism, their understanding of the particular economic burdens and experiences of womyn around the world, and their understanding of the strategies and tactics they need to fight their own oppression.

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22 Fernandes. "Gender, Populism, and Women's Participation in Popular Politics in the Barrios of Caracas": 24.

23 "Protagonistic" is a popular term in Venezuela, meaning that the person or group takes an active, leading role in a movement or in their own lives.

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Media In Venezuela: Facts and Fiction

By Liz Migliorelli and Caitlin McNulty

When Hugo Chávez won the Venezuelan Presidential election of 1998, he immediately implemented one of his primary campaign platforms, the rewriting of the Venezuelan Constitution of 1961. This new constitution included a broader scope of social, economic, cultural, political and civil rights. A popular referendum was held to elect qualified citizens to make up a Constituent Assembly whose job was to draft the new constitution. This constitution was truly written for the people and by the people. One of the articles in the constitution required the restructuring of the Venezuelan oil industry in order to provide a more equal distribution of resources and wealth to the Venezuelan people. For the economic and political groups who traditionally held power and who had benefited greatly from this oil profit, this shift in structure and fortune was not at all welcome. Since then, this large block of private media (whose ownership belongs to the most powerful businessmen and corporations) has worked toward removing Chávez from power and slowing the revolutionary process.¹ Since Chávez won the presidential election and the traditional political parties Acción Democrática and COPEI lost power, the news media has

become the greatest weapon of the opposition in a war against the Chávez administration.

Media Sources in Venezuela

The preferred news source of most Venezuelans is television media. There are at least five nationally broadcast television stations that dispatch via “free-over-the-air” and publicly allotted signals. These stations include Venevisión (controlled by Grupo Cisneros), Univision, Televisión de Venezuela (Televen) and previous to its closing (which will be explained later in the article), Radio Caracas Television (RCTV).²

For several decades, commercial television in Venezuela has belonged to an oligopoly of two families, the Cisneros and the Bottome & Granier Group. The tremendous influence of these parties reaches beyond broadcast networks into advertising and public relations agencies that operate for the welfare of the stations, as well as record labels and other societal industries that produce material to be promoted on the stations. Not only does the Cisneros family own Venevisión, the largest station in Venezuela, they own over 70 media outlets in 39 countries, including DirecTV Latin

America, AOL Latin America, Caracol Television (Colombia), the Univisión Network in the United States, Galavisión, Playboy Latin America as well as beverage and food distribution such as Coca Cola bottling, Regional Beer and Pizza Hut in Venezuela. They also own entities such as Los Leones baseball team of Caracas and the Miss Venezuela Pageant.³ The reach of the Cisneros power is massive; the media monopoly broadcasts to more than 4,000,000 television screens in Venezuela, giving it tremendous power and influence.

Globovisión, a channel that is widely broadcast in major metropolitan centers is also available on satellite and DirecTV, as well as CNN en Español. Both are private stations that have a harsh anti-Chávez rhetoric. President of CNN en Español Christopher Cromwell has said that Chávez may not like the programming on his network, but this meant that CNN was doing its job correctly. Another station, Valores Educativos Televisión (Vale TV) is a major regional network that is run by the Asociación Civil, which is managed by the Catholic Church.⁴ These smaller, regional networks are never mentioned in reports of media in Venezuela. Five major private television networks control at least 90% of the market and smaller private stations control another 5%. This 95% of the broadcast market was quick to express its opposition to President Chávez's administration as early as 1999, soon after Chávez first took office.⁵ There are three public and state-controlled television channels that exist on the same national electromagnetic spectrum, including Venezolana de Televisión (VTV, established in 1964, a state-owned television network); Visión Venezuela (ViVe TV, established in 2003, a cultural network funded by the government that is starting to be broadcast nationally); and Televisora Venezolana Social (TVes, established in 2007 as RCTV's substitute).⁶ These channels cannot compete with the privately owned, commercial media that serve as the dominant source of television news media in Venezuela.

Print media in Venezuela is diverse, but it depicts a greater opposition presence than seen in television networks. Many publications are corporate-owned and extremely critical of

the Chávez administration. In comparison to the United States, where New York, the largest city, has only four daily papers (*New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Post*, *Daily News*), Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, has twenty-one daily papers. Whereas the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *Washington Post* are the only nationally distributed daily papers in the United States, Venezuela circulates eight daily papers nationally. A Washington D.C. based think-tank Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) has described the print media situation in simple terms: "nine out of ten newspapers, including [the most prestigious daily] *El Nacional* and [the business oriented] *El Universal*, are staunchly anti-Chávez."⁷

The Coup D'etat

Never was corporate media's agenda of destabilizing the Chavez government more transparent than during the 2002 coup attempt against Chávez, which was seen by many as the "first media war in world history".⁸ Overwhelming public outrage broke out as the majority of Venezuelans who voted Chávez into office saw the democratic process derailed before their very eyes. Their voices, actions, and protests were silenced by the news media in favor of the "inauguration ceremony" of Pedro Carmona, the illegitimate coup-appointed interim President of Venezuela. In response to the government's change of the executive board of Petroleros de Venezuela (PDVSA, Venezuela's oil company) a massive opposition march to the headquarters of PDVSA was promoted by print media, radio and television incessantly. In the days before the coup, instead of regular television programming, Venevisión, RCTV, Globovisión and Televen broadcast constant anti-Chávez speeches and propaganda calling for viewers to take to the streets. Some ads urged, "Venezuelans, take to the streets on Thursday, April 11 at 10 a.m. Bring your flags. For freedom and democracy. Venezuela will not surrender. No one will defeat us."⁹ Many propaganda ads were extremely threatening and clearly intended to instigate violence and an overthrow of the Chávez government.

On April 11, 2002, the march that was directed toward the PDVSA headquarters changed route toward the presidential palace, where a group of pro-government supporters were rallying that same day. When sniper gunfire rang out and pro-government supporters began to fall, the Chávez supporters started to shoot back in the direction of the gunfire. RCTV, along with other major news networks, selectively showed footage of Chávez supporters firing guns off of the Puente Llaguno bridge along with a voiceover of “Look at that Chávez supporter...see how he unloads his gun at the peaceful opposition march below.”¹⁰ They failed to broaden the angle to include the abandoned street below, or include that a mix of two peaceful marches of both Chávez supporters and opposition members had been fired upon by unidentified gunmen, the majority of victims were Chávez supporters, and the men on the bridge were responding to a direct attack. The private media held the Chávez supporters responsible and blamed the Chávez government for arming the aggressors.

Shortly afterwards, a video of objecting high-ranking military officials pronouncing themselves against Chávez’s government and requesting his resignation was shown. By projecting these videos over and over again in the mass media, the coup plotters hoped to justify their final goal of kidnapping Chávez and carrying out the coup. The next morning, after Chávez had been taken away but had not resigned, a Venevisión morning program hosted some of the military and civilian coup leaders. The guests on the show thanked the private media channels for their integral role carrying out the coup. As powerful businessman Pedro Carmona became the de-facto president of Venezuela, all the private media owners were present in the palace cheering loudly as the new president dismantled the democratic institutions that Chávez’s government had put into place.

There was a complete blackout of information about the coup. The private media intentionally kept breaking news and critical information concealed from the public. On April 11th, RCTV received information that Chávez had been kidnapped and was being held in a

military prison, but withheld that information from the public, continuing to publicly celebrate his “resignation.” During this news blackout caused by the forced closure of the state TV channel, the private media became the primary source of information. Demanding the return of their democratically elected president, Chávez supporters took to the streets on April 13th. Instead of reporting these demonstrations and massive mobilizations, the private channels broadcast old movies, cartoons and soap operas. There was a total news blockade; networks prohibited all employees from showing Chavez supporters on screen, forcing those with moral or ethical objections to leave. Venezuelan analyst Eva Golinger states that;

*The intentional censorship was a clear attempt to deny Venezuelan citizens access to true, objective and timely information, violating their constitutional rights and those rights garnered to them under international human rights instruments.*¹¹

It wasn’t until the protesters won back the state-run television station that Venezuelans began to receive news of what was happening in their country.

Community media played an integral role in combating this widespread media manipulation and blockade, presenting accurate information about the coup and the popular resistance beginning to mobilize in order to derail it. Gregory Wilpert explains;

*During the coup, the community media filled the gap which the private mainstream media left when it played an active role in the coup and refused to broadcast the military and popular resistance against the coup government.*¹²

Although the majority of community media stations were broken into, dismantled, and destroyed, a few managed to convey their message and helped mobilize the masses that eventually managed to reinstate their justly elected president. On one of the most significant days for Venezuelan democracy, the day the democratic process prevailed and Chávez was re-instated as the President of Venezuela, major news stations broadcast cartoons.¹³

In the end, the private media was not able to complete a successful coup d’etat against

Chávez, but they were able to rally support from the U.S. media which lead to a greater range of misinformation about what had happened during those few days in April. Fairness in Accuracy and Reporting published a Media Advisory on April 18, 2002 titled, "U.S. Papers Hail Venezuelan Coup as Pro-Democracy Move" where it explains the way U.S. newsprint sources such as the *New York Times* declared that "Chávez's 'resignation' meant that 'Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator.' Conspicuously avoiding the word 'coup,' the Times explained that Chávez 'stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader.'" But the *New York Times* did run an editorial three days later when Chávez returned to power and said;

*In his three years in office, Mr. Chávez has been such a divisive and demagogic leader that his forced departure last week drew applause at home and in Washington. That reaction, which we shared, overlooked the undemocratic manner in which he was removed. Forcibly unseating a democratically elected leader, no matter how badly he has performed, is never something to cheer.*¹⁴

The *Times*' "apology" was a thinly veiled criticism of Chávez. The *New York Times* was not the only paper that celebrated the removal of Chávez; the *Chicago Tribune*, *Newsday* and the *Los Angeles Times* were all quick to pay tribute to the coup. Overwhelming international criticism of the coup and interim government was silenced by this approval of the United States, Colombia and Spain, the only three countries that acknowledged the coup-appointed government as legitimate.

RCTV and Freedom of Speech

In Venezuela, the government decided in May 2007 not to renew the broadcast license of RCTV, which was one of Venezuela's largest and most powerful television stations. This decision created a large uproar amongst critics of the Chávez government, international media, free press groups and human rights groups, all which claimed that the denial of renewing the broadcasting license of RCTV was direct proof that freedom of speech was being limited in

Venezuela.¹⁵ By looking deeper, one can see how profoundly the propaganda campaign carried out by the corporate media of the United States and Venezuela affected the way in which people comprehend the issue of RCTV's "closure." For the Chávez government and its supporters, this conclusion of RCTV's broadcast rights was long overdue because of its participation in the April 2002 coup attempt, where they used manipulated film footage to convince people that the government was murdering people in the streets and refused to broadcast any footage of thousands of Venezuelans taking to the streets to defend their democracy. RCTV has been censured and closed repeatedly in previous presidential administrations and the station leads Venezuela in its violation of communication codes, with 652 infractions.¹⁶

Not only do the mainstream media dictate the way in which individuals and movements are perceived, they dictate what the framework for that perception will be. Those participating in the international political debate over free speech and RCTV weren't discussing the fact that RCTV continues to broadcast on cable despite its prominent role in the funding of the 2002 coup against Chavez. Neither were they addressing the fact that the US government, through the N.E.D. (National Endowment for Democracy) and US A.I.D. provided several million dollars to the news networks funding and participating in the coup, had a military presence during Chávez's temporary detention, and therefore had vested interest in the international "debate" (read international propaganda campaign) and how it was framed.

The "Organic Law on Telecommunications" gives Chávez the legal authority to not renew RCTV's license. "A concession for the use of the radio electric spectrum will not be provided to those who, despite having been in conformity with the modalities established in this law are, nonetheless, involved in the following situations: ... 5. When grave circumstances arise relating to the security of the state that, in the judgment of the President of the Republic, make the provision [of a concession] unsuitable." There is no review process stated in the law.¹⁷

This issue of violating freedom of speech

in Venezuela remains a popular debate in the media. It is necessary to look at whose freedom of speech we are addressing, and how we are addressing it. With a few individuals controlling 95% of Venezuela's broadcast media, the international debate should have centered on the rights of the remainder of the population to express their opinions, ideas, and beliefs. Because media has the power to create commonly accepted truth, freedom of speech should allow everyone to share that power. Political analyst and author Diana Raby states;

"The question of expression and communication of social and political discourse is absolutely fundamental to any discussion of democracy, and the notion that such powerful instruments of communication as newspapers, radio or TV stations should be the private property of individuals or commercial enterprises would be laughable if it were not already established practice."¹⁸

Without a way to express ideas to a broader audience, freedom of speech and expression is a hollow concept, a negative right. Private corporate media is often used to dominate and control populations, perpetuating a system in which only those with capital truly have a voice. The abstract right to freedom of speech does not negate the fact that only an elite few have the resources to realize this right.

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Community Media: The Thriving Voice of the Venezuelan People

By Liz Migliorelli and Caitlin McNulty

In Venezuela today a grass-roots movement of community and alternative media is challenging the domination of private commercial media. Community oriented, non-profit, non-commercial, citizen and volunteer run media outlets are a crucial part of the democratic transformation of society that is occurring throughout Venezuela. Part of this transformation is the understanding of freedom of speech as a positive and basic right. This right includes universal access to a meaningful space for communication in addition to freedom from censorship. Freedom of expression as a positive right provides universal access to the means of communication. Political analyst Diana Raby reiterates; “the technology of modern communications has to be made accessible to all, not merely as consumers but as participants and creators.”¹ Community media is beginning to fill this role in Venezuela.

The 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was written and ratified by the people themselves, setting a societal precedent of democratic participation. The constitution contains articles that grant new rights to Venezuelans such as indigenous rights, access to education, healthcare,

housing, employment, political participation and many others that make the Venezuelan Constitution one of the most progressive in the world in the area of human rights. Article 58 specifically states, “Communication is free and plural and must adhere to the obligations and responsibilities under the law. Every person has the right to objective, true and impartial information, without censorship....” Article 108 of the Constitution ensures that all communication media, public and private, must contribute to the social development of citizens. The same article guarantees public access to radio, television, library networks and information networks in order to permit universal access to information. Public access channels and community-based media are rights that, for the first time, were ensured under the 1999 Constitution.²

The Organic Telecommunications Law, which was passed in June 2000, states that there are three types of broadcast media in Venezuela: private, state and community. The law gives legal recognition to community broadcasting and even enables it to receive special tax breaks. In order to be recognized as a community broadcaster, the programming has to meet the following criteria. Principally, the

station must be non-profit and dedicated to the community, requiring 70% of its programming to be produced within the community. Also, there must be a separation between the station and its programming, which means that the station itself may only produce 15%, leaving the remainder to be produced by community volunteers. In addition, the station must provide training to community members so the production of media is accessible to everyone. The law also states that the directors of the community media cannot be party officials, members of the military, or work for private mass media.³

Although the Constitution of Venezuela recognizes community media, prior to the April 2002 coup against the Chávez government, these small television, radio and newspaper resources did not receive much attention from the state. While the community media normally supported the Chávez government, active support was not provided. At first, the primary goals of community media centers were the right to exist and operate openly in society. Before Chávez was elected president, participating in community media was a clandestine activity and a victimized form of freedom of speech; homes and offices that housed community radio stations were often raided and operators feared for their lives. Community media stations have since multiplied, amplifying the voices of individuals and communities, increasing community communication and cohesion, fostering cultural awareness and political participation, and increasingly meeting the positive freedom of speech rights of Venezuelans. A new form of participatory communication based on local experiential knowledge is gaining popularity and influence.⁴

Despite the strong foundation community media has in the Venezuelan Constitution and laws, community media is still a relatively new voice evolving into an active forum for the democratic and revolutionary process of the Venezuelan people. Community media has become a necessary alternative because it is made and controlled by the people. The people, the *barrios*, and the communities of Venezuela are becoming their own media. After the failed coup attempt, the government realized how

crucial community media is to the people and to the State. It became apparent that the state media cannot be the only alternative to the private media because of its relatively low ratings and its consolidated nature that made it completely vulnerable in a coup situation. When Channel 8, the state run television channel, was taken off the air during the coup in April 2002, most Venezuelans were denied accurate coverage of the events. The coup d'état was defeated with the help of community media stations and activists; they rallied their communities together to take to the streets and demand that their voices be heard by the coup leaders that had betrayed the Constitution.⁵

In stark contrast to corporate media that creates a dominant ideological framework that alienates people and keeps them "asleep", community media is a instrument of ideological formation that harmonizes with the democratic, social and economic progress that the people are experiencing in Venezuela. A large part of the population, who could never before express themselves, are now beginning to control their media and create positive change. Communities are telling their own stories, sharing their struggles and exposing their truths that had been excluded and silenced for so long. Community media has become a tool to battle against corporate media control of society. Blanca Eekhout, a founding member and director of community run CatiaTV in the Catia *barrio* of Caracas speaks of the film movement connecting her community:

*The next step in the process was decisive: the activists in the struggle for water, in the 'asamblea popular del agua,' began to use film as a tool for their struggle. The camera became a weapon: we would tape officials coming to the community and making promises, and use the film to hold them accountable. This film movement started to become the cables of a network to connect the community. A network of barrio news was created, based on creating and passing these films.*⁶

CatiaTV and other community TV stations engage in the struggle for liberation from the corruption of private media with a critical, self-critical and class-consciousness perspective because participation comes

from within the communities. According to the CatiaTV Collective, “community media works to democratize communication, affecting the necessary separation of the medium and the message.”⁷

Community media activists created a National Association of Alternative and Community Media (ANMCLA) in response to the extreme difficulties the community media stations faced when trying to obtain authorization through the National Commission of Telecommunications (CONATEL). Carlos Carles, a journalist with Radio Perola in Caracas, said that CONATEL, in presenting what validates an alternative radio station;

*...proposed techniques of demonstrating statistical data. Against this, we proposed local knowledge, oral narrative, historical memory, and the everyday work of the community. As a result of this difference, we entered into a major debate, and we completely rejected the legal component of the proposal made by the Chávez government.*⁸

With ANMCLA, a community can authorize a station and when a community recognizes the station, it is legal. There is no such thing as an illegal station because everyone has the constitutional right to communication.

The type of programming that one finds at a community media center is different in every neighborhood because it is made locally by the people of that neighborhood. All community media gives voice to a range of groups and members. Talk shows, educational programs, cultural shows, sports segments, local history programs, children’s shows, cooking shows, a variety of music programs and social and political programs are examples of the diverse community media programming. Programs that do not have space within the state-run media and would never have been a possibility in the private media are beginning to emerge, confronting such topics as race within a community.

There are many examples of community TV, radio and print centers. One alternative media source, Aporrea.org, has become the single most important source for information on Venezuela in Spanish. Founded by community activists and leaders in direct response to the

right-wing coup in 2002, this website contains news about the Venezuelan present and the process of true democracy. Gonzalo Gomez, co-founder of Aporrea.org, says that the website is a;

*...popular alternative news agency and an open mailbox for the popular and working class movements, with a wide base -- from those who offer a blanket defense of the positions of Chávez to those who defend the revolutionary process but have proposals to take it even further, who want to deepen the process and have positive criticism.*⁹

This website is open for anyone who wants to contribute and is worked on by a team of volunteers who see the work as a public service.

Community media is democratic media. Vigorous citizen participation is needed from the bottom up and it operates according to the needs and wants of the public. A clear difference is understood and made between citizens and consumers; the viewer is seen as a “protagonist” rather than a consumer, the prominent portrayal of viewers in private media.¹⁰ The community media movement promotes public ownership and control of resources; public rights over the air waves, the radio and TV spectrum, and over communication infrastructures are supported. Democratic media concern themselves with the civil and human rights of all media participants. Media producers must be free from government and commercial interference and free to innovate and present controversial issues. Because the programming comes directly from the community, the content is truly democratic and inclusive.

In addition to providing a meaningful space for community communication, community radio and television stations can be a space to keep local culture and traditions alive. *Paraguaipoa*, the first indigenous community radio station located in the state of Táchira, is now one of nine indigenous community radio stations in Venezuela. All programming on *Paraguaipoa* is either in Wayuu or provides bilingual programming for accessibility and the preservation of language. The radio station shares a building with one of the first indigenous

primary schools which places an emphasis on traditional Wayuu culture, language, and traditions. The school has two weekly radio programs in which students regularly create their own shows. Ángela, a Wayuu member who has a weekly radio station, captures the essence of the role community media plays;

Our children turn on the radio, and they hear their aunt, their friend's mother, their older sister and her friends. They hear stories from the mouths of those who know the community and what we need. And they hear our language. All of this makes the children proud and eager to participate, and it gives our own community some of the power we lost to the lies of the media stations.¹¹

In Venezuela, a proliferation of community media sources is taking place today. The private media fails to report the great successes of community media because despite their small size, these stations pose a serious threat to those who are in control of the information that mainstream Venezuela receives. Venezuelans are making their own news, reporting their own stories and are unmasking the lies and manipulations that the corporate media has controlled for so long.

The Future of Community Media In Venezuela

Community media is a strong, promising and essential step toward democratizing Venezuelan society, but the road there isn't necessarily a smooth one. There are many challenges that lie ahead. To begin, community media is still a small mobilization, one that the majority of Venezuelans do not take part in.¹² Venezuelans must reject this dependence on private media sources and begin to participate within their community. Without the direct participation of the people, there is no alternative voice to the dominant media in Venezuela. And a capacity to coordinate these guerilla media resources must be strengthened. Community radio and television stations are incredibly effective in covering issues affecting the community and facilitating community communication and organization, but not all stations cover national and international issues.

This is why the network of cooperation between community radio and television stations in Venezuela is so important. Through sharing programming and air space with stations throughout the country the stations, which often have a regional focus, are able to provide more comprehensive coverage. Although there is value in covering local issues; community media centers need to network and have the ability to communicate with one another. Exchanging knowledge, information, resources and ideas is crucial in furthering and strengthening the community and alternative media movement. The State TV channels and radio stations need to be developed with popular support, not just top-down commands. At the moment, a disconnection exists within these institutions. If a government channel is going to be a channel for the people, a democratic collaboration needs to take place. The Venezuelan government has an opportunity to do this with TVES, the station that replaced RCTV in 2007, but needs to better coordinate with the people to democratically determine the goals, ideas and purpose of the channel.

There has been some criticism over government funding of community media. Because many stations were only legalized under Chávez, and the majority receive governmental funding, many have voiced concerns of government intervention or pressure concerning content.¹³ ECOS radio, the station for Barrio Pueblo Nuevo in Mérida, occupied an abandoned building for three years before it was expropriated by the government and they received the title. Now, they share the space with the barrio's community center, often using the radio for community organizing. Although the station has benefited from the expropriation of their building, the legalization of their station under the radio and telecommunications act, and the donation of equipment, ECOS is in no way under the control of the Chavez government.

We believe it is important to work for the revolution that is working for us, but we often express criticisms of el proceso bolivariano... of course the state has played a large role in the implementation of the social programs, but there are many movements, many great things

*that come directly from the community here and that is what we share here at ECOS.*¹⁴

This sentiment has also been expressed by Chávez. When Catia TV was officially legalized, he urged the community media center to speak out on issues important to the community and hold the government accountable to their promises, welcoming criticism.¹⁵

Community media stations are ensuring true freedom of speech and expression in Venezuela. The media conglomerates that are trying to take this democratic process out of the hands of the people can be fought and defeated with the awakened, aware and united voices of the Venezuelan people. As Venezuelan activist Eva Golinger states;

*The case of Venezuela evidences the first time that the media, as a powerful, private actor, has waged war against the people in order to advance its own agenda. Public access to media and diversity of voices have been usurped by the private media moguls in Venezuela propagating their own political and economic aims.*¹⁶

Community media in Venezuela is fighting back. Mass media's monopoly on the power to manipulate public opinion has been threatened. The Venezuelan revolution is based on the principles of inclusion, participation, and protagonism; on spreading what used to be reserved for a few to the entire population, from political representation and participation to social services such as healthcare, food, and education, to the ability to participate in the media. As individuals work together to learn to use equipment, collaborate to create radio shows and proceed together with the long process of experiential learning, the self-sufficiency of the community grows. In creating a community voice organically from those who have lived and breathed and struggled there all their lives, a sustainable means of communication media is established. Voices formerly silenced by the corporate media emerge on their own terms, articulating the reality they are creating for themselves through participatory communication. They are deciding what the important issues are for their own communities and framing their own debates. The democratization of media has begun.

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Center for Community Power: Forming Enduring Relationships Together.

By Erika Davis

While in Venezuela, I worked with the Centro de Poder Comunal (CPC) located in Barquisimeto, one of Venezuela's largest cities. The CPC contained a community meeting space, a free orthodontics clinic, a community radio station, and a film collective. The first time I went to the CPC, I was in a group of around 15 and we were given a tour of the radio station and film collective. We were invited to put our best Spanish speakers on the radio as the rest of us sat and listened to the live feed in the small room outside. The radio station was organized as pirate radio during the coup attempt in 2002. Since then, the collective community members have fought to keep on the air and are now operating legally.

At the end of the day a member of the film collective addressed us, saying that a lot of people come there to take pictures, ask questions, then leave. He explained that he appreciated the interest, but he was looking to form relationships as well as provide an example. We were struck with the questions: What are you going to do when you leave here? Will we ever hear from you again?

Over the next two months or so, I was able to go back various times to engage in

dialogue with community organizers about the importance of community media, what I was doing in Venezuela with the program, and what the relationship between the two groups may be in the future. Everyone I met there was excited about creating an exchange.

The media collective, Voces Urgentes, is where I spent most of my time. Voces Urgentes receives funding from the government to make movies about the community. They produce a series, *Andamos*, which depicts the lives of community members. They have also traveled throughout Latin America as an act of solidarity within the 33.3 campaign. The 33.3 campaign is a campaign that is now global and seeks to evenly distribute the media power between the three existing types of media: private, state, and community.

Students of all ages use the CPC as they become interested in media. Each summer, free media workshops for kids are offered. The kids learn the benefits of media as well as how to use film equipment to produce their own programs. There are also frequent intensive weeklong workshops open to anyone. People come, learn about theory for two to three days, go out into the community to film an event or

conduct interviews, then polish the film in an intensive three-day (without sleep, I was told) editing session and critique. These workshops are put on whenever the collective has time, about once a month.

My time at the CPC allowed me to see how movements in Venezuela are connected. Activists working to create alternative sources of information are, in turn, promoting the work of members of their community. Furthermore, this drive to inform a community from within has been vital in creating the roots of the revolution: grassroots organizing and activism. With the progress of these community media outlets and movements such as the 33.3 campaign, this community-level organizing can only get more successful.

Healthcare & Democracy: An Intimate Look at the Venezuelan Healthcare System

By Caitlin McNulty, Lindsay Solise and Katelyn Banner

The right to healthcare is guaranteed in the Venezuelan Constitution, which was written and ratified by the people in 1999. Through implementing a state-funded social program called *Barrio Adentro*, or inside the *barrio*, free comprehensive healthcare is available to all of those who reside in Venezuela. Beginning in June 2003 through a trade pact with Cuba, Venezuela began to bring Cuban doctors, medical technology, and medications into rural and urban communities free of charge in exchange for low-cost oil. The 1.5 million dollar per year program expanded to provide a broad network of small neighborhood clinics, larger regional clinics, and hospitals which aim to serve the entire Venezuelan population.¹ Chavez has referred to this new healthcare system as the “democratization of health care” stating that “healthcare has become a fundamental social right and the state will assume the principal role in the construction of a participatory system for national public health.”² In Venezuela, not only is health care a right, but it is recognized as an essential for true participatory democracy.³

Some of what characterizes movement towards health care for all includes popular participation, preventative medicine, and evaluation

of community health issues. Western medicine typically operates in a top-down fashion, where information about one’s health is controlled by the experts. Doctors treat symptoms, and often fail to evaluate the larger picture of community health issues or teach prevention.⁴ In a for-profits system, there is little incentive to prevent costly illnesses. *Barrio Adentro* brought about the construction of clinics within neighborhoods where many had never been to a doctor. Through this program, a community can organize to receive funding to build a clinic and bring in doctors. The community is responsible for locating housing for medical staff, all of whom live in the neighborhoods they serve. The community is responsible for creating health committees, and members of the committees go door to door to survey the community about health issues and get an idea about what kinds of health problems are affecting the entire community. Doctors who live in the communities also make house calls.⁵ People participate in the process of serving the health needs of the entire population.

Many doctors in Venezuela are part of, and used to serving, middle and upper class populations. To go “inside the *barrio*” is seen by these doctors as dangerous, dirty, and unpleas-

ant. In fact, *Barrio Adentro* and Cuban doctors have faced heated opposition, mostly coming from the Venezuelan Medical Federation, comprised mainly of upper-class doctors. Cuban doctors have stepped up to the plate, and live and work in the barrios, serving the poorest in Venezuela, many of whom have never received medical attention.⁶

The extensive health program is also being used to train a new generation of Venezuelan doctors. The training program takes place within the clinic system itself and relies heavily on experiential learning. The program seeks to build a new relationship between doctor and patient based on the values of service, solidarity and compassion. Doctors participating in the training program are coming from the communities they are learning in and serving, building on their intimate knowledge of the communities to provide truly compassionate and personalized care. Using popular forums, medical professionals are able to respond to the needs of the community and offer education, treatment and consultation addressing unique public health issues.⁷

Although the system began by focusing exclusively on preventative health, it has expanded to include emergency health services, mental health services, surgeries, cancer treatment, dental care, access to optometrists as well as free glasses and contact lenses, support systems for those with disabilities and their families, as well as access to a large variety of medical specialists. They have succeeded in taking an under funded, corrupt public health care system and changing not only the quality and accessibility but also the mentality of those working there. Instead of a for-profit industry systematically denying access to large sectors of the population, healthcare in Venezuela is seen as a basic human right. No one is turned away, and no one is denied care. In Venezuela, they treat the whole person, not simply their illness, and money stays where it belongs- outside of the healthcare system.⁸

During the winter 2009 quarter, 36 students and two faculty from The Evergreen State College in the United States traveled to Venezuela as part of the academic program “Ven-

ezuela: Building Social and Economic Justice.” During our travels, three of us had meaningful experiences with *Barrio Adentro* through listening to the stories of Venezuelan patients and as patients ourselves. Here are a few of our experiences:

The Value of Life: Reflections on Healthcare in Venezuela and the US.

By Caitlin McNulty

During my time in Venezuela, I developed a cough that went on for three weeks and progressively worsened. Finally, after I had become incredibly congested and developed a fever, I decided to attend a *Barrio Adentro* clinic. The closest one available was a *Barrio Adentro II Centro de Diagnostico Integral* (CDI) and I headed in without my medical records or calling to make an appointment. Immediately, I was ushered into a small room where Carmen, a friendly Cuban doctor, began questioning me about my symptoms. She listened to my lungs and walked me over to another examination room where, again without waiting, I had x-rays taken. Afterwards, the technician walked me to a chair and apologized profusely that I had to wait for the x-rays to be developed, promising that it would take no more than five minutes. Sure enough, five minutes later he returned with both x-rays developed. Carmen studied the x-rays and informed me that I had pneumonia, showing me the telltale shadows. She sent me away with my x-rays, three medications to treat my pneumonia, congestion, and fever, and made me promise to come back if my condition failed to improve or worsened within three days.

I walked out of the clinic with a diagnosis and treatment within twenty five minutes of entering, without paying a dime. There was no wait, no paperwork, and no questions about my ability to pay, my nationality, or whether, as a foreigner, I was entitled to free comprehensive healthcare. There was no monetary value connected with my physical well-being and the care I received was not contingent upon my ability to pay. I was treated with dignity, respect, and compassion, my illness was cured and I was able to continue with my journey in Venezuela.

This past year, a family friend was not so

lucky. At the age of 56, she was going back to school and was uninsured. She came down with what she thought was a severe case of the flu, and as her condition worsened she decided not to see a doctor because of the cost. She died at home in bed, losing her life to a system that did not respect her basic human right to survive.

Her death is not an isolated incident. Over 18,000 United States residents die every year because of their lack of prohibitively expensive health insurance. The United States has the distinct honor of being the “only wealthy industrialized nation that does not ensure that all citizens have coverage.”⁹ Instead, we have commodified the public health and well-being of those living in the US, leaving them on their own to obtain insurance. Those whose jobs do not provide insurance, can’t get enough hours to qualify for healthcare coverage through their workplace, are unemployed, or have “previously existing conditions” that exclude them from coverage are forced to choose between the potentially fatal decision of refusing medical care and accumulating medical bills that trap them in an inescapable cycle of debt. And sometimes, that decision is made for them. Doctors often ask that dreaded question; “do you have insurance?” before scheduling critical tests, procedures, or treatments. When the answer is no, treatments that were deemed necessary before are suddenly cancelled as the ability to pay becomes more important than the patient’s health.¹⁰

It is estimated that there are over fifty million United States residents currently living without health insurance, a number that will skyrocket as unemployment rates increase and people lose their work-based healthcare coverage in this time of international financial crisis.¹¹ Already this year, seven point five million people have lost work-related coverage. Budget cuts for the state of Washington this year will remove over forty thousand people from Washington Basic Health, a subsidized program which already has a waiting list of seventeen thousand people.¹² As I returned from Venezuela, I was faced with the realization that as a society, the United States places a monetary value on life. That as a society, we make life and death judgments based on an individual’s ability to pay. And that

someone with the same condition I had recently recovered from had died because, according to our system, her life wasn’t insured.

Healthcare, a Right or Responsibility?

By Lindsay Solise

When I was in Venezuela in early 2009, I realized that I had become pregnant a few days prior to my trip. This came as a surprise to me and my partner who was still in the US. I chose to stay in Venezuela until the end of my scheduled trip. Part of the reason I chose to stay was the peace of mind that I had knowing that I was in a country where my right to health care was recognized, and I would have no problem getting advice and seeking treatment should anything arise.

A few days after my positive over the counter pregnancy test, I began to experience some mild uterine cramping and spotting. As this was my first pregnancy, I did not know what to expect or what was normal. Worst case scenarios played out in my mind as I went to a *Barrio Adentro II* for care.

There was no receptionist and no cashier at the clinic. All I had to give in order to be seen was my name, phone number, and country of residence. One of the medical staff lead me to an emergency center for pregnant women, where an ultrasound administered by a kind Cuban woman revealed an intact and living embryo thriving in my womb. I was congratulated and instructed to take it easy and get plenty of fluids and see another doctor as soon as possible. I experienced no lines, no waiting, no paper work, and compassionate care at no charge.

The spotting slowed down, and I began to feel really happy about the little lentil living inside of me, although I was plagued with nausea and exhaustion that is typical in early pregnancy. I took it easy, and began to contemplate what my life would be like when I got back home. I was a 24 year old first year college student, broke, traveling on a loan, unmarried with no career and no medical insurance. My partner had a

low-paying job in the public school system as an education assistant, and his job was likely to be cut soon due to funding shortages. The odds were against us, and I began to really realize how different things would be if I knew I had access to health care for myself and future family, and access to education no matter what.

One morning, I awoke to some cramping and an amount of fresh blood that was cause for alarm. I was staying with a host family who lived very close to a public hospital, and I rushed over, and was seen right away. I had an ultrasound, where I saw for the first time the tiny little heart beating. Everything appeared to be normal according to the ultrasound, but the Cuban doctor who I saw was very concerned about the bleeding. She gave me advice to stay in bed, rest and hydrate and avoid any rigorous activities.

My last two weeks in Venezuela found me sicker that I had ever been in my life with an intestinal virus. I became dehydrated and could barely eat crackers for the duration of the illness. I was too sick to find the energy to go to a doctor. I knew that when I got home, I would need to see a doctor right away. I was desperately concerned about the fetus.

Fortunately, I had about two weeks before the spring quarter started, and had time to figure out how to get in to see a doctor. I spent entire days when I wanted to see a doctor getting together the paper work that I needed to submit to the Department of Health and Social Services, where I applied for medical benefits. After a week of dealing with paper work and interviews that were dehumanizing and demoralizing, and calling various doctors and midwives who had booked schedules, I was put on a program called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families that gave me medical coupons as well as a big stamp on my forehead that said “needy” when I sought care. I had to prove that I was inadequate in caring for myself, and even though I was enrolled full time in college, I would have to commit to finding 20 hours a week of paid work in order to keep my benefits. If 40 hours a week in school and 20 hours a week at work was too much, I would have to quit school to keep my benefits, as the 20 hours a week of employment were a minimum requirement. I would be given

time to find a job, and I would have to get a doctor to fill out paper work saying I was medically unable to work in order to me exempt. I kept thinking that if I were in Venezuela, I could just walk in and see a doctor immediately.

Finally, a team of two midwives agreed to squeeze me into their schedule after I explained how urgent my situation was. Two weeks after I returned home, I was finally able to receive an ultrasound. What was discovered was devastating for me; at 11 weeks the fetus was no longer living. If I did not spontaneously miscarry, I would have to have a procedure to cut the fetus and placenta from my uterus (D and C).

The grief and loss that I experienced was worsened by the fear of what would happen with my medical coupons, as I was only granted them because I was pregnant. One night, I began to miscarry. I passed the fetus, and began to hemorrhage. I lost way more than normal amount of blood, but did not go to the ER. A week later, blood tests revealed that I was severely anemic due to the blood loss that I experienced. I was also still losing blood and still testing positive for pregnancy. There was still a possibility that I would need to have a D and C, and I would need careful continued care. I was also advised to seek counseling.

I was in a bit of a conundrum with DSHS. My benefits would be cut off if I did not come to a meeting to enroll me in a work first program, where I would commit to finding employment. I was in no physical shape to work, especially considering that I was still a full-time student, and my midwife filled out the proper paper work explaining that I couldn't work as anemic as I was. I went to a meeting with a work first representative, gave her my work exemption form, and she looked at it and said that I would be ineligible for medical coupons, as my pregnancy was complete. My benefits would end in two weeks. There was no longer anything that they could do for me. She also advised me to seek counseling to deal with the loss, but acknowledged that it would be difficult since I had no way to pay for it. I went to my last appointment with a women's health nurse practitioner, and she advised me to come back in two weeks. I told her I would no longer have insurance in two

weeks, and she said, “Well, it’s not so important. I tell you what, if you figure out a way to get insurance, come on back. If you can’t come in though, you can’t come in, and I am sure you will be fine.” My ability to receive medical care ended and I still was testing positive for pregnancy, and still had the possibility of needing a D and C.

My options were to apply for another state medical insurance program called Basic Health, in which payment is based on your income and other factors and care is minimal with high co-pays. The Basic Health application takes about a month to complete, and any gap in care I would receive would leave me vulnerable to being denied care based on a preexisting condition. Besides, Basic Health’s funding would be cut in half in a couple of months, and there was already a long waiting list. I was also dealing with severe anemia, grief and sadness, and a full-time commitment to school, and had little energy for the extensive and invasive application process. I could also apply for an emergency health care option through DSHS which would give me three months of care, but I would have to prove that I had a condition that needed about three months worth of continued care, which would mean more doctor’s appointments to fill out forms to satisfy the bureaucracy.

This system left me feeling abandoned, unimportant, helpless, and insecure, a sharp contrast to the compassion and affirmation I experienced in the Venezuelan medical system. The constant struggle to prove myself was exhausting. The position I had to put care providers in, having them fill out forms and phrase things a certain way so I could get what I needed was a waste of their time and skills and a drain on the time I had to address what I really needed in terms of care. At a time when I needed healing, support, comfort, and quality compassionate care, I had to submit to a defeating process, spend enormous amounts of time and energy proving my case and begging for help, and lived in fear for what would happen, knowing that my access to care was a fragile issue. This experience also blurs the issue of choice when the choice to have a child forces many women to submit to the same inhuman processes in order

to receive proper care, and many of them are denied this care.

Creating a System of Quality and Inclusion. **By Katelyn Banner**

“They told me she would never walk again,” explained Alexandra’s mother, looking down at her daughters legs with a stern glance. Her gaze returned to meet mine, eyes animated with intensity. “I couldn’t accept this doctor’s prognosis, even though he is considered to be the best spinal injury specialist in all of Venezuela”, she said laughing. “I had learned about Venezuela’s agreement with Cuba and I knew that it could mean another chance for Alexandra. So when Chavez came to meet with the people in Mucuchies, we went directly to speak with him ourselves”.

At the age of eight, seven years prior to when I met Alexandra, she had suffered a nearly fatal transit accident that had left her quadriplegic. After Alexandra was released from the emergency department, her mother began diligently seeking treatment for her daughter in hopes that she would eventually recover her former mobility. Following innumerable visits to public hospitals, Alexandra’s mother went to seek assistance from the private sector-- hoping that she would find a more specialized doctor able to give them more encouraging answers. Their hopes were dismayed when the top ranked spinal surgeon in the country gave them the same answer as the rest: Alexandra would not be able to regain the use of her limbs and would never walk again. Not long after seemingly exhausting all options for effective treatment, Alexandra and her mother heard about the *convenio*, or agreement, between Venezuela and Cuba, a program exchanging doctors for oil.

In 2000, shortly after the democratic arrival of Hugo Chavez to presidency, a comprehensive agreement, exchanging oil for health-care services, was developed between Venezuela and Cuba. Through a government funded healthcare program in Venezuela called *Barrio Adentro*, Cuba has sent over 30,000 health-care physicians, technicians, and specialists from Cuba in trade for petroleum. As a way to

augment the former agreement, the *Convenio de Atención a Pacientes* was created sending anywhere from 150 to 350 Venezuelans to Cuba each week for operations that Venezuela is not currently equip to perform. Considering unconditional access to healthcare as a basic human right, the government of Venezuela covers all costs of transportation and all costs accrued through operations, medications, medical services, food, and housing are covered by the government of Cuba. Since there is no charge policy on both ends, this program has created an all inclusive healthcare system, providing thousands of people the chance to see after being diagnosed as blind, the chance to regain active lives after severe disease or injury, or even the chance to walk and recover full mobility after being rendered quadriplegic.

In 2004, when Chavez went to Mucuchies, a small mountain town outside the city of Merida where Alexandra and her mother live, they decided they would go directly to ask for his assistance. Eight days after meeting personally with Chavez, Alexandra and her mother were on a plane along with 300 other passengers heading to Cuba to receive medical treatment. Alexandra shared with me that even up until that point, she felt very skeptical that the doctors in Cuba would be able to do anything more for her than those she'd seen previously in Venezuela--though since she and her mother weren't asked to pay anything it was entirely worth a try.

Alexandra and her mother were informed that they were only to bring a suitcase of clothing and that all other expenses would be covered; not only for the prospective patient, Alexandra, but also for her mother. As the plane touched down in Cuba's international airport just outside Havana, they were unsure of what to expect. After debarking the airplane, Alexandra and her mother were immediately ushered away to a top-end hotel where they would be living for the next nine months while Alexandra went through surgery, physical therapy, and a healing period. They both recalled being overwhelmed with the accommodations and equally the high quality food they received, catered specifically to offer Alexandra the nourishment she would need for healing.

After various consultations and tests over the next week, Alexandra went through a surgery that is considered high risk in many places but executed with much success in Cuba. After a few months of adequate rest and healing, Alexandra was assigned a personal physical therapist with whom she met six days a week, eight hours a day until she left to return to Venezuela. During Alexandra's initial trip to Cuba, she and her mother were astonished again and again by the high quality services and extremely personalized attention they received-- all without paying a dime.

Since their initial trip to Cuba, Alexandra and her mother have traveled back three times, all for periods of eight or nine months-- receiving exceptional professional and personal attention every time. "This June, after I'm done with school, me and my mom will be going back to Cuba for one last operation", Alexandra tells me with excitement. "This last operation and physical therapy session should be the last time we will have to go there before Alexandra will be up walking on her own again," Alexandra's mother says with tears in her eyes. Alexandra stood proud, supporting herself with crutches and braces around the lower parts of her legs, a pleased smile stretching across her face. At first sight, no one would have been able to guess that only a few years ago she was a timorous pubescent, rendered quadriplegic. Now, this confident 14 year old, was speaking freely of ambitions to become a doctor and dance again.

Of the hundreds who take advantage of this ground-breaking trade-pact every week, this is only one story. On some level, it could be a reasonable concern that this system of transporting patients to another country rather than serving them in their home nation, is not sustainable. The participating countries, however, have already thought of this. At present, a far-reaching training program is being implemented in which Cuban doctors are training Venezuelans to do the work they are currently doing. According to students from *Barrio Adentro's* medical school, an integration process is already underway dispersing medically trained Venezuelans throughout the country-- particularly to underserved populations in rural or urban-marginal areas-- to

assume the work that Cuban doctors have been performing. This project will continue expanding until the Cuban doctors are no longer needed, and Venezuela operates a fully inclusive, sustainable, national medical program. However, until this goal comes to fruition, thousands are benefiting from this *convenio* on a continual basis.

Conclusion.

As we recognize this compassionate, humanist system of healthcare, we are glaringly reminded here in the US-- a so-called industrialized, first-world nation-- that we are constantly denied access to the most basic healthcare, not to mention more comprehensive operations and treatments, entirely due to economic requirements the majority of us can't meet. Is our government simply too afraid that some of these values-- such as prioritizing human lives over capital expansion-- may spread to the hearts and minds of the American people?

Many in the United States fear that people would abuse a free healthcare system, causing overcrowding and a compromised level of care. Others claim that a single payer system would limit the freedoms of both doctor and patient, leading into a downward spiral into socialism. These claims, propagated by the corporate media in the United States, are a hollow attempt to keep those in the US from organizing to demand single payer healthcare. Primary care and preventative medicine are seen as the first steps towards sustainable universal health care, keeping people out of costly hospital stays, tests, and treatments down the road. Socializing the costs of medicine keeps costs low by preventing expensive treatments and health problems. It is difficult to understand how much quality, free healthcare means until you find yourself in a position of vulnerability and need. We felt a sense of security traveling in Venezuela that we did not feel in the United States; in Venezuela, there is a safety net ready to catch you when you fall. We must ask ourselves, as a country, where our values lie and how we have not only let people slip through the cracks but worked to systematically exclude them. Do we believe that insurance corporations and the medical indus-

trial complex should be profiting from denying care and keeping sick people from receiving treatment? Or do we believe that care should be separate from an individual's ability to pay? As a nation, we must embrace our humanity and value life over profit.

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Education & Exclusion

By Caitlin McNulty

Higher education in the United States, despite private scholarships and federally subsidized grants and loans, systematically excludes those from lower socioeconomic classes. From great disparities in the quality of public primary and secondary education to unbelievably high tuition prices, those whose families are not able to pay for their education often are forced to go straight into the work force. Even public higher education in the United States works to reinforce social classes rather than promote income equality.

Venezuela seems to have found a solution to this perpetuation of the inequitable distribution of wealth and power. Education is guaranteed as a right in the Venezuelan Constitution;

“Education is a human right, a fundamental social right. It will be free, democratic, and mandatory...Every person will have access to an education...of equal quality and providing equal opportunity.”¹

In the Venezuelan system of higher education, tuition is free for all, as are housing, transportation, and meals in an attempt to make higher education inclusive and accessible for all sectors of the population. In addition, a host of social programs have been implemented

to improve the quality and accessibility of the Venezuelan education system as a whole. Mission Simoncito fosters early education and brain development through providing free comprehensive day care and preschool to students aged 1-6, helping to ensure that all students are ready to start school. Mission Robinson works to improve adult literacy, and Mission Ribas provides primary and secondary education to adults who dropped out of school. Mission Sucre brings university professors to smaller cities and towns to make college accessible for those with families to care for. In the next three years, 29 new universities, traditional and vocational, will be built in an effort to accommodate the large influx of students coming from the improved educational system. These programs have formed a network that has nearly eradicated illiteracy in Venezuela. They have also contributed to the accessibility of higher education, with the number of students graduating public universities each year soaring from 172,432 in 1998 to 504,958 in 2007. In addition, it is estimated that over 70% of the new students entering Venezuela’s university system come from families living below the poverty line.²

Venezuelan students are also obligated to give back to their communities. As part of a new graduation requirement, students must complete 120 hours of community service in a field related to their major. The hope is that this will bridge the social gap between university students and their communities to create an ethic of compassion and involvement. Julia, a student at la Universidad de los Andes in Mérida, was inspired to volunteer at Mission Robinson after witnessing the sheer joy her grandmother felt when the program taught her to read;

“My grandmother said she felt like a whole new world was opened up to her...The first book she read was the 1999 constitution she helped to ratify. In my work I get to bring that kind of power to people.”³

As a university student in the United States, I would love to see our system of higher education adopt any one of these changes. Due to budget cuts in the state of Washington, tuition at The Evergreen State College, the public school I attend, will go up thirty percent over the next two years, excluding even more low and middle-income students from attending.⁴ We can either allow this global financial crisis to perpetuate the current inequitable distribution of wealth, or we can learn from the positive examples countries such as Venezuela present and move towards an ethic of community collaboration where education is a right for all rather than a privilege only a few are able to enjoy.

ALBA: The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, a Fair Trade Association

By: Kaitlin Baird

For a long time industrialized capitalist countries have assumed they know what is best for the rest of the world. International organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank have allowed wealthier nations to impose neoliberal ideas and policies upon under-developed countries. U.S.-backed trading blocs such as the Free Trade of the Americas Association (FTAA), North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), and Central American Free Trade Association (CAFTA) have tried to force the values of trade liberalization and profit upon Latin America. Latin American nations have significantly less developed industries compared to the United States and because of this the only people who have benefited from these trade agreements are the wealthy government and corporate elites, leaving the majority of these countries' populations to suffer in poverty.

The Chávez government of Venezuela has been taking a leading role in movements and struggles to combat the damaging effects of globalization in Latin America. In addition to denouncing the U.S. government and its policies toward Latin America, Chávez has taken real

steps in fighting harmful neoliberal influences in the region. Since taking office Chávez has helped create BancoSUR (Bank of the South), an alternative to the IMF and World Bank which provides low interest loans to Latin American countries, and TeleSUR (The New Television Station of the South), a regional station providing local alternative perspectives for stations coming from the U.S.

One of the most important programs to counteract the neoliberal trade model is the *Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas* or in English, Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. ALBA was designed in collaboration with Cuban president, Fidel Castro, as an alternative to the FTAA. Additionally ALBA promotes the idea of social, political, and economic integration within the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. ALBA is not based on profit and trade liberalization, but on equity, social welfare, and mutual economic aid. Although the current members include Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Honduras, Dominican Republic, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, many other regional countries engage in trade and support ALBA's alternative values. Amid founding this organization, presidents Hugo Chávez and Fidel

Castro decided upon three main principles:

“(1) using trade and investment as instruments which can help achieve fair sustainable development, (2) special and individualized treatment for each nation, considering the levels they have of development and the dimensions of their economies, (3) financial complementarities and co-operation between participating countries which may contribute to the fight against poverty and to preserve the different cultural identities.”¹

Unlike the FTAA, ALBA acknowledges that all nations are not economically equal and that trade agreements must be made around the idea of equality for everyone and not maximum profit.

The values and ideals that define ALBA are represented in trade agreements with Latin American countries. Venezuela provides subsidized oil to Cuba and in return Cuba provides free health care assistance to Venezuelans and trains Venezuelan doctors. Both countries benefit immensely from this trade. Venezuela is able to implement the government program, Barrio Adentro, where many Cuban doctors work to provide free health care for previously marginalized people in poor communities, while Cuba uses cheap oil to continue to rebuild its economy after the devastation left by the collapse of the Soviet Union.²

Since the election of leftist Bolivian president, Evo Morales, Bolivia has also received medical aid from Cuba. Cuban doctors work in 180 Bolivian municipalities and nine provinces.³ Cuba and Venezuela have contributed to Bolivia's literacy campaign, Yo, Si Puedo (Yes, I Can), which in 2008 allowed Bolivia to declare itself free of illiteracy.⁴ In another Bolivian support agreement, Venezuela and Cuba purchased soy beans from Bolivia after Colombia, Bolivia's main importer of agriculture, signed an agreement with the United States to pay cheaper prices on imported U.S. soy beans.⁵ In addition to these specific mutual interest trade agreements, Venezuela and Bolivia have signed numerous other agreements pertaining to education, hydrocarbons, petrochemicals, finance, communications, the environment, mining, security, defense, and technology.⁶

Trade that does not revolve around profit and trade liberalization is considered as a step in the wrong direction by countries like the United States. The negative effects of this mind-set are slowly becoming more apparent in light of our global economic, political, social, and environmental problems. ALBA is just one example of the inspirational movement against globalization and free trade happening all over Latin America. U.S. intervention and neoliberal policies have and will continue to try to dismantle anti-capitalist leftist movements and their leaders. However, after decades of repeating the same mistakes and in light of our current economic crisis, it is clear that it is time to begin to build something different. It is time to pay attention to what is happening in our hemisphere and to acknowledge this downward spiral that will continue unless we change something. ALBA doesn't solve all the problems of unfair trade policy, but it provides an appealing alternative to an unjust system in the process of collapsing.

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Whose Dream?

By Robyn Adair

Starbucks, anyone?

Entering the Benito Juarez International Airport in Mexico City, I looked around the terminal and nervously wondered if I had mistakenly boarded the wrong flight in my layover haze in Houston. For two months I had been working to leave my individual identity and join the masses, to bask in the fruits of the emerging socialist society. Leaving my hostel at 4 AM, I waved a fateful farewell to my neighborhood Simon Bolivar, a hero of the region's independence and a regular fixture in the many honorary plazas in Caracas, Venezuela. Fatigued and forlorn, before I could continue to my second stop in Latin America I was scheduled for a detour in the homeland for the confiscation of any Commie contraband I had incurred and for a few bites of the fruits of capitalism.

Or in this case, cool, refreshing sips.

If Socialism means collective interests, collective efforts, and collective benefits, Capitalism means getting what I want. Three and a half hours in the U.S. would be just long enough to grab that iced coffee I'd been craving for several weeks, that is, after all the x-rays and metal detection. Yes, in spite of its subtropical

climate and passion for the caffeine bean, few coffee vendors, including McDonalds, even seemed to understand why one would put ice in coffee.

Imagine my rude awakening when I scoured the imperial air palace of George W. Bush, traveling by train to multiple terminals, and found there was no Starbucks! Bitter, exhausted, deprived, and grateful to continue my consumer celibacy, I lingered in cultural limbo for the remainder, subjected to the O'Reilly Factor (it was on in every gate), fearing sleep which would make me vulnerable to any passing terrorists that might try to slip me a nail file or a water bottle, occasionally moving my feet for the Latina maintenance worker sweeping up trash left behind by sombrero-wearing exchange students returning from Mexico, likely carrying the H1N1 (swine flu) virus that contaminated their classmates and principals only days later. Ah yes, this was surely America, so where's my Starbucks?

We All Live in America

One two-hour flight later, I arrived in Mexico, and before I had even stepped out into

the infamously potent smog of the city, I spotted it: Starbucks, right alongside 7-Eleven. After the day I'd had, my disorienting departure from the revolution, the customary Customs security shakedown, the fickle flight and gate changes due to the snow stateside, and now the stress of being met by a friend I hadn't seen in five years, I deserved a venti iced vanilla latte. However, before my brain could send the message to my body, I was flooded with memories: the voices of the Venezuelan people against neo-liberalism, the haunting Rammstein lyrics a Venezuelan friend had assured me were true that--like it or not--"We all live in America," the courageous speeches made by President Hugo Chavez about the perils of imperialist policy in Latin America.

I thought of the Oaxacans and other farming communities forced to move from their land, leaving behind hundreds of years of traditional farming methods and heirloom seeds to work in U.S. fields as "illegals" because NAFTA made it impossible for Mexican crops to compete in their own domestic markets. I thought of the Colombian coffee growers, being bullied by their own countrymen to produce more beans to gain more profit for the owners, which for the workers meant lower wages, more pesticides, and longer hours, all so that the Colombian government could make good with its allies in the U.S. I thought of the vanilla venti iced latte.

Our Struggle

My coffee crisis is as hard as it gets for the majority of us in the United States, if we choose to be conscientious consumers. Most typical acts of consumption, such as fast-food dining or buying fruit, have implications if you care about your fellow human being in this globalized world. Unlike in the U.S. and Mexico, where agricultural products are traded "freely," not fairly, coffee in Venezuela, at least in theory, is ethically sound. Venezuelan farmers can organize into cooperatives and receive land and training from public programs making most agricultural products freer from chemicals and fairer for workers than in most countries.

Even oil, a nonrenewable resource that has been made culpable for the destruction of our natural environment, has its upside in Venezuela, but this hasn't always been the case. Since the discovery of massive oil reserves in Venezuela in the 1920s, it has become the fourth-largest producer worldwide, making it of particular interest to foreign investors and governments, especially those of the largest consumer of petroleum in the world -- the United States.

Their Struggle

Since the election of President Hugo Chavez in 1998 oil has become the fuel for the Bolivarian Revolution (named for Simon Bolivar), a national movement to build "Socialism for the 21st Century" which has drawn tremendous criticism from the United States government, corporate investors and media.

As the Venezuelan economy continues to grow its social sector, empowering its own poor majority with surplus oil funds through community-based social missions that provide subsidized food, free education at all levels, free hospitals and clinics in local communities, training and microcredits for equitable employment, and increased access to cultural activities, the US government questions if human rights are being upheld.

While the US fights to maintain the salaries of its wealthiest on Wall Street, Venezuela in particular finds itself in a conundrum, selling oil in a globalized economy through its nationalized oil company PdVSA with the interests of the most in-need Venezuelans in mind. But the government of Venezuela has managed to make friends with its neighbors and other oil-producing nations, despite the hostility from the North. Venezuela, under Chavez, has used its oil wealth to help its neighbor nations such as Bolivia, Argentina, Cuba and Haiti to alleviate debt to the wealthier nations and international financial institutions as well as trading petroleum products like oil at a lower cost to encourage the formerly colonized countries' developing economies.

This act of solidarity has created a chain reaction, spurring the election of Leftist

presidents throughout the region, such as Evo Morales of Bolivia, Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, Rafael Correa of Ecuador and several others and most recently Mauricio Funes in El Salvador. It should be carefully noted that the revolution sweeping through Latin America is part of an effort to stimulate trade and proactive relations between all developing nations, including those in Africa. The new Bolivarian Universities in Venezuela, for example, welcome students from the Americas and Africa and provide tuition as well as room and board free of charge.

North Meets South

With the change in government in the United States, some enthusiasts of popular participation on the Left, supporters of the Venezuelan revolution, are watching Obama-Chavez relations closely. Others have opted out.

Much like the case in Venezuela prior to their 1989 financial crisis and the subsequent election of Hugo Chavez, US citizens who feel their voices aren't being acknowledged when their party doesn't win often become alienated from the political process. Representative democracy dominated by partisan politics rather than the will of the people has lost its charm. In the case of the United States over the past half-century or so, mounting political and military intervention abroad for corporate interests has proven to be a disservice to the average American, especially in the wake of our own economic crisis. Consolidated power in the executive branch, most recently aggravated by the Bush-Cheney duo of destruction, have left Left-leaners feeling helpless and frustrated with the vision of freedom and democracy alleged by this nation. Many prominent and determined intellectuals, including lawyer and author Eva Golinger, have abandoned all "hope" for "change" in the U.S., buzzwords in the recent presidential campaign of Barack Obama, and directed their energies towards the revolutionary measures in a growing number of Latin American nations. Their reasons no doubt vary, but generally stay within the realm of social class struggle, from the ruling class's stubbornness to relinquish their

privileges to Golinger's idea that the working class, including recent immigrants, accepts the current system and strives to be at the top of it rather than fundamentally changing it.

Despite what critics say, the revolutions of our brothers and sisters in the south are continually credited to the people, as presidents and other revolutionary leaders celebrate their allegiance to and identification with the working class majority in their respective nations. The autonomous will of the people finds itself in stark opposition to the neoliberal agenda and the poverty-inducing effects of the careless and cold free market, so they use structures of community participation to counteract the tendencies. It's as simple as this: 30% of the 2009 budget allocation for the Governmental Decentralization Fund (*Fondo Intergubernamental para la Descentralización*) goes to the communal councils, which are assemblies of 20-200 families that decide on projects to enrich their barrios (neighborhoods) through various committees. Just under 1% of the total national budget is enough to enable these councils to bring electricity, trash service, plumbing and irrigation, healthcare and subsidized grocery stores among other things to their hillside, often hand-built homes. They have also attained the titles to the property through this process, and many have even had their makeshift homes converted to more comfortable, permanent structures.

The safety net for the majority of the country who lived in poverty was thin. Even though higher education has been free since the 1970s in Venezuela, it mostly benefited the wealthy, because they made up the majority of high school graduates. For the barrio-dwelling street vendors with the work of rebuilding their society to do, it is no surprise that iced coffee has been far from their minds.

Justice, anyone?

In the home of the American dream, it is disheartening to read of millions losing their jobs and their homes with no safety net whatsoever. In a nation that teaches its schoolchildren to sing of its amber waves of grain, the leading cause of death among farmers in the United States

is suicide. In the land of the free, where we define freedom by our ability to choose from an abundance of consumer goods, the population at large has no say in how government funds are spent, and thus trillions of taxpayer dollars go to starting wars that destroy more of an already sick planet.

There is a revolution taking place that seeks to make up for lost time and resources, to eliminate the gap between the haves and the have-nots, in which the underpaid, unemployed, and undernourished work together for what they need and assist one another in getting it, to use social programs to develop participatory structures. I for one would go the rest of my life without the privilege of ice in my coffee for a world in which we all had access to potable water. Fortunately, it's possible for all of us to have our coffee and our ice too, without destroying the planet or the communities that inhabit it, by working together with our neighbors instead of exploiting them. Let's follow the example of our other half, America of the South. This is America, all of it. We all live in America; how about we dream together?

The Food Sovereignty Movement in Venezuela

By Anna Isaacs, Basil Weiner, Grace Bell, Courtney Frantz and Katie Bowen

Defining Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is a relatively new concept. Originally coined and defined by the international peasant movement, Via Campesina, in Mons, Belgium in 1993, it is:

“The RIGHT of peoples, countries, and state unions to define their agricultural and food policy without the “dumping” of agricultural commodities into foreign countries. Food sovereignty organizes food production and consumption according to the needs of local communities, giving priority to production for local consumption. Food sovereignty includes the right to protect and regulate the national agricultural and livestock production and to shield the domestic market from the dumping of agricultural surpluses and low-price imports from other countries. Landless people, peasants, and small farmers must get access to land, water, and seed as well as productive resources and adequate public services. Food sovereignty and sustainability are a higher priority than trade policies.”¹

Via Campesina, in its definition, clearly states certain specific issues that deserve more attention in relation to Venezuela’s

current recovery of its food sovereignty. These issues are absolutely essential, not only in guaranteeing that local food needs be met by local food production, but also in protecting the cultural heritage of people who have invested generations upon generations in the same land. All over the world, where people have had land in their families for centuries, the land is being lost because of the dumping of heavily subsidized, imported foods onto their local markets. Farmers cannot compete and must give up their land. With those losses goes pride and the hope for locally based and supported food systems. Rising numbers of farmer suicides are the ultimate result of a system of global trade that strips away the land, its products, cultural heritage and pride. People are dying because they cannot afford to eat and farmers are dying because they cannot afford to feed.

Some of Venezuela’s obstacles to food sovereignty include: the speculative market that formed around buying and selling land; the transformation from individual landowners to conglomerate companies, and farmers to farm workers; and technology that has made a small farmer’s way of life economically unsustainable.

Economic History

The story of the Venezuelan economy deserves special attention because of the presence of oil. In order to understand the specific forces working against food sovereignty, we must travel to the 16th century, when Spanish colonizers arrived to Venezuela's fertile grounds. Isabel Allende once commented on the fertility of Venezuelan soil: if she didn't dust daily, she would arrive home to find a plant growing straight out of the dust on top of her furniture. The Spanish colonizers enslaved Africans and native peasants, and grew cocoa, coffee, sugar, cotton, and tobacco for export. At least 70% of the population lived in the countryside and 80% of the country's revenues were attributable to agricultural production. After the War for Independence (1821-1839), strongmen, caudillos, who had risen through the ranks during the war won large estates called latifundios, and land was further consolidated into fewer hands.

In 1914, however, the country's oil wealth was discovered, and within 50 years Venezuela's economy had been completely reoriented. With two world wars, petroleum-based industrialization and use of personal vehicles, the world demand for oil increased dramatically. Instead of agricultural exports, the country exported oil, and by 1957 agricultural activity only accounted for 1.9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Most widely referred to as "Dutch disease", the Venezuelan economy suffered from paralysis in all sectors not affiliated with oil. Domestic agricultural production could not meet domestic demand and the country quickly became a net importer of food. The countryside was no longer of service to the oil-rich policy makers and fell into a state of neglect. With another oil boom in the 1970's, the Dutch disease only worsened. The increased importation of food crippled local agricultural production, leaving large groups of Venezuelans with no choice but to migrate to the cities where there was more hope of finding work. As a result, Venezuela is one of the most urbanized countries in the world with most sources estimating that approximately 90% of the population is located in urban areas. Today, any traveler can observe the effects: shantytowns,

or barrios, crowd the hillsides around the more well-to-do city centers. Employment rates and infrastructure cannot keep pace with mass migration. Residents don't always have water or electricity; roads, which are usually too narrow for automobiles to navigate, aren't officially named or marked. In the overcrowded conditions, poverty festers.

In 1989, President Carlos Andrés Pérez gave in to IMF policies. Pérez was required to apply the neo-liberal package: privatizing services, cutting social spending and subsidies, orienting the economy for export, and deregulating trade.² Venezuela's economy was already oriented towards the export of oil, which destroyed internal agriculture production, caused a build-up of poverty in the city and created a need to import more food. But the new policies also demanded that social spending and subsidies be cut. With the government unable to subsidize Venezuela's own oil, prices of everything, especially food and transportation, doubled overnight, and Venezuelans took to the streets rioting, in what is called the Caracazo. The Pérez government brutally repressed the rioters, killing thousands. Most observers believe that Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1998 in direct response to failed neo-liberal policies and the repression of the Caracazo: Chavez's victory symbolized taking back sovereignty and working for the welfare and needs of the people. Chavez won on a platform to eliminate corruption, fight poverty, and create a new constitution. The 1999 constitution, drafted by a popular assembly and approved by a clear majority of the population, is considered one of most progressive in world. It prioritizes food sovereignty, addressing food as a basic human right, not merely a commodity.

Food Culture

Hugo Chavez and his government are among the first policy makers in the world to address issues of food sovereignty, but they are working against years and years of damage that have already been done. The present-day reality is that Venezuela imports 70% of the food it consumes. Pabellón, the national plate of Venezuela, is made of slow roasted, pulled beef, white rice, black beans with cheese, and

fried plantains. However, Venezuela does not produce the entirety of its national meal; the majority of black beans and beef consumed in the country are imported. In supermarkets food prices are about the same as they are in the U.S., but Venezuela's minimum wage is \$11 US a day. This does not translate perfectly to the U.S. because many poor people in Venezuela don't pay rent and there are no property or income taxes. Nonetheless, a high percentage of one's income goes to food, especially for those living in poverty.

Compared to most of the nations of Latin America, Venezuela is relatively prosperous, and for the most part, minimum caloric intake is met. However, in many quarters, the diet is poor. We found it odd to learn that Venezuelans don't eat many vegetables when their soil is so fertile and they could grow them all year long. Salad was rare. Fruit was readily available, but it was usually served as juice, with a lot of added sugar. You find a lot of processed flours, powdered milk, and hydrogenated oil—a diet similar to that consumed by many people in the United States. One of our classmates became sick and told her host-mom that she hadn't been able to poop for the past 3 or 4 days. Her host-mom seemed to think this was normal. Upon my arrival to Venezuela, my host-brother wanted to take me out. I was expecting Venezuelan cuisine. Instead, we went to the mall where he professed his love for McDonalds to me. These experiences could just be a few extreme, isolated cases, but if Venezuelans had control over their food supply, would they be eating this way? Would they be connected to their luscious countryside and eat more fresh vegetables and less sugars and starches? Would they practice a more traditional food culture and less addiction to corporate American brands?

As campesinos were pushed off their land and flocked to the barrios to find jobs in oil and industry, Venezuela lost much of its traditional food culture and its ability to feed itself. In Venezuela, corporations have the ability to dictate what is eaten and create a demand for their products through marketing and media control. Venezuela has been colonized by food corporations. You can't get away from Nescafe

and Coca Cola. The "globalization" taking place around the world can also be called "Americanization".

How is Venezuela moving forward to food sovereignty and away from the problems history has brought them?

1. Land reform.

Article 307 of the constitution states:

"The predominance of latifundios is contrary to the interests of society. Appropriate tax law provisions shall be enacted to tax fallow lands and establish the necessary measures to transform them into productive economic units, likewise recovering arable land. Farmers and other agricultural producers are entitled to own land in the cases and forms specified under the pertinent law. The State shall protect and promote associative and private forms of property in such manner as to guarantee agricultural production. The State shall see to the sustainable ordering of arable land to guarantee its food-producing potential."

Likewise, the constitution specifies that it is the State's obligation to promote the development of agriculture in Venezuela:

"The state will promote conditions for holistic rural development, with the purpose of generating employment and guaranteeing the peasant population an adequate level of well-being, as well as their incorporation into national development. Similarly, it will support agricultural activity and the optimal use of land, by means of the provision of infrastructure works, credit, training services, and technical assistance."

Reforms to article 471 of Venezuela's Penal Code de-criminalize small farmers who occupy private lands. The Law on Land and Agricultural Development of 2001 is the legal framework of land redistribution, which President Chavez calls "a return to the countryside". The law aims to tax unused property that could potentially be used for growing and raising food. It also redistributes unused government-owned land to peasant families and cooperatives and expropriates uncultivated land for redistribution, while compensating private owners at market

value. The size of uncultivated landholdings is limited to 50 hectares of high quality land and 3000 hectares of low quality land, with another four categories between these two extremes.

The National Land Institute (INTI) oversees the land redistribution process. It determines what land can be redistributed and who, out of those applying for land deeds, is eligible. Mission Zamora is a government initiative inspired by Ezequiel Zamora who was a crusader for land reform and peasants' rights in the 1850's. The mission is in charge of helping to organize small and medium producers and assisting them to receive land titles. When the work of these institutions started, 70% of cultivatable lands were in the hands of 3% of the population. By 2005 2.2 million hectares of state owned land had been redistributed to more than 130,000 peasant families and cooperatives. One million hectares of private land had been redistributed, of which 90% are successfully producing food.³



Man planting seeds. By Basil Weiner.

Recuperated lands are distributed to cooperatively run projects called Zamoran Farms. The land is owned by the state, but it is considered the cooperative's as long as it remains productive. Value added to the land, such as housing, tractors, livestock, recuperated soil or planted trees, is classified as productive and belongs to the cooperative.

We visited such farms in Venezuela. One was a 60-hectare parcel of formerly idle, state-owned land in Merida, which the government granted to small producers. 63 people showed interest in the land, but they did not complete the free workshops offered by the government mission, Vuelvan Caras, which educates people about how to form cooperatives. As a result they were not eligible to attain helpful micro-credits and benefits from the government. Disappointed, they tried to divide the land into individual family farms to create an association of producers, but they could not create consensus and many people left. Out of the 63, seven stayed to form the cooperative, now called Pan y Amor, or Bread and Love.

We visited another Zamoran farm in Tucaní. The land redistribution process there was entirely different. The land was formerly a 200-hectare, privately owned latifundio. 206 laborers in the region organized a Land Committee, a Comité de Tierra, and fought for four years with the help of Mission Zamora to obtain the land. On April 7, 2002, after 120 hours of workshops about cooperatives, the Comité de Tierra became the cooperative Beveré. In this case, the workshops were given by an enterprise called Cecosesur. As with Pan y Amor, the number of members decreased; 65 people lasted through the workshops. They received the title to the land from the National Land Institute (INTI) on October 12th and on November 15th, entered the land. We were told that 42 members make up the cooperative today because, while people want land, they are not interested in the social organizing that accompanies it.

Outside of Caracas, we were able to witness an actual land takeover. 20 years ago, hundreds of families were pushed off

the land when the landowner suddenly decided to take it back. He had done nothing productive with the land, so the residents organized to reclaim it, along with the surrounding land, and farm it. They were approved by INTI and we had the opportunity to partake in the celebration of entering the land. There we watched members of the community, aided by El Frente Nacional Campesino Ezequiel Zamora (The Ezequiel Zamora National Peasant Front) break the chains of the property to march onto the land that would be their new home and livelihood. These battles are not easy ones; it is important to know that since 2001, 241 rural activists have been murdered. One of the recipients of the land told us, "If we tried to do this ten years ago we would have been beaten by the cops."

The Frente Campesino Ezequiel Zamora was an organization we heard a lot about. We met Braulio, a Frente leader, who we have been in touch with since returning to the U.S. In an email he wrote about the organization's goals: "to form, organize and mobilize agrarian communities using and defending our laws that are fundamental tools; and to orient people collectively to eradicate Venezuelan bureaucracy." Braulio wrote, "We also work in other countries and we belong to the worldwide organization, La Via Campesina. We believe in popular power and that the government only is in control when it is obeying the people." This "lead by obeying" philosophy is a quintessential tenet of the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico. To witness separate campesino movements in Latin America operating on similar philosophical grounds gave us a lot of hope and helped us see that work being done in Venezuela has global scope and implications.

2. Institutions.

Land reforms under previous presidents failed because there was no support for farmers once they received land. Newly created government institutions, like the missions and ministries, act as the supporting structure for the land reforms. I mentioned Mission Zamora and Mission Vuelvan Caras (now called Mission Che Guevara) in the section above. Mission Zamora's goal is, according to government documents, to

"reorganize the ownership and use of idle lands with agriculture to eradicate the latifundio" by aiding those interested in reclaiming land.

We visited a Mission Che Guevara in Quibor. This mission gives people scholarships, and often health and housing assistance while they take higher education classes in technology, management, history, and cooperative values. It focuses on the Social Production Enterprise (EPS) model, defined as "economic entities dedicated to the production of goods or services, in which work has its proper and authentic value, with no discrimination associated with any type of work, no privileges related to certain positions or hierarchies and with equality between its members, based on participative planning."⁴ Cooperatives are preferred by the state but not required. The Social Production Enterprises are part of a larger plan for endogenous development, another Venezuelan-coined term, which counters neo-liberal development. While neo-liberal development promotes privatization of services in order to profit transnational companies, endogenous development promotes socialized services and localized production, organized by and for the collective whole. The Che Guevara mission that we visited functioned as a community center, but there were also community members paid by the government who were giving workshops on baking, canning, sewing, electronic repair, wood shop, soldering, and tourism, in order to strengthen the local economy and generate employment.

The Ministry of Popular Power of Agriculture and Lands (MPPAT) is made up of four departments: INDER, FONDAS, CVA, and INIA. The National Institute for Rural Development, INDER, works on infrastructure and construction projects like irrigation, drainage, bridges, and roads. We saw their plaques on completed projects everywhere along the rural roads. The Socialist Agrarian Fund, FONDAS, assists farmers through micro lending at little to no interest. Pan y Amor, for example, needed a tractor and the government gave them credits to buy one. They aren't required to begin payment on the tractor until the land begins to produce. If farmers receive such credits, they are often required to sell their

goods to the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation, CVA. This can be seen as a good thing or a bad thing because it offers a steady and fair buyer, in comparison to profiteering middlemen, but also leaves little space for independence and change. One of the CVA's goals is to find markets for the products of small and medium farmers. In Quibor we visited a new plant that was co-managed by the government and workers from the community. They bought tomatoes, peppers, and onions from small and medium farmers in the region and made ketchup, salsa, and pasta sauce; they then sold these products to government subsidized food stores.⁵ They are adding value to raw produce to develop food industries and create more jobs. A woman nervously approached us at the plant wanting to tell us something. She explained that before Chavez was elected, she worked as a migrant farm worker on latifundios, going wherever she could make enough to survive. She explained that as a single mother with three children, that kind of life was impossible, unbearable. Now she has steady work in one place. She threw her hands in the air and thanked Chavez for his compassion for the campesino. In 2008 the National Assembly allocated \$379 million to a network of these "socialist" food producers. 21 agro-processing plants run by communities across Venezuela are currently coordinated by the CVA.⁶

The National Agriculture Research Institute, INIA, is particularly interesting to us. It is the participatory research branch that conducts studies and projects with farmers. If a farmer needs technical assistance, they can go to INIA and get it for free. Basil made contact with a team in the Merida office and went on several visits with them to the farms they work with. He explains that he was lucky in meeting this particular team (Angelica, Camilo, and Adrian) because they exhibit the amazing potential of INIA. We were introduced to Pan y Amor, a research plot in Zulia, and many small family farms in Pueblo del Sur. Pan y Amor struggled with their citrus production and asked INIA to help. INIA did this and more. Now with their help, the farmers are growing and studying the production of organic cocoa. Recently

they started a new project of growing different varieties of yucca. The region is perfect for yucca production and the government, as a way to bolster internal production and processing of foods, is building a yucca-processing factory in the area. INIA is helping Pan y Amor conduct a yucca experiment on their land in preparation for this factory. The yucca grown there will be sold raw, but will also be processed into flour and a lubricant for oil drills. At the INIA research plot in Zulia, they are studying which varieties of plantains are more naturally resistant to pests and therefore require less chemical applications. This research was initially intended for a large plantation, but Beveré, the cooperative farm we visited in Tucani, was also benefiting from their research and was conducting a similar experiment on their land. In Pueblo del Sur, the INIA team is working with small family farms to study which grasses increase cows' milk production. Angelica gave them the basic tools to conduct their own experiment to see which kind of grass made the cows produce the most milk. Each family ran its own experiment and by the end of a month, the cows were giving 5 litres of milk a day instead of 1. The goal of this experiment was not to increase milk production for commercial production, but to make sure small family farms remain self-subsistent. But the ability of small families to produce what they consume also has an impact on the amount of food the country needs to import.

The contact with small, rural farming operations provides opportunities for a very different kind of relationship between producer and researcher. There is a feeling of deep mutual respect. This is what is so significant about participatory research. A farmer told Basil, "Before, we only ever got help from scientists when they were writing their papers for school. They treated us poorly and only ever told us what we needed to do, never asking us what we needed help with." We witnessed scientists encouraging producers to make sure their children went to school. The INIA researchers were always greeted more like family than professional associates. We also witnessed our friends at INIA spreading awareness about the opportunities that farmers have to organize to

meet their needs. When one farmer complained about his irrigation difficulties, Angelica told him that he could get together with other farmers in the region, form a communal council⁷ and apply for money to install more advanced irrigation infrastructure. After giving farmers seeds, Angelica explained that she wouldn't give them anymore because the farmers need to be independent and claim the knowledge INIA is providing, like seed saving, as their own. This is in contrast to agricultural production since the Green Revolution, where seeds have been developed to terminate after a season, thus forcing farmers to rely on corporations like Monsanto to buy new seeds every year.

Anna met another team in the Merida office who was experimenting with a bacterium, as an ecological alternative to chemicals, to eliminate a butterfly larva that was killing the corn and cruciferous crop in the area. Another man named Javier was working with a strand of mushrooms called *trichoderma harziaunum*



Man planting seeds. By Basil Weiner.

to kill mushrooms that were destroying broccoli, cauliflower, and potato crops.

3. Food Factories

Just as with land takeovers, there has been much organizing to take over important points of food production and distribution. We visited the town of Barlovento where family cooperatives grew cacao. The producers in the area understood that they were losing profit: they sold their cacao on the world market as a raw product and they bought back chocolate bars, the finished product, at a 100% price increase. They realized the importance of endogenous development and in 2004, the communal council⁸ made a proposal to the government to build a cacao processing factory. The government approved the proposal and built a state of the art processing plant. The government and the communal council each owns 50% of the plant; however, the communal council has complete control over how the plant functions. The government can't tell them what to do except to demand productivity.

The people of Barlovento are descendents of Africans who escaped the bondage of slavery. Their shared heritage has created a close-knit community. The people who work as farmers are often family members of those who work in the factory, and some people may do both. Because of this, there is close cooperation between the farms and the factory. Cacao is bought from small and medium farms at a fair price and surplus realized from factory production is reinvested in the whole system (from farming to processing) or divided equally between the farmers and factory workers.

Another example is the factory of the Italian multinational company Parmalat. When they abandoned their milk plant, the Venezuelan government bought it from them for \$372 million. It is another example of a "socialist" producer supported by the CVA. It has the capacity to produce 1 million liters of milk per day, but currently, is only operating at 6% of its capacity.⁹

4. Subsidized food.

Children all over the world “die because of illnesses that are practically always preventable and curable at a rate of over 30,000 per day, 21 per minute, and 10 every thirty seconds. In the South, the proportion of children suffering from malnutrition is upwards of 50% in quite a few countries, while, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization, a child who lives in the First World will consume the equivalent of what 50 children consume in an underdeveloped country throughout his or her life.” This statement was made by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez at the opening of the seventh G-15 Summit on March 1, 2004. Mercal, PDVAL, comedores populares, and casas de alimentación are all methods the government is using to stop hunger.¹⁰

In December 2002, Fedecámaras, Venezuela’s chamber of commerce, and PDVSA, the state-owned oil company called for what looked like a general strike, but was actually a lockout of employees. As in the United States Venezuela’s production and distribution of food was heavily controlled by international corporations. These food corporations supported the lockout, as an attempt to get Chavez out of office by creating instability in the country. This attempt of sabotage resulted in closed supermarkets, growing malnutrition, and food shortages across the country. On his television show, *Aló Presidente*, Chavez made clear how dangerous Venezuela’s lack of food sovereignty and vulnerability to the major food corporations was. Mission Mercal was created in response to this danger. It is a chain of government-subsidized grocery stores that sell meats, fish, eggs, milk, cheese, bread, cereal, pasta, rice, flours, tomato sauce, fruit, coffee, margarine, oil, sugar, and salt, all priced 39% below traditional supermarkets. They buy directly from Venezuelan producers or import what isn’t produced in Venezuela to eliminate the intermediary. The current goal is to buy 40% of food from small and medium local producers. They have also developed large storage spaces and distribution and transportation networks to combat food speculation, hoarding, and sabotage. The stores also provide jobs for the

communities. Some Mercal stores, such as the one Katie went to in Monte Carmelo, are run by the community. They organized through their communal council to obtain money for the initial capital, and run it like community supported agriculture in the U.S., where customers receive packages of food weekly.

PDVAL markets, on the other hand, are run by the state oil company, PDVSA, and sell essential products at nationally regulated prices. They are mobile, smaller markets. We often saw PDVAL trucks selling to crowds of people in parking lots or plazas. Comedores Populares are popular cafeterias that offer large healthy lunches for five bolivars (about \$2.50) or for free if you aren’t able to pay. Basil and I ate at one in Mérida and were pleasantly surprised. We saw men and women of different economic levels and classes all eating together. Casas de Alimentación (basically soup kitchens) are community-run cafeterias that operate out of individual homes. Katie went to one in Palo Verde. She explained to me that women from the community used funds from their communal council to make lunch everyday for people who were in need. The government’s 14,000 Mercal stores and 6,000 soup kitchens comprise 22% of national food distribution currently. Per capita food consumption of Venezuelans has grown from 370 pounds of food per year in 1998 to 415 pounds per year now. The recommended amount of food that each person should consume per year is about 440 pounds. We in the U.S. average 1800 pounds per year.¹¹

5. International trade of goods and knowledge.

In the face of crippling free trade agreements enforced by the United States, Venezuela is working to make new alliances, based in mutual agreement and cooperation. In our visit to Beveré in Tucaní, we saw Veniran tractors that were made in Iran specifically for Venezuela. The plan is not just to import tractors from Iran, but to be capable of manufacturing tractors in Venezuela by acquiring necessary equipment and engineering skills to do so. Beveré also had a Cuban agronomist, veterinarian, and accountant stationed at their farm as a part of

the agreement of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). Chavez proposed ALBA in 2004 as an alternative to the U.S. proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas. Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Bolivia, and the Dominican Republic join Venezuela in ALBA. The Cubans stationed in Venezuela provide technical assistance but also teach cooperative theory. Cubans have also provided greenhouses to Venezuela in exchange for discounted oil. A regional farmers organization in Mucuchies, Producción Agroecología Integral (PROINPA), was working with Universidad de Los Andes (ULA) scientists on a project on potato seeds. The construction of Cuban greenhouses was critical to the success of the project and Anna witnessed Cubans working with ULA scientists and PROINPA farmers to jumpstart the production of potatoes and protect the biodiversity of the potato seeds. In Caracas we saw a beautiful urban garden inspired by those in Cuba. The CVA has created five food factories (similar the tomato processing plant we saw in Quibor) through economic accords with Cuba, and has launched a corn processing plant in cooperation with Iran and Nicaragua. The cacao plant in Barlovento was also trying to utilize ALBA to trade its chocolate products within the region. PDVAL signed a 12-year milk importation contract with the Argentine dairy

cooperative Sancor in order to provide food products that are currently scarce.¹²

6. Getting tough with agro industry.

In 2004 President Chavez's rhetoric towards big business agriculture surprised the international community. Upon receiving word from Via Campesina that Monsanto was going to plant 500,000 acres of transgenic soybeans, Chávez called for the termination of the project and declared that genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are contrary to the interests and needs of the nation's farmers and farm workers. In reaction, he ordered that the land that was to be used for the soybean planting be planted instead with yucca, a widely recognized indigenous crop. He also announced plans for a project to create indigenous seed banks in order to ensure availability, security, and diversity of seeds for peasants worldwide.¹³

Chavez was standing up to the corporation that produced Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, the bovine growth hormone rBGH, and the pesticide "glyphosate" which is used by the Colombian government against coca production and rebel groups. It has destroyed legitimate farms and natural areas like the Putomayo rainforest, and poses a direct threat to human health, including that of indigenous communities.¹⁴ Sadly, Monsanto does not continue to operate within Venezuela. This is because if an enterprise is productive, the government has not challenged their right to operate. That was obvious when we drove through a plantain latifundio in Zulia that stretched for miles and was owned by a large company that sprayed its fields by airplane. However, if your company is not conducting productive business, the government



Veniran tractor in Beveré. By Basil Weiner.

won't hesitate to pounce. While we were in Venezuela Polar was found to be hoarding rice and Cargill was evading price controls on rice. The government took temporary administrative control of a Polar plant in Guárico state and expropriated Cargill rice plants for 90 days as a warning.

In 2003 the Venezuelan government set price controls on about 400 basic foods. Manufacturers claim that food shortages are occurring because the price controls have not kept up with inflation. The government argues that the fall of the U.S. dollar and speculation on the market is leading to the instability. Problems with hoarding and smuggling to Columbia have ensued, where manufacturers can turn a 300% profit.¹⁵ Also, food manufacturers are evading the price controls by producing non-regulated foods and decreasing production. Anna was told, "Imagine you can't find any milk, but you can find all the sour cream and yogurt you want." Rice was a growing problem: the prices were rising and the shelves weren't being restocked. As a result, in February 2009, Chavez ordered the military to temporarily take control of all the rice processing plants in the country and force them to produce at full capacity. Polar, Venezuela's largest food processor, claimed that the regulated price of plain rice was below the cost of production, and therefore it was reasonable that 90% of the plant's production was non-regulated, flavored rice. Polar also claimed that because of the shortage in raw materials, they could only operate at 50% capacity. The government claimed otherwise, saying they found two months' worth of raw rice in the plant's storage. In March 2009, Chavez set minimum production quotas for 12 basic foods that were subject to price controls, including white rice, cooking oil, coffee, sugar, powdered milk, cheese, and tomato sauce. He also has raised the regulated prices of another 10 basic foods; however, the regulated prices must stay current with inflation or corruption will continue.¹⁶

The battle continues: these private companies do not want to cooperate with the government and are more concerned with their profits than the wellbeing of the people. Let me

note here that Cargill reported nearly \$4 billion in net earnings in 2008, a 36% increase over the previous year, while the number of people suffering hunger worldwide increased to a record 923 million.¹⁷

7. Regional organizing through consejos comunals and the comuna.

The following information is taken from Josh Lerner's extensive article, "Communal Councils in Venezuela: Can 200 Families Revolutionize Democracy?" published in March 2007. We had a chance to meet Josh in Venezuela, where he was working in barrio Pueblo Nuevo in Mérida. He was a much-appreciated resource in our studies.

Since 2006, Venezuelan neighborhoods have been organizing themselves into communal councils, a form of participatory democracy where the community has the responsibility over decisions that affect them. Each urban council contains about 200-400 families, each rural council has at least 20 families, and each indigenous council is about 10 families. All decisions are to be made in citizen assemblies with a minimum of 10 percent of residents over age 15. These assemblies are to elect leadership, financial management, and monitoring committees, as well as committees based on local priorities (health, education, recreation, land, safety, etc.). Money is funneled to the communities that need it without corrupt government officials interfering. By law, communities can receive funds directly from the national, state, or city governments, from their own fundraising, or from donations. In turn, the councils can award grants for community projects or cooperatives. Officially, communal councils are to send project proposals directly to the Presidential Commission of Popular Power, which gives the go-ahead as long as they are legally valid. However, councils often send projects to their municipality for review first. Eight months after the law was passed, over 16,000 councils had already formed throughout the country. As of 2007, 300 communal banks were established, which have received \$70 million in micro-loans. Thanks to these funds, the councils have implemented thousands of

community projects, paving streets, creating sports fields, building medical centers, and constructing sewage and water systems. Some leaders have proposed that the councils replace city and state governments entirely, or work parallel to them.¹⁸

The comuna is a fairly new idea. It is a larger social network of communal councils and cooperatives that can combine resources to work on larger projects that benefit more people. Infrastructure committees from several communal councils might decide to work together to build new sewer systems or several communal banks may decide to co-lend start up capital for a cooperative that addresses a need like distributing food. The comuna, hopefully, will have more resources to invest in Social Production Enterprises that can generate employment and produce what the community is in need of, thus furthering endogenous development.

Agroislena is a Venezuelan based agro-chemical corporation that has a very strong presence in certain areas of Venezuela. Mérida state is one of these areas and during our time in the Merida countryside, in Mucuchies, we saw many Agroislena “tiendas” or shops. For decades, small farmers in the region have depended on this company for most of their agricultural inputs such as seeds, herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers. The agricultural areas suffer some of the most devastating rates of topsoil erosion in the world precisely because of the heavy reliance on chemical inputs that have historically exacerbated erosion issues. It is also important to state that a significant portion of the products sold at Agroislena stores are bought from U.S, European and Canadian multinational agribusinesses such as Cargill and Monsanto.

With the Chavez administration’s stated goals to promote locally based endogenous development around food production and distribution, and the local urgency to address the problems of chemical input dependence and subsequent erosion, locally based grassroots solutions have begun to emerge. The local production of organic alternatives to multinational chemicals serves as a very effective strategy for communities to pinch the markets of the

large corporations. Maria Vicente is one of the community organizers and activists behind the initiative. She showed us the work of their communal council: new drip-irrigation systems that used less water than the sprinkler system they had before. She and some other women were also working to organize a cooperative trash pickup service that was quite comprehensive. Anti-litter posters hung up around the town and they had taught residents how to separate their trash from reusable materials. Food was separated for compost, which was in turn made into a worm fertilizer, hummus, and teas by the women. They had also set up childcare services for the children, which offered healthy meals and health care. Instead of chemical fertilizers or chicken manure (which was also imported from a different region of the country and caused contamination of the waterways), local producers were buying compost made by the women’s cooperative. The monetary price is a small fraction of the imported inputs, the compost does not contribute to erosion, and it is reported to be highly effective. It may make a nominal difference in the bottom line of agroindustrial companies, but the positive local impact is tangible and transformative. It is in the grassroots where the spirit of the Bolivarian revolution truly resides. With the sprouting of locally based solutions to local problems, the theoretical concept of sovereignty begins to take physical shape.

In Monte Carmelo some of us witnessed examples of really exciting community based organizing around food sovereignty issues. Irrigation and transportation infrastructure, organic, cooperative agriculture, regional networks of food producers and experiments with soil building worms and micro-rizomes are all examples of the activity in this small community. At the center of many of these projects is an amazing woman named Gaudi. Gaudi is acutely aware of the history of food in Venezuela. As a campesina, she has spent her life inside of an economy that has prioritized importation over local production. She has not only witnessed the slow and steady loss of local food autonomy, but she has suffered from it. For Gaudi, the seed is at the center of this

story, and her work with seeds in the community has been extremely important, not only in encouraging the use of locally produced and adapted seeds, but in rescuing local awareness, identity and pride in that which is uniquely Venezuelan. In concert with the Lara state office of INIA, Gaudi and her community helped organize an annual festival dedicated to celebrating, honoring and sharing local seeds. The day of the campesina seed is now an official holiday in Monte Carmelo and its organizers hope that it spreads across the country.

When you visit Gaudi in her home, she will show you two things. She will show you a painted mural of Simon Bolivar, Venezuela's liberator from Spanish rule, that hangs on her inside wall, and she will show you her seeds. Her collection is impressive, but what may be more impressive is that many homes in Monte Carmelo are also small banks of local seeds. Instead of relying on agricultural stores for their seeds, the people of Monte Carmelo are working towards food sovereignty by localizing their production, storage and distribution.

Here, we have included the Declaration of the Campesina Seed, which Gaudi wrote:

Declaration of the Campesina Seed

We, the campesino seeds, gathered in assembly with the campesinos and campesinas of Monte Carmelo, declare:

That we are the nutritious hope of our people.

That for centuries we have filled stomachs, pockets, marusas, bags, and granaries.

That we are part of the Venezuelan people, because we are all together at breakfast, lunch, merienda and dinner.

That, besides being nourishment, we are also medicine and happiness for the campesinos and campesinas.

That we create and give life when our love merges with the love of the humble and unassuming people of the fields; and that we love being grown as we were grown in the past, without being mistreated.

That, despite the persecution and mistreatment we have received from other seeds that are more powerful than us, we are still curled up safely in Monte Carmelo.

That, with courage and bravery we have resisted the harshness of herbicides and insecticides that have been spread over us.

That we are born from the womb of Mother Earth and we cry with her because she's damaged and unloved.

That we love being caressed by fresh water once we are sowed.

That we are friends of the insects, birds and microorganisms that sing us songs of love and fertility in the voice of patriotism and national identity.

For these reasons and many more we proclaim to the world:

That we need to unite with all the seeds in the world, especially those in Latin America and the Caribbean.

That all of us seeds should organize ourselves in cooperatives in order to defend our existence.

That those who aren't familiar with us should get to know us, so that they can help us reproduce and support us in our struggles for justice.

That the creation of indigenous Seed Banks should be promoted in every Venezuelan village.

That love for us should be promoted in schools, high schools, universities and all other centers of education.

That girls and boys should play with us when they are washing us for dinner.

That, as nourishment, we should never be missing at the tables of any Venezuelans.

That the campesino seeds should be able to enjoy life with men, women, boys, girls, and young people in an environment free of contamination

by toxic agricultural substances and industrial waste; and to avoid, by any means necessary, being displaced by imported and transgenetic seeds;

and to be ourselves, with our own flavor, color and aroma.

The seeds of Monte Carmelo, together with their hardworking friends, the faithful inhabitants of this village;

declare that this day, October 29th,

is the Day of the Campesino Seed

so that it will be celebrated

every year on this date in all of Venezuela,

with the respect and appropriate honors that signify

that this is a memorable a day for the Venezuelan people.

During his expeditions with INIA Basil saw the work of rural communal councils. Through their communal councils, many agricultural villages and towns are organizing to develop transportation infrastructure in order to make production economically viable. Since isolation can threaten food sovereignty, this development is most urgent where dirt roads are all that connect remote villages to larger urban markets.. One such road lies in a mountainous region south of the city of Mérida in a cluster of small towns called Los Pueblos del Sur, or the villages of the south. The road is a patchwork; some sections are paved while others are virtually impassable without four-wheel drive. This patchwork road illustrates a very interesting dynamic of the Bolivarian revolution. With increased autonomy over their territory through legally recognized communal councils, some communities have made it a priority to improve their section of the road. They have created plans; they have applied for and received government funds and they have paved the sections that pass through their community. Neighboring communities have not.

This can easily be seen as proof of the ineffectiveness of community-based development. A road that passes through many communities presents the challenge of consistency. But development initiated by one community may motivate others. People can learn from a neighbor's example that they have the very tangible power to direct the development of their communities and their regions; they may decide to pave their own sections of road.

8. Education.

Education is central to building consciousness of farmers' rights and urban peoples' rights to food. Education in many social movements has been a tool to organize people. It is also a service that has been neglected in the Venezuelan countryside, leaving a whole constituency of citizens without access to schooling. Mission Sucre provides free higher education to poor and previously excluded people. The government expects the student body to grow to one million by 2009, with more than 190 satellite classrooms throughout

Venezuela, especially in the countryside, where students are receiving higher education for the first time.¹⁹ In the small farming village of Bojo we observed a classroom affiliated with the Bolivarian University that offered courses in agro-ecology. Students are expected to use the knowledge gained in their course to serve the community, linking theory to practice. The director, Andrés Eloy Ruiz describes the teachers in these classes as "leader[s] of the process of learning but also...full participant[s] in the process of connection with a community in which, with the knowledge that both students and faculty have, the community's problems can be resolved." The Ministry of Higher Education is particularly interested in creating agro-ecological programs that specialize in studies useful to peasants, the indigenous and African descendants.²⁰

At the Simon Rodriguez University students are required to engage in the problems encountered in their communities. We heard from Maria Vicente that her worm cooperative in Mucuchies was benefiting from the help of agro-ecology students who came to her wanting to learn and asking how they could help. This shift in educational philosophy is creating professionals who are experienced in working in concert with the needs and priorities of communities.

Anna and Katie attended a three-day farmer's conference in Mucuchies that was organized around the region's problems with soil erosion. Students from the Simon Rodriguez University, many of them children of farmers, were at the conference to become involved in the political organization of their community. The conference was part of something larger we saw in Venezuela—a culture of workshops and sharing of knowledge. Soil erosion was becoming an economic as well as environmental problem for farmers in the region. This region is very special and seen as a model of success for what community organizing could look like in rural areas. Communal counsels, students, regional organizations like Instituto para la Producción e Investigación de la Agricultura Tropical (IPIAT), farming, processing, and vending cooperatives, and government services like INIA and INDER were organized

into a larger Red de Comunicación Agrícola, or Network of Agricultural Communication, that had been meeting periodically. Because they were organized like this, they were able to mobilize by convening the conference to learn about erosion, techniques of agro-ecological production and recuperation of soil and water, and make agro-ecological farming the norm rather than the exception. In three days we learned the basic principles of agro-ecology. We watched presentations by regional activists like Lijia Para of Asociación y Coordinación de Agriculturas de Rangel (ACAR), and experts like Fred Magdoff from Vermont and Miguel Angel Nuñez. We networked with others and learned about projects people were working on in the region, like reforestation and the rebirth of herbal medicine. Perhaps the most important thing I witnessed was farmers sharing their problems and successes in agro-ecological, small scale farming, and collaborating with students, government technicians, and experts in a beautiful participatory way. On the last day, people discussed goals for the region, one which was to stop using chemicals and large amounts of chicken manure fertilizers. As farmers, government workers, and activists alike received their diplomas for the completion of the course, we could see their excitement, looking forward to the changing future.

One of the most exciting schools we visited was the Latin American Institute of Agro-ecology “Paulo Freire” school in Barinas. The worldwide peasant movement, Via Campesina, that provided the definition of food sovereignty for this paper and the peasant movement in Brazil, Movimiento Sin Tierra (MST), approached Chavez in 2005 at the World Social Forum to create a farmers school in Venezuela. Chavez agreed and with Bolivarian University funding, donated 35 hectares of land expropriated from an privately-owned latifundio. Seventy students (48 male, 22 female) between 18 and 30 years of age from 7 Latin American countries were elected by the peasant movements of their countries and arrived to build their campus from scratch. Students from Venezuela are elected by the Frente Nacional Campesino Ezequiel Zamora.

In five years, the students will graduate with professional degrees. There are eleven professors that teach classes from epistemology to physics, agricultural history to biodiversity and plant life. The institute is named after the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, universally known in the field of popular education. The pedagogical method fuses university studies with the traditional knowledge and culture that each individual and the collective holds. “The result should be that the political thought of pedagogy is committed to the social dynamic of the popular struggle.” When Anna asked what the students wanted to do after graduating, most said they were going back to their families to farm, become leaders in social movements, and do community organizing.

A student named Orlandiz told us his family and other families took over land in Zulia and formed a farming cooperative with the help of Mission Zamora. He became active in Frente Zamora and they elected him to go to the school in Barinas. As he was teaching us how to grow yucca, he was asked he had known how to do this before going to university. He replied, “I, shamefully, am the son of a campesino, so I always knew how to plant yucca but I didn’t know why I was doing it. Now I am testing what I learned before and am more connected to it.” At the school, students are learning to be proud to be farmers, learning how important they are to society and using that power to organize around their rights as producers of labor and consumers of the fruits of the earth. Sixto, from Brazil, sported a MST shirt that said: “organize, produce, feed”. The goals of the school are similar: produce food to become self-sustaining, organize politically, and work within the community while learning academically.

The land that was given to them by the Venezuelan government serves as a ground for experimentation. In one area an old yucca field had been allowed to grow wild to let the land recuperate from the chemicals that the previous latifundio used and to see what grew there naturally. In another area, they were using the Mexican growing model of intercropping beans, corn, and squash. As the need for more classrooms grew, the students started

constructing classrooms out of straw and mud as an exploration into native, sustainable architecture. We helped them build a pond for the ducks and advised them to learn about plants that purify and hold water. The next day they started to do this. This mentality and interest in experimenting was prevalent, and was often carried over into community work. For every 16 weeks spent on campus, 6 are spent in farming communities all over Venezuela participating in innovative, experimental projects. By funding a school that serves all of Latin America, Chavez has received a force of young enthusiastic students who are working on Venezuelan projects while catalyzing an agrarian movement throughout Latin America.

9. Food systems outside of the government

While the government is doing as much as it can to advance towards food sovereignty, there is also plenty of room to work outside the government towards these same goals.

Cecosesola is an umbrella cooperative in Barquisimeto that incorporates 80 organizations in 5 states. It was started in 1967 by 9 cooperatives who wanted to provide affordable means of burying the dead. By the 1970's it evolved into a subsidized bus transportation service. By 1984 Cecosesola had reorganized to provide mobile food markets. This method of selling directly to people was highly successful and led to the idea of having permanent distribution areas in the city.

Now Cecosesola has 3 ferias, or markets, where food and other household necessities are sold. Their cooperative is the largest network of food production and distribution in the country. During our time in Barquisimeto, we worked at the feria in the center of the city. The cooperative is a wholesale distributor of fresh produce supplied by 12 farmer associations and 12 food processing associations, all within a 5-hour drive.

What makes Cecosesola so influential and important is the price of the food they provide, their direct connection with their associated producers, and the methods they've developed to create egalitarian relationships among their members. The cooperative was created in the

1960's in order to provide affordable necessities to communities. Today, Cecosesola works directly with local growers and the price it pays for produce is based on what it costs the farmers to produce; in this way the cooperative pays the farmers a fair price for their produce. Cecosesola's prices are approximately 50% of the prices found in supermarkets and estimates are that their produce uses 80% less chemicals. In a city of 1.5 million inhabitants, over 55,000 families get their weekly supply of food from the cooperative.

At Cecosesola the members of the cooperative meet to decide what wage they should all receive in relation to their costs and profits. Cecosesola's financial information is completely transparent and since job rotation is practiced, most members have a good understanding of every aspect of the cooperative's functioning. Cecosesola makes an annual profit of 1.5%. 1% is to counter inflation and .5% is invested back into the cooperative and used for social benefits for the members. Some examples of this are the clinics they maintain in different areas of the city, and a state-of-the-art health center, still under construction, which will serve those who work at the feria, their families, and associated producers. The services of the clinic and health center are available to the general population as well, with fees set to recoup the costs of service.

Las Lajitas is a small farm near Monte Carmelo and Bojo in the state of Lara, near Barquisimeto. It is the organic branch of a larger cooperative, La Alianza. La Alianza is one of the many producers in the country that are associated with the Cecosesola project. Some of us worked for three weeks at Las Lajitas and had the opportunity to see both how the farm is organized and run internally and how it interacts with the larger, regional Cecosesola food system.

In the 1960's a small group of European Catholic missionaries came to the region with the intention of working with the communities to help solve local problems. Following the principles of liberation theology, the priests worked in close cooperation with farmworkers in the region to confront issues of poverty: hunger,

malnutrition, exploitation and landlessness. La Alianza was created, and eventually obtained land and became an important agricultural producer for the region. Their association with Cecosesola has brought in reliable income for decades. The associates at Las Lajitas explained that this association was created, the most they could get for a kilo of potatoes was two Bolivares; the same potatoes would end up in an urban supermarket settling for 18 Bolivares per kilo. Instead of an “invisible hand” that threatens the economic viability of the production of food, producers and vendors meet every 3 months. Once the price of labor and all other inputs (seeds, fertilizers, water, electricity) are calculated, a price is decided based on how much it costs to produce.

Regional integration is very well established in this food system. Food produced at Las Lajitas goes to 8 de Marzo, the women’s pasta making cooperative and or to Moncar, a women’s sauce and jam making cooperative. These processes of adding value to locally produced raw materials have bolstered the local economy.

While Cecosesola is autonomous and unaffiliated with the government, La Alianza does accept government assistance. INIA has worked with them on issues related to soil health and quality, seed saving techniques, worm technology and micro-rizome experiments. They have been instrumental in helping the farm become organic. Some of the farmers have been involved in national and international outreach efforts to share the knowledge they have acquired through their 40 year process of learning.

8 de Marzo is a women’s cooperative in Palo Verde that sells whole wheat and vegetable-derived pasta to Cecosesola. This cooperative was primarily founded by women. Many rural women in Venezuela carry a double burden; they work for low wages outside the home, but they also put in long hours of unpaid domestic work, and in addition, many are single mothers. In rural areas migrant farm work pulls families apart, leaving women to care for the home and children. 8 de Marzo has significantly benefited the economic lives of the women who

work there.

8 de Marzo has also closed the gap between poor producers and poor consumers. They work closely with the people they buy from and sell to in order to create a network of cooperation. They source vegetables from Las Lajitas to support organic farming in their local economy. They set their wages just above minimum wage so that their product can be sold at affordable prices. There are many benefits that have been socialized and localized: food stamps are provided by the cooperative that are spent at a store which is owned by their members and which carries their products. Women members are paid by the cooperative to care for each others children. 8 de Marzo decides collectively what they need and want. In this model, there is a space to discuss women’s issues, labor, economics, food systems, and the environment, and to build their collective political power as women, campesinas, workers, and people.

The cooperative Bervere in Tucaní has struggled with selling their produce at fair rates. They are far away from Cecosesola and felt that selling to them was not profitable. They also sold their produce to the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation, but they waited 9 months for payment—CVA is a slow moving government program that is still in its infancy—only a year old. It was easier and more reliable for Bervere to sell to intermediaries even though they received lower prices. It is obvious that the connection between producer and consumer is what needs the most improvement; it is the part of the food system that is the weakest. We visited Barrio San Juan in Caracas, where the Colectivo Revolucionario de San Juan actively sought out small farmers outside the city and by eliminating intermediaries was able to sell produce at a farm stand at the base of the barrio. The small profit made by the collective is being used to build a community center where the farm stand can expand into a large open-air market. Every Sunday some of the money is used to cook a huge pot of soup and the whole barrio is invited to eat and spend time together in order to strengthen the community. As the project continues, a comuna is developing, including communal council members, the collective, the farmers, and

those interested in running the cooperative food market. The cooperative food market is a great example of a Social Production Enterprise that will further endogenous development between the producer and consumer. The space where the market will one day stand is now just rubble under a highway overpass, but neighbors shows up regardless to play dominoes and bingo, and talk politics. They are building the energetic foundations of an important community space.

Further Problems: World Food Crisis

Since 2003, household poverty in Venezuela has been cut in half, from 54% to 27.5%²¹. As Venezuela's poor obtain more spending power, they are able to consume more than ever before (some say 400% more), contributing to inflation. In three years alone, from 2004 to 2007, consumption more than doubled from \$24 billion to \$52 billion. On a global scale, from 2002 to 2007, global consumption of milk rose by 14.3% while the number of milk cows rose by only 1%. Production has not kept up with consumption. President



Worker showing organic compost. By Basil Weiner.

Chavez commented, "The impact of tighter food supply is already evident in raw food prices, which have risen 22% in the past year ... wheat prices alone have risen 92%"²². When most of one's income goes towards food, as it does in Venezuela, these numbers are very damaging, with the damage falling disproportionately on the poor. Venezuela's problem is part of a larger food crisis worldwide, where inflation and food shortages are reoccurring. For example, in 2007, when many bakeries in Mexico went out of business due to rising wheat prices, protestors took to the street. Mexico imports over 60% of the wheat it consumes. Recently, Afghanistan asked for \$77 million in emergency food aid. The Philippines have had difficulty in meeting their rice quota after a 40% rise in the price of rice. This crisis is new and baffling: never have we seen these patterns without war, drought, or natural disasters.²³

Fossil Fuel Dependency Creates Contradictions, Worldwide

Chavez has said that one of the causes of rising food prices may be global warming. Oil revenues are being invested into agricultural production, but what is oil, a fossil fuel, doing to agriculture in the long term? Fossil fuels contribute to global warming, which is predicted to contribute to the world food crisis. According to a new study at the Carnegie Institution and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, researchers found that in the past two decades, warming temperatures have caused annual losses of roughly \$5 billion for major food crops.²⁴ While there is a lot of work being done to develop more understanding of agro-ecology, the production of petro-fertilizers has not slowed down. We drove past an industrial complex that produced the petro-fertilizers, brandishing the state oil company's name, PDVSA. As we passed the complex, our professor's partner explained to us that PDVSA fertilizers were being traded with Cuba, marking a disappointing regression from agro-ecological farming since 1989 when trading with the former Soviet Union collapsed.

Another factor, as Chavez says, "is Bush's crazy plan to use food to make fuel." He is referring to the United State's policy of using

subsidized corn for the production of ethanol, which caused the global price of corn to increase by 44% in 2008 [3]. In response, Chavez banned corn exports to ensure that corn would be used only for consumption.²⁵ Evo Morales, president of Bolivia has said, “Agro-fuels are not an alternative, because they put the production of foodstuffs for transport before the production of food for human beings. Agro-fuels expand the agricultural frontier destroying forests and biodiversity, generate monocropping, promote land concentration, deteriorate soils, exhaust water sources, contribute to rises in food prices and, in many cases, result in more consumption of more energy than is produced.”²⁶

Food Security vs. Food Sovereignty.

Relying on food imports may alleviate the short-term crisis of food shortages, but will not ensure a long-term solution that leads to food sovereignty. This has to be achieved by entrusting workers and communities with the power over their own food production and distribution. While Mercal is concerned with feeding the hungry through subsidized commodities that foster food security, the mission as of now doesn't tackle issues essential to food sovereignty like fair trade, land degradation through chemical use, culturally appropriate and healthy foods, or building endogenous development—because they can import, buy from transnationals operating in Venezuela, or buy from large latifundios. To help overcome food shortages, Chavez lightened restrictions on the importation of 50 products²⁷. This will not achieve sovereignty over Venezuela's food system. While the minister administering Mercal might request a larger budget to import more beans, the minister of INIA might be more interested in figuring out how to increase bean production within the country. Even if a nation was secure in its bean production, if its security was brought about by a government-owned food system that hired people to work in government farms, factories, and distribution sites, then food sovereignty would only be obtained on the national level, rather than the local level. In this classic socialist sense, the state could control all the means of production and create complete food security.

But socialist agricultural development looks very different than this in Venezuela. The food sovereignty movement is, essentially, socialism decentralized. The Venezuelan government is a supportive facilitator for the projects that cooperatives and communities decide they need for themselves.

However, the immediate need for food security can and does delay the larger movement for food sovereignty. The debate and contradictions forming around food security and food sovereignty are taking place worldwide. For example, Ecuador's constitution states that food sovereignty is a priority but they also allow GMOs into their country. MST of Brazil is an internationally known organization that has gained political recognition and power, but Brazil is also one of the largest producers of soy for export.

Conclusion

It is interesting to look at how the numbers mirror each other: 80% of people in poverty, 90% urbanized, 70% of food imported, 70% of land in the hands of 3% of the population, and 2% of GDP based in agriculture. The problems of food and poverty are connected. They do not represent a nation that is sovereign or sustainable. In the case of Venezuela, these numbers are also a result of neo-liberal development. The examples presented in this paper, of new laws, new techniques, new organizing are examples of what Venezuela calls endogenous development, which represents a different model of development for agriculture, for people, and for the nation—development that is communal and local and ensures the people's sovereignty and sustainability. For one of the first times in Latin American history, there is synergy between the efforts of the government and people because through participatory democracy, the people have become their own government. They rightfully aim to be sovereign from foreign corporations and US imperialist intervention. This sovereignty has bubbled over to all sectors, one of the most important being food. One of the goals of the government and the people is a food system that is just and sustainable, that is able to provide what

people need. Based on the examples provided here, it is certain that great strides have been made in the 10 years of Chavez' administration. Agricultural production has increased by 24%, corn production by 205%, rice by 94%, sugar by 13%, and milk by 11%.²⁸

The Bolivarian movement, symbolized and led by Hugo Chavez, is working towards a different set of ideas, principles and goals. Just like healthcare and education, access to food is a constitutionally protected basic human right. The Venezuelan Food Security Law states:

"It is indispensable to guarantee to all Venezuelan citizens access to quality food in sufficient quantity. For true and revolutionary rural development, it is necessary to overcome the traditional market conception of foods and agricultural products. This vision is a detriment to the fundamental right that all Venezuelans have to feed themselves."

The government and the people of Venezuela share a common perspective about what their problems are and how they should go about solving them. When people are given the tools and the freedom to produce how and what they want, they inevitably begin to create a society that has the interests of its very designers at the center, the interests of people and their sovereignty.

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CECOSESOLA Cooperative: A Personal Interview with Gustavo Salas Romer

By Elliot Jensen and Anna Isaacs

Cooperatives attempt to eliminate some of the problems that are associated with capitalist ownership of the means of production. The goals of cooperative ownership and management are to democratize the workplace and reduce worker exploitation. A cooperative is defined by the International Co-operative Alliance as an “autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.” In other words, it is an economic organization owned and controlled equally by the people who work there.

CECOSESOLA is a network of cooperatives in the state of Lara in Venezuela. Their biggest enterprise is a large food cooperative located in the city of Barquisimeto, which has recently been receiving attention from leftist activists and independent media all over the world.

The *CECOSESOLA* food co-op is owned and managed collectively by all 470 of its workers. Everyone earns the same monthly wage. Almost all of the administrative and managerial decisions are made in meetings, by the consensus of everyone involved. This is especially unique because *Cecosesola* is a very large en-

terprise. Their food markets, or *ferias*, supply somewhere between 25% and 30% of all of the families in Barquisimeto with fresh produce and other food.

CECOSESOLA insists, however, that their organization is not a model. The way they operate is in constant flux, and their current form took several decades to evolve from something that was originally much smaller and much more hierarchical.

I got to sit down and talk with a *CECOSESOLA* veteran, Gustavo Salas Romer, who has been working with the organization for over thirty years.

Tell us about how *CECOSESOLA* began?

Well, when we started, we started like any other cooperative, I think, in the world. We were very normal. The very first members were a group of people from ten cooperatives in Barquisimeto. And we started because in one of those cooperatives, the hospital, one of its members died and they didn't have enough money to bury him. And that initiated a discussion in the cooperative movement of that time, that we needed a funeral service.

So that was our beginning. And when we started out, I think we never would have imagined an organization this size, with this much variety of activities, we have a funeral service, we have household goods we sell, we have the *ferias* where we sell food, and all the activities that we have, that that could be generated and organized without any hierarchical organization. Nobody has power over anybody else. We have activity. People work accounting, different activities, but when you do those activities, that doesn't give you power over the other associates. You're there for a time, and since activities are rotated, you might be in accounting one moment and you'll be sweeping the floors the next day, or you might be cooking. So those who are looking for power, they don't find a nice place here.

And so the reason why CECOSOLASOLASOLA began was because of the need for a funeral service?

Yes, everything we have done has started with a social need. And that's discussed, and through the discussion, we find a way to do it. We have never been too much preoccupied about money. If we decide to do something, we do it.

When did you become a member of CECOSOLASOLASOLA?

There was a group of people that started when I started, that was 1972. There was about five of us. We came to a cooperative movement that was working very traditionally, but a lot of people within the cooperative movement were questioning the lack of participation. They wanted more of a chance to participate in CECOSOLASOLASOLA. And we came from the outside with the same idea: that the educational process is not an "in school" type of education, it's what you do, how you relate yourself in the workplace. That's your main educational possibility, because education is relationships. So we started with that idea: to expand the participation in CECOSOLASOLASOLA. That was the initial idea. We didn't have clear at that time that you could eliminate completely the board of directors, but we wanted to go towards that. That CECOSOLASOLASOLA should be an organization open to the participation of all its members. And the board

of directors, what they should do is catalyze and promote that participation. But at the very beginning, I'm talking about 1974, we couldn't think of it because nobody had had that experience, that you could completely abolish the board of directors.

So that's why at the beginning it was very hard. At the beginning it was very hard because our intention, our desire wasn't as clear and as shared as it is now. So that's what I say when people come and ask "how can I do something similar to CECOSOLASOLASOLA?" Well, you get a group that has clarity that they want a shared experience, they want to respect each other, they want to construct relationships, and the rest comes easy. You don't have to do anything else; the rest just evolves. But if the group is not clear with that, if the group is there for personal, individualistic objectives, it's not going to work.

At one point CECOSOLASOLASOLA became a bus service cooperative. How did that happen?

We got involved with the transportation because, since we were fighting for social justice and the Enterprise Bus owners wanted to raise the price, we said, "we'll take care of that. We will assume the transportation and we won't raise the price." So we bought 127 buses and we were transporting almost the whole city, but inflation came. So prices didn't cover our costs. So, since we were fighting for social justice, we made meetings in the community, we organized people, enormous manifestations, and we asked the government to subsidize the transportation. And that meant that we were wielding power, so the political parties started getting afraid of CECOSOLASOLASOLA, that we were going to displace them, that we wanted to be governor, that we wanted to be mayor of the city, all the political parties got very scared of us, because we had a capacity to mobilize the city, a much greater capacity than any political party. Because we had the buses and we had a reason: to not raise the price. So the students got involved with us and they defended us. It got to the moment that the political parties were very scared, so after elections, they decided to destroy us. And the government came in, and they took over our buses with the police. They jailed us, they persecuted

us, and they took away our cooperative, because we were not of a political party. Supposedly we were competition, but we never had political ambition. And we spent five and a half months without buses. We had a hundred and twenty-eight workers that we had to feed. And we were completely broke. The government didn't plan to give back the buses. They thought that once they took them away, that we would give up. And we didn't give up. We kept on fighting. We got help from different cooperatives; we walked to Caracas, and we made manifestations in Caracas. We made it a whole movement, a national movement. And at the end they had to give us the buses back, but when they gave them back to us, we were completely broke. The buses were almost all destroyed by the government. Of a hundred and twenty-seven buses, only thirty were functioning when we got them back. Because they used them, they took them away and threw them in the street without any coordination, without any management. So it was a mess. Our losses reached 30 million Bolivares at that time, and our capital was 1 million. So we lost our investment, we had lost it thirty times. In economics, that's broke sixty times. It's completely impossible to recover from that situation. But we didn't give up.

That's one of the secrets: to keep on fighting until you find a solution. And the food fair was the final solution, although when we started the food fair we never imagined that we could pay that debt. We had debt in the millions of dollars. We didn't have any way to pay it. We didn't even have any way to pay the salaries every week. But we survived for about three or four years, and then one day we decided to take the seats out of the buses and put some vegetables in them and going to the barrios and selling them, and that's how the food fair started. But we did that to get a little income to pay the weekly salaries, we didn't ever expect that it would grow to this and that we would pay all that debt with the food fair. But after twelve years of the food fair, we had grown enough so that we paid all our debt. We are completely solid. We don't owe money to anybody. And that's been important for us, because it has made us work harder and unite more.

The key to all this is the desire. See, usually when people try to find something that has had a good experience that they want to copy, they try to make a model. And we say, "We're not a model. We're not something you can copy, we're just a process." And that process, the coherence of that process is that there's been a desire. At first, not too deep, at first not very shared, but at this moment much more deep and more shared, is the desire to live together respecting each other, in solidarity. If you have that clear, you don't need anything else. Everything else comes. But it's not a desire for economic richness, for power. It's not an individualistic desire; it's a collective desire. That's the difference.

We're wondering what the pay is like: is it similar to other jobs in Barquisimeto? Is it based on the hour?

The problem is that we don't have jobs. Like I said, one day you might be in accounting, the next day you'll be sweeping the floor. So we just have a flat daily... it's not a salary. I don't know how you say it in English. It's that we're anticipating our profits, but it's not called a salary. The people who enter here, who have been here for one or two years, they will have a small difference in income yearly. They have the same daily income, but there's a small difference in bonuses. We have always wanted to maintain at least a small difference to give the message that this has to be a big effort; we're not going to give you everything... But the difference, every time it gets smaller. After they've been here two or three years, it's the same as everybody. We earn, according to what our labor would earn in Barquisimeto, we earn maybe twice as much. People come here that maybe don't even have second grade, third grade, fifth grade. My youngest son, his best friend graduated as an engineer a year ago. It took him a year to find a job, and he's earning less than us. So it's not a high salary, it's a bit more than twice the minimum. But, there are a lot of other advantages. We have a health fund. If somebody gets sick or if family of ours gets sick, we have the money to solve it. We have special bonuses in December. We buy food a lot cheaper. So in the end, it might represent almost three times the minimum wage. And also all the advantages,

all the opportunity to expand your knowledge that we have here. Also, there're certain careers that... we have the opportunity to learn about health, about maintenance, about how to grow food. We also have the opportunity to study, to continue our studies. We're flexible with that. We also have the opportunity to travel. For instance, many of the associates here haven't left their hometown ever in their life. But right now, more than fifty percent have visited at least ten, fifteen, twenty cities in Venezuela that they never would've gotten to know. And, a lot of us have had the opportunity to visit other countries. So the opportunity to enhance your knowledge is another thing that we have here.

Urban Gardens & Self Revolution

By Matthew Higgins

The rural life has been all but abandoned throughout the years in Venezuela. The connection between producing and consuming one's own food has been replaced by mass importation and consumption. Venezuela's agricultural innovations have come out of a desire to create a viable alternative to the industrialized agriculture complex that has dominated. The benefits that can come from these regional innovations can help the people maintain their own development. By taking up gardens, they are taking up arms, defending their independence towards food sovereignty. We, in the United States, can significantly draw from this government supported and people powered agricultural revolution by taking back the means of production. This revolution need be approached from a personal and collective point of view, from a holistic and political standpoint. Only then can real changes become reality.

Currently, Venezuela's economy is dominated by oil. This has created a centralized reliance on one sector of the economy. There needs to be a diversification of the economy in order to create a decentralized struggle towards change. But this change comes from both the cityscapes and countryside. There is

a clear distinction between the two, but which one holds more prosperity for the overwhelming majority of poverty-stricken citizens? Why does there need to be a choice between the two? What lessons can we in the United States take from the current effort in Venezuela to develop the agricultural component of the Venezuelan economy? Over time, fusing the small farms and the large cities into one is a way to reclaim a self and collective definition that can create an alternative to the preconceived blueprints that industrial agriculture has brought to communities all over the world.

The overwhelming majority of the Venezuelan population lives within the cityscapes. A main cause of such patterns can be attributed to an economic syndrome known as "Dutch Disease," a "development that results in a large inflow of foreign currency, including a sharp surge in natural resource prices, foreign assistance, and foreign direct investment."¹ A country catches this economic disease whenever a commodity brings an increase of income in one sector of the economy, which is not matched by increased revenues in other sectors of the economy.

Gregory Wilpert states; *The oil income*

causes a distorted growth in services and other non-tradables, while discouraging the production of tradables, such as industrial and agricultural products. The increased demand for imported goods and domestic services, in turn, causes an increase in prices, which ought to cause domestic production to increase, but doesn't because the flow of foreign exchange into the economy has caused a general inflation of wages and prices.² This inflation of wages and prices makes it easier to import goods, resulting in a better buy from abroad than fair exchange from within.³

As the main economic perpetuator of this syndrome, Venezuelan oil generates 80% of the country's total export revenue.⁴ This has left a weakened agricultural sector for Venezuela, resulting in roughly two-thirds of Venezuelan food being imported. While over one-third of the population is poverty stricken (as of 2007)⁵ the need for cheap, organically grown food is becoming a necessity, especially considering "in recent years, crude oil production in the country has fallen, mostly due to natural declines at existing oil fields" (EIA).⁶ The finite availability of oil to sustain the economy and social programs, let alone feed the people, most of whom do not have easy access to fresh food, presents a problem.

So what solutions are in the present and foreseeable future?

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989 Cuba went through what has been dubbed "The Special Period," during which they developed organic urban gardens in their cities known as *organopónicos*. This was not out of dietary acknowledgement, nor consciousness towards the Earth, but out of a necessity to survive. Without oil to import from the Soviet Union and lack of imported foods, fertilizers, and pesticides needed for large-scale industrial farming, the implementation of the *organopónicos* came from the people constructing the alternative. Only after mass mobilization did the government sufficiently implement the construction of urban gardens into their policy, which still continues to this day. Cuba has seen enormous success from these gardens, with production growing at 250-350% per year (as of 1999).⁷

Venezuela's current economic situation has not reached the extremity of Cuba's dilemma after the fall of the Soviet Union, but the current economic trends are encouraging alternative agricultural growth similar to that of Cuba. The Venezuelan government acknowledges the need to implement alternative agricultural programs despite the lack of mass mobilization from the citizens. But there have been many instances of small, organic farms and urban gardens sprouting up all over Venezuela. The seeds of urban gardening have been planted and projects have been started through the government. The prize trophy thus far is the *Organopónico Bolívar I*; a 1.2-acre plot tucked into what used to be an empty lot right across from what is now the Hilton hotel.

With various governmental and international ministries making up the Special Program for Food Security in Venezuela, the Chávez administration and program directors have set a target of supplying 20% of Venezuela's vegetable production from these urban gardens.⁸ This will help to ease the need of having foreign markets feed the people of Venezuela. The direct connection to the food is a direct connection to the land which one lives on.

While this means of local food production goes against the grain of global economics, imports/exports, and hard data that is a part of the free market and trade society we live in, it is a viable alternative. In the process of staying alive (and consequently maintaining the Cuban Revolution) the Cuban citizens mobilized and made possible the continuation of food security *and* autonomy outside of the everyday flow of importing and exporting.

Cuba survived economic downturn but also benefitted greatly from the creation of the *organopónicos*. The benefits go far beyond solutions to hunger. This wide range of benefits that is exemplified through Cuba is far reaching through Venezuela and can benefit all who garden. Such benefits come to those who work for them.

The *Organopónico Bolívar I* in Caracas, Venezuela was originally started by a co-operative of 10 people that maintained it but were not used to the physical labor and subsequently

quit. The government then restored the project and has used it as the first in a chain of *organopónico* projects. There is hard work involved in sustaining a way of life when not relying heavily upon the import/export industrial complex.

That is why there is such an importance for the Venezuelan government to educate the people about the creation and maintenance of such projects and also the wide range of benefits these projects provide. Urban gardens, while eliminating hunger, and the excessive transportation of food can also provide a more aesthetic, calming, and spiritual approach to the means of production by working with the natural world. This practice is defined as Horticultural Therapy (HT) and is praised for its curative efforts, particularly for people with mental illness. It can also be a very meditative and reflective time that can help lower blood pressure, promote a mental and physical workout and foster optimism in watching the fruits of one's labor grow.⁹

By developing local food production there are not only the mental and physical benefits but also a shift in defining one's self. This shift sees the labor process as *the* mode of self-definition. According to Karl Marx, "man forms himself by changing the world; he appropriates it, refashions it according to his 'needs,' and thereby projects, materializes, and verifies himself in the objects of his own labor."¹⁰ When reshaping the land that was originally vacant in order to better project, materialize, and verify one's self through growing food, people will feed both their stomachs and their definition of who they are.

Within cityscapes it is difficult to appropriate and refashion the world according to an individual's quest for self-definition when the cities are pre-designed. The crosswalks and traffic lights impede and control the flow of vehicles and people, the parks are pre-designated, and the skyscrapers control the horizon. City planners plan the streets while the majority walk the streets.

The *barrios* (the Venezuelan equivalent of a poor community) are the result of mass migration to the cities while displaying the turbulence of poverty. But at the same time they

show how citizens can vastly change the horizon of a city. These shacks are constructed using whatever material is available and whatever hillside is vacant. What if there were materials and space to build gardens? How much more would the city horizons change? While constructing a shack is widespread through the cityscape it has come at the cost of an abandoned rural sector.

Have the city and countryside disintegrated? There has been mass migration to the cities but they just foster another style of harshness. In the wake of the mass rioting and military suppression of the 1989 *Caracazo* and some statistical analyses claiming Caracas as having one of the highest rates of violent crime in Latin America, which place is better to live in?

The scope of the city life *versus* the rural life needs a reorientation to have the city life *and* the rural life. Both settings have their flaws and benefits. If we as a global community are to expect the romanticism of connecting with our food and the progression that the cities foster, a middle ground needs to be devised.

In order to bring about this middle ground, planting gardens is a basic component. Build a community garden. Exchange surplus food within your community. Start with the basis that it is still possible to connect with the soil. The fundamental development of this shift in attitude can help entrain the brain to be a more effective and assertive mode of production and regain how we interact with our surroundings.

*"[The] remarkable feature of the brain appears to be the physiological basis for the possibility of transforming our minds. By mobilizing our thoughts and practicing new ways of thinking, we can reshape our nerve cells and change the way our brains work. It is also the basis of the idea that inner transformation begins with learning (new input) and involves the discipline of gradually replacing our 'negative conditioning.'"*¹¹ If we not only practice new ways of thinking, but new ways of acting and new ways of creating our surroundings, we can begin by transforming the negative conditioning that is content with just food security.

Food security implies not living in hunger or fear of starvation. But the practice of endogenous

development (meaning inwardly developing) within a country can play a remarkable role in long term goals of producing and distributing food within one's own country. This "is based on local peoples' own criteria of development, and takes into account the material, social and spiritual well-being of peoples".¹²

There are clear and emergent examples cropping up all over the global map to create an alternative to the agricultural status quo. In north eastern Venezuela there is a community called "Lolokal" that defines itself as an "Adventure, Health Community, and Retreat Center dedicated to sustainable living, education, community service, and getting people outside". They are 100% off-grid, practicing *agnihotra* farming techniques¹³ as well as solar food preservation, producing 90% of their food consumption with grey water filtering systems. They also have a health center with yoga, massage and natural homemade remedies.

People and government are beginning to create the initiative that holistically binds the inner and collective revolutions that are transforming the agricultural status quo. Negating industrialized agriculture through small organic farms, urban gardens, and most importantly holistic gardening takes the struggle of socialism for the 21st century and bridges the connection between a societal revolution and personal growth. This growth and practice of knowledge is embodied in the Bolivarian Constitution and process that is occurring now through endogenous development.

Venezuela is at a pivotal moment. Imminent change to food production may not be the case for Venezuela as of now but as with Cuba, circumstances can change quickly. To grow from these past and present experiences is something that we can all draw from. It is our responsibility as global citizens to germinate these seeds of knowledge and create the alternative within our own communities.

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Development of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)

By Ryne Maloney-Risner

Introduction

On December 15th 2006, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez announced his desire to create a single, consolidated left wing party entitled the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Chavez encouraged all left-wing parties, representing the mass majority of the National Assembly, to dissolve into the PSUV and abandon their current leadership. Chavez has framed the formulation of the PSUV as an essential step toward creating 21st Century Socialism and furthering the revolutionary goals of the Bolivarian process. Chavez stressed that the PSUV shall be governed primarily from the bottom up, focusing on mass-participation and democratic principles, and claimed that “[the PSUV] should be the most democratic party in Venezuelan history”¹. Chavez proposed the creation of a party-wide congress to establish an official party agenda and nominate candidates, through referendum, to replace current officials representing the various left wing parties. Voting on the agenda and candidates was held on March 8, 2008, national elections for state governors and mayors took place on November 23, 2008.

Chavez’s announcement immediately

sparked controversy, as well as enthusiasm, on both the left and the right of the Chavista parties. The idea of a single party representing such a wide spectrum of political viewpoints and wielding unprecedented power has created a division amongst major political parties, with some refusing participation in the PSUV, and others eager to promote the new united party. The major issues surrounding the formation of the PSUV center around political autonomy, the degree of popular participation, and how to replace existing bureaucratic hierarchies within former and current PSUV factions. Despite the lingering historical specter of failed single-party states, Venezuela is moving forward with a challenging process which could either serve to reinvigorate socialism or stagnate into bureaucracy, or worse, authoritarian rule.

Despite the controversy and inherent skepticism, there are currently around 5.5 million members registered in the PSUV². Regardless of its successes and failures, it is destined to wield major influence over the future of Venezuela. In order to understand and analyze this process one must examine the history of the parties involved, the stated goals and organization of the PSUV within the context of the Bolivarian

movement, and the expressed concerns against participation in the PSUV.

Political Background

Venezuelan political parties have a long history of infighting, fracture and restructuring based along ideological and political lines. However from 1958 until the election of 1993, mainstream politics were governed by the three parties of the *Punto Fijo* Pact³. Signers included *Accion Democratica* (AD, Democratic Action), COPEI (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*, Political Electoral Independent Organization Committee), and *Union Republica Democratica* (UPV, Democratic Republic Union). The *Punto Fijo* parties were de-legitimized for overt corruption which was highlighted during the furious *Caracazo* riots, which consumed Caracas for three days⁴. The 1993 re-election of former COPEI leader Rafael Caldera, campaigning for a new party, ended *Punto Fijo* control of Venezuelan politics. The shortcomings of Caldera's second presidency, which included taking IMF loans and structural adjustment programs, would give way to Chavez's presidency, which unified a coalition of leftist groups who, though marginalized, had remained active during the *Punto Fijo* reign.

The PSUV Party Program

In early 2008 the Presidential Commission to Organize the PSUV drafted an outline for the party which included a political-ideological doctrine, a critical analysis of the past and present, and a program which described goals and methods of action necessary to achieve an ideal future. The draft was then sent to 1,676 elected congressional delegates to further discuss and refine the program. Since then, the delegates have been back and forth to their local constituents debating the program.

The outline highlights seven strategic guidelines that serve to summarize the party's agenda and define the goals of 21st century socialism (it is important to note that at this point, the program promotes party ideals but does not provide specifics on how to achieve them):

1. *Defense of the Revolution.*

The PSUV will, first and foremost, unconditionally defend the Bolivarian Revolution and construct socialism for the 21st century. "The PSUV is the instrument with which to set out the objectives, forms and methods of this revolutionary project, and express them at each moment... that can facilitate the transition from immediate reality to end goal." ⁵.

2. *Internationalism*

A major stated goal of the PSUV is to work toward unity and emancipation of all Venezuelans, as well as Latin American and Caribbean peoples, from the networks of capitalism and imperialism. It seeks new alliances in order to create innovative axes apart from neo-liberalism and the interests of the international market. The PSUV wants to focus on creating "solidarity-based" exchanges of resources with other nations.

3. *Build Popular Power. Socialize Power.*

This section states a desire to promote and build a society based on popular power where direct decision making is placed in the hands of the masses within their various organizations: students, workers, farmers etc. It vows to make self government a reality, with a focus on transferring as much available policy-making power towards city governments, communal councils, and communes. In order to achieve these goals there must be as much direct and constant participation as possible amongst the populace.

4. *Planned Economy. Communal State.*

This section outlines the economic and political goals of the PSUV, "throughout this period of transition, which at this moment marches from a state capitalism dominated by market forces towards a state socialism with a regulated market, the aim is to move towards a communal state socialism."⁶ The goal of "communal state socialism" is an economy based on "humanistic values of cooperation and the preponderance of common interests."⁷ The PSUV aims to build a society that favors collective forms of property,

and a “mixed” economy where a “social product” is used to maintain the means of production and satisfy public needs such as schooling and health care⁸. This also entails the transfer of private *latifundio* land to revolutionary state entities, cooperatives, and other social organizations. However, not all private property would transfer into state or public hands. Certain private property “that is of public utility or general interest and which is subjected to contributions, charges, restrictions and obligations”⁹ would be respected.

5. Defense of Nature. Planned Production.

This section pertains to the proposed environmental policy of the PSUV, which includes the promotion of alternative energy sources, consumption of ecological products, and the preservation of water sources and basins. This also includes the planning of economic production within the requirement of the ecosystem, and fighting against consumerist society, which leads to the production of “useless objects at the cost of exhausting natural resources.”¹⁰

6. Defense of the Revolution and Sovereignty.

The PSUV acknowledges the threat of outside intervention from imperialist nations, and the need to protect the revolutionary process. Therefore an “alliance” with the National Armed Forces (FAN) is proposed. Alongside this is the creation of popular militias and defense committees within communal councils. This section provides little detail on the relationship between FAN and the proposed popular militias.

7. A State Based on Popular Power.

This final section discusses the goal of constructing a state:

*...based on Councils of Popular Power, with the full and democratic participation... guaranteeing the widest possible participation and protagonism of the people in determining and realizing their destiny.*¹¹

This final section serves to acknowledge that mass participation is crucial to popular control of the state in order to fulfill the revolutionary political and economic goals of 21st century

socialism.

Next, the program outlines more specific ideological principles. This includes the defeat of poverty, and the promotion of direct democracy, humanist values, and anti-imperial solidarity. It presents a powerful critique of the current state, and historical growth, of global capitalism and imperialism:

*Capitalism contradicts the human condition and goes against the survival of the species. This catastrophic dynamic is caused by the irrationality of a socioeconomic system that omits the necessities of humanity and acts under obligation of its own logic, compelled towards constant growth in the pursuit of profit.*¹²

This attempts to prove the necessity of a mass revolutionary party and to justify the conclusion that socialism is the only reasonable choice for Venezuela.

Party Organization

The structure of the PSUV attempts to fulfill the program’s promise of popular power by establishing a bottom-up, democratic method of electing party officials and establishing party policy. To start, some 11,000 party “promoters” traveled the nation registering members into the party and taking a census.¹³ After registration, groups of around 200 party members, organized by region and locality, formed “socialist battalions”. A socialist battalion is the basic building block of the party; a political/community group meeting weekly to debate the party program and address concerns of the community, having the ability to influence decision making on a regional and national level.¹⁴ Each socialist battalion elected a recallable spokesperson. These spokespeople went on to form “socialist conscriptions” that then elected delegates, roughly one per seven to twelve socialist battalions, to the national PSUV congress. Delegates would remain in constant contact with their respective socialist conscription in order to be aware of the demands of their socialist battalions.

The congressional delegates attended two conventions on January 12 and March 2, 2008. During the convention delegates selected candidates for party leadership and created more concrete ideological and political goals for

the party program. On March 9th, 2008, party candidates were officially elected. On November 23, 2008, elections for mayoral and gubernatorial positions were held. An official party program is to be created by an “Ideological Congress” some time in the near future. Despite this democratic process, Chavez remains the de-facto president of the PSUV, and has exercised power in appointing some preliminary party officials.

Controversies

Dissenting Parties

Apart from the usual critiques coming from parties traditionally in opposition to Chavez, there have been a number of controversies within the Venezuelan left around the formation of the PSUV. Criticism has come both from the left and the right of the Chavista coalition, with several major parties refusing to join the PSUV as well as discontent coming from within the party. Valuable critiques have also come from international scholars such as Gregory Wilpert.

The three major parties refusing to join the PSUV have expressed different reasons for their decision, with some overlapping rationales. The Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) has refused to join primarily for ideological reasons, stating that the PSUV does not fit in with its Marxist-Leninist agenda¹⁵ which requires full expropriation of capitalist institutions. *PODEMOS* and the PPT, seen as the “right wing” of the Chavista parties, differ for more complicated reasons involving disagreements with the organization of the party and how its constitution is being drafted. In the media, the *PODEMOS* party leader, Ismael Garcia, has accused Chavez of a having “fascist mindset” and a “single line of thinking” for opposing pluralism within the left¹⁶. Both parties have warned of impending authoritarianism.

While those are the rationales presented on the surface, these parties may be more concerned with protecting institutional privilege for party bureaucrats and elites. Both *PODEMOS* and the PPT have expressed discontent over the creation of the PSUV Technical Committee, in charge of consolidating the party, and the PSUV Promotional Commission, in charge of early ideological development. Members of

both groups were appointed directly by Chavez, which included a mix of grass-roots activists, outspoken leftists with guerilla backgrounds, and even an “out” lesbian.¹⁷ These choices were meant to symbolize the new direction of the PSUV and to emphasize inclusion and bottom-up, popular power. Absent from these committees were former and current party leaders, and traditional members of the business and bureaucratic elite. Former leader of the radical UPV party and appointee to the Technical Committee, Lina Ron, has accused *PODEMOS* of wanting to protect the power of their mayoralties and governorships within the revolution, believing that the PSUV will dispense with internal hierarchies.¹⁸

As the second largest Chavista party, *PODEMOS* wanted their electoral weight represented and translated to decision making power in the drafting of the constitution and policy making for the PSUV. Instead of “socialist battalions” in charge of electing constitutional delegates they preferred an electoral system which weighted voting influence; 50% coming from “socialist battalions”, 30% coming from state officials, and 20% coming from national officials.¹⁹ Chavez, denied this request, resulting in *PODEMOS* refusing to enter into the PSUV. The reasons behind PPT’s dissent are less clear, though they have also been accused of attempting to protect their party privilege by PSUV members on the left.

Internal Conflicts

Smaller and more radical parties supporting the formation of the PSUV see it as an opportunity to replace stale bureaucrats in positions of power with radicals and grass roots activists who more directly represent the interests of the people. However, there are still conflicts within the party itself. Orlando Chirino, a national organizer for the National Union of Workers (UNT), and leader of the C-Cura (United Autonomous Revolutionary Class Current) within the PSUV, has been an outspoken critic from within the party. His concerns echo many other leftist voices in the party and are especially representative of the concerns of organized labor.

Chirino's chief complaints center around the relationship between union members of the PSUV and the government, as well as the PSUV's stance on capitalist institutions. Chirino believes that the PSUV is not interested in fully expropriating foreign capital. C-Cura sees the nation moving towards developmentalist state capitalism rather than socialism, with private property remaining as well as worker exploitation. C-Cura supports the nationalization of industries, but sees contradictions when certain privately owned companies are labeled as "good capitalists,"²⁰ thereby avoiding nationalization.

With trade unions aligned with the PSUV, Chirino wonders what the relationship with the government will look like. He is concerned that the PSUV will become another appendage of the government and is uncomfortable working with mayors, bosses and bureaucrats traditionally at odds with radical labor. Therefore C-Cura believes in trade union autonomy and is fighting to preserve internal currents within the PSUV. However, C-Cura and the UNT continue to collaborate with the PSUV and push forward their revolutionary agenda; working to seize economic, political and military power from capitalist institutions.²¹

Finally, Venezuelan scholar Greg Wilpert outlined two major obstacles in the creation of a successful participatory democracy for Venezuela in 2005: 1) the "in-group" culture of Venezuelan politics, and 2) the cult of personality surrounding Chavez.²² The PSUV seeks to address these issues. By dissolving party distinctions and empty signifiers such as flags and colors, allegiances will be formed along more identifiable ideological tendencies. This should allow more room for leaders to emerge based on their grassroots merits rather than their political/party affiliations. By embracing and empowering new collective leadership elected by popular means, party members should develop a more shared commitment to the revolutionary process. If this is true, the party, and the revolution, should gradually become less reliant on the leadership and charisma of Chavez. This all depends on the commitment of party members on all levels, especially at the local grassroots, who potentially have the most

to gain from the success of the PSUV.

Conclusion

While the party is still in its formative stage, it is impossible to judge the success of this ambitious project. However, there are several points that can be addressed. First and foremost, it is very clear that in order for this party to legitimately carry out its goal of creating a participatory socialist democracy, the bottom-up aspects of the party's organization must remain intact and respected. Mass participation on the grassroots and local levels are of the utmost importance to maintaining the legitimacy of the PSUV. People must feel that their voices are being heard and that the promises of popular power are kept. Stagnating into a state run by a single-party bureaucratic elite represents the greatest threat to the success of the revolution and the party. If at any point the influence of top rankers greatly outweighs those at the bottom, the party's vision will likely fail.

Secondly, it is clear that the party program and definition of 21st century socialism is still vague, and in some places contradictory, though a more concrete party program is expected soon. Capitalist institutions still play a major role within Venezuela, both politically and economically, which presents the possibility of conflict in the future. It is even stated in the party program that certain capitalist institutions will remain, which creates a great deal of uncertainty around the selection of those "socially valuable" institutions.

Thirdly, infighting within the party and on the left might weaken the Chavista coalition as a whole and strengthen the opposition parties. However, the refusal of *PODEMOS* and others, to join the PSUV might actually strengthen the party, as those in favor of maintaining traditional party power will not interfere with party decision making.

Finally, the last round of elections, which took place on November 23, 2008, showed a large increase in voter turnout and a huge turnout for PSUV candidates. The PSUV won 17 out of 22 governorships, and 81% of mayoralities.²³ Nearly 5 million votes went for the PSUV.

The PSUV is being closely followed

around the world by socialists and capitalists alike, representing one of the only major revolutionary political parties in the world, holding the potential to reinvent socialism and presenting a viable alternative to neo-liberal and capitalist development models for nations all over the globe.

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Controlling Oil: PDVSA Investing the Profit into the People.

By Erika Davis and Kaitlin Meeks

As is the case with many oil-rich nations, Venezuela has been a key target for US intervention. Oil has more recently begun to act as an enabler, promoting Latin American integration and sovereignty. In the past decade, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez has transformed the oil industry, pushing to diversify the economy and redistribute oil revenues amongst Venezuela's poor. In addition to promoting endogenous development in Venezuela, the new oil policies have created new relationships among nations in Latin America that seek to end the long history of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank control in the region.

Foreign control of Venezuelan resources, however, did not begin with the exploitation of oil. Prior to the oil industry Venezuela had already developed a pattern of dependency on foreign investment through the development of the agricultural economy. The capital produced by the agriculture sector gave political and financial power to the elite minority who controlled it.

Exploitation in Venezuela began with the Spanish Empire's attempt to extract wealth from Venezuela in the 1500's, but the lack of exploitable minerals temporarily left the country's political autonomy intact. Instead the

Empire exploited indigenous labor to develop an agricultural based economy for the production and consumption of the Spanish colony. It is estimated that 350,000 indigenous persons perished during the Spanish conquest.⁷

The sudden European interest in cocoa production introduced the first colonial ruling class (*the creoles*), which was split into two factions - the *peninsulares* who were loyal to the Empire and the *mantuanos* who eventually revolted. This revolt led to Venezuela's independence from the Spanish Monarchy. The expansion of cocoa production required an increase in the labor force and, due to the decimated indigenous population, the creoles turned to importing African slave labor.

From the War of Independence emerged a new ruling class made up of the agricultural oligarchy and financial and commercial elites who upheld similar interests to the Spanish Empire. Although it established Venezuela's independence, the new constitution retained slavery and excluded landless *pardos* (small scale cultivators or laborers) from the right to citizenship. The oligarchy maintained monopolies over land, primitive systems of exploitation, and repression of social and political advancement

by *pardos*.⁷

Governments found it necessary to accommodate the elites because they controlled the only dynamic part of the economy—agricultural exports. As the coffee industry emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, dictator Antonio Guzmán Blanco invested in the *Compañía de Crédito*, a private bank founded and controlled by commercial interests. The bank financed foreign loans and contracts for infrastructure development. Revenues from customs, taxes and bonds sold in Europe and North America passed directly into the hands of the financial elite. To induce foreign investment Guzmán gave French, English, and German companies exclusive rights over natural resources with a minimum seven percent profit.⁷

In 1873, Venezuela was an agricultural economy based on cocoa, tobacco, cattle, sugar, and leather hides. As coffee became a desirable commodity in Europe there was a gradual shift towards coffee production. By 1890 coffee constituted about 80% of total exports.⁶ Capital generated from coffee and cocoa could have furthered the development of the country and minimized the wealth disparity. Instead, agricultural revenue paid for the luxurious lifestyles of the oligarchy. This dependency proved to be disastrous when coffee prices plunged from 5.47 *Bolivares* (Bs.) per 100 kilograms in 1894 to Bs. 0.83 in 1899.⁷ This created tension between producers, the financial-commercial elite and the Venezuelan government. The decline of the coffee industry and rising debt from foreign contracts and loans left the Venezuelan economy weak and the government vulnerable to foreign influences.

With the discovery of oil, Venezuela changed from a predominantly agricultural economy to an oil based economy. Still, it remained dependent upon a single resource and foreign investment for production. The economic impacts of this investment could be seen immediately: in 1922 oil revenues represented 8.9% of shared exports—by 1929 they represented 81%.¹⁰ The oil industry also disrupted the agricultural sector which declined from being 1/3 of the GDP in the 1920's to only 10% in the 1950's.¹⁶ This resulted in a slowed industrial sector leading to

a decline in the domestic production of tradable products, massive land flight, labor migration to the oil sector, and devaluing of currency, allowing for increased imports. Out of these consequences arises the problem known as “Dutch Disease” which continues to structure the Venezuelan economy today. Dutch Disease in Venezuela has meant that domestic industry and agriculture could not keep up with the rapid expansion of demand for consumer goods and so both industrial and agricultural goods were imported.¹⁶

During the century foreign companies maintained control over oil production because they had enterprises in almost every phase of the industry; drilling, marketing, and finished products. Of the 30 companies that operated in Venezuela until the 1970's, almost all were integrated subsidiaries of multinational corporations. In 1973 two companies, Creole (controlled by Exxon) and Shell of Venezuela (controlled by Royal Dutch) dominated the industry, producing more than 70% of the oil.¹⁴ The first concession contracts given by the Venezuelan government by Juan Vincent Gómez were made favorable to the foreign investors because Venezuela lacked proper technological infrastructure to dictate agreements. Gómez saw foreign loans and oil revenue as a solution for the debt crisis but these agreements gave the state only 15% of production revenue. Constant tension erupted between the government and foreign companies over oil contracts. Soon, Venezuela's political struggle for domestic control over oil production and independence from multinational corporations would begin.

This struggle led to the nationalization of Venezuela's petroleum company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PDVSA), in 1976. From 1972 to 1974 oil revenues quadrupled allowing newly elected president Carlos Andrés Pérez to promise Venezuelans that Venezuela would be a developed country. His project was called “La Gran Venezuela” and it was supposed to “sow the oil.” The idea was to use the increase in income for the benefit of the majority of Venezuelans by fighting poverty, diversifying the economy, and nationalization.¹⁶

Nationalization of basic resources

doesn't inherently imply redistribution of income for the majority's benefit, nor does it necessarily endanger the power and privileges of the dominant minority.⁶ After nationalization, PDVSA, continued to be operated by the same management, who sought to maintain ties to previous owners through technical and commercialization assistance contracts. The executives of PDVSA saw the need to protect their oil revenues through various strategies. One solution was maximizing production and sales but not profits, because these profits would have to be turned over to the state. Another strategy was the evasion of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) regulations and quotas.

Oil executives accomplished this by no longer measuring domestically used oil, allowing companies to avoid royalty payments because the government did not have accurate production numbers; reopening production to international investment, where the transnational companies' production did not count towards OPEC quotas; and classifying the extra-heavy oil as bitumen, which did not fall under the OPEC quota system. The attempts by the oil executives to protect their oil wealth resulted in an overall decline in global prices. Nationalization did nothing but keep oil revenue in the same pockets—just under a new name.

In 1989 Carlos Andrés Pérez ran again for presidency, on the platform that he would not accept IMF policies. However, in an effort to reverse Venezuela's economic decline Pérez accepted an IMF economic austerity package. The package entailed many changes to Venezuela's economy, but the most significant measures were the dramatic increases in the cost of living: utilities, 50%, transportation, 30% and gas doubled in price. Inflation skyrocketed and the fuse was lit for the social explosion of February 27th later to be known as the *Caracazo*.

In Caracas the buses and *porpuestos* (vans) are individually owned, so when gasoline prices increased by 30% the owners took matters into their own hands. The attempt to raise fares and the refusal of student discount cards incited the *Caracazo* riots. In the anticipation of price

increases, business owners hoarded essential staples such as food, clothing and tools and left behind bare shelves. In an attempt to obtain these products buses, automobiles, and vans were burned and stores were looted. The *Caracazo* was evidence of the widespread struggle of the majority of Venezuela's population.

Pérez responded by sending in 10,000 police and national guard troops in an attempt to regulate looting. They conducted massive sweeps through barrios, confiscating goods and shooting, murdering and arresting thousands. By the end of the violence there were estimated 1,000 to 1,500 deaths⁷ (later estimates were higher than 3,000).

The *Caracazo* set the stage for revolutionary change in Venezuela. Hugo Chávez ran with the promise to eliminate Venezuelan dependence on the banks of the North and won with a large majority vote.¹ Contrary to Venezuelan presidents before him, he has kept these promises. Venezuela, after the long history of foreign control and resource exploitation, is no longer in debt to the banks of the United States. In large part, however, this is still a plan in progress that seeks to lessen Venezuelan dependence on oil profits and create sustainable development in Venezuela and throughout Latin America.

In 2002, the old ruling elites backed by the United States carried out a coup d'état that briefly took Chavez out of power. It was clear, as thousands of people poured into the streets of Caracas to demand the return of their democratically elected leader, that this was a people's revolution. In December, PDVSA was shut down as managerial workers went on strike in a further attempt to oust Chávez. Venezuelans were forced to do without necessary items for over two months as the consequence of a single-export economy clearly took its toll. Many people died without proper medical care and millions more went hungry. The government took two valuable pieces of insight from these demonstrations: the US was going to intervene as the Bolivarian Revolution progressed; and the people were behind the Revolution and willing to fight. In large part, the increasingly radical policies of the Chavez government were a direct

result of this this demonstration of support.

Ironically, as Gregory Wilpert notes in *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power*, “Without the massive oil revenues that oil provides it is unlikely that Chavez would have been able to steer the country in an increasingly more radical direction”.¹⁶ Oil accounts for more than 80% of Venezuela’s export income, 50% of the central government income, and 33% of the gross domestic product.⁹ Reshaping an economy to create sustainable development practices and move toward an independent Venezuela is not an easy task.

Jose Delgado Salavaar, Manager of Sustainable Development at CPV, a PDVSA subsidiary, defines sustainable development as a process guided by the principle that “the development of the people must be attained through actions seeking to satisfy the needs of the present, without jeopardizing the possibilities for future generations to satisfy theirs”.⁹ This sustainable development can be divided into three factors: economic, environmental, and social.

Nationalizing PDVSA in 1976 neither distributed state oil profits to Venezuela’s poor, nor did it create economic sustainability. The ‘Dutch Disease’ that has plagued Venezuela since the development of the oil industry continues to hinder economic diversity. Because of the tumultuous events of 2002, the Venezuelan government has taken measures to increase social spending and create sustainable development, relying heavily on PDVSA profits. One “key achievement of the Chávez government’s economic policy has been to reassert economic sovereignty, mostly by gaining control over the state-owned oil industry and resisting the US push for free trade and by instead promoting Latin American economic integration”.¹⁶

One way of moving towards economic sovereignty is to produce more food and import less. Although creating a Venezuela free of food imports is far off into the future, a movement towards food sovereignty in Venezuela is growing and has proven to be beneficial in diversifying the economy. Although Venezuela has some of the most fertile soil in the world, 70% of food consumed in the country is not produced there.¹¹

Since Chávez has taken office, however, the agriculture industry has grown 24% , including 3% in 2008 alone. Over the last ten years, corn production has increased by 205%, rice production by 94%, sugar production by 13%, and milk production by 11%.¹¹ Although this has not stopped oil production or lessened the export dependence on oil, it has diversified the economy and lessened Venezuela’s dependence on food imports.

Food production is only a part of creating endogenous development. Endogenous development, an increasingly important part of sustainable development practices in communities throughout Venezuela, is a process in which “productive systems grow and change through development potential existing in the territory. . . by way of investment from firms and public actors, under increasing control of the local community”.¹⁵ Local production helps to support individual communities and moves toward a Venezuela free of foreign control.

To help support development on a community level, national government-funded social programs called “missions” have begun to play an important role in creating sustainable, endogenous development. These “missions” have improved the quality of life for millions of Venezuelans. Spending on these programs, including health care, education, access to micro loans, and job creation in sectors other than oil, has skyrocketed under the Chávez administration. In 2007, social spending was 41% of the budget. In 2008, social spending increased to 48% of the budget, one of the highest figures in the world.³ This clearly demonstrates an attempt by the government to support people’s development on a local level.

The Venezuelan government has also begun to cooperatively create alternatives with other nations, supporting the independence of Latin America as a region. Venezuela helped create the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), a fair trade agreement that also includes Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Honduras, Dominica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Venezuela also helped found the Bank of the South, an alternative to the IMF and World Bank that seeks to eventually include

every nation in South and Central America and the Caribbean.⁴ Venezuela has also joined the trade market Metrosur with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Metrosur was created as an alternative to agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

The creation of these alternatives have allowed nations in Latin America to advance their interests without having to adopt neo-liberal policies as imposed by US institutions and “free trade” agreements. In fact, freedom from these policies has had a visible effect in many places in Latin America. Following the economic crisis in Argentina at the turn of the century that was also induced by neo-liberal IMF policies, Venezuela has purchased 3.5 billion dollars in Argentine bonds, helping to eliminate their IMF debt.¹ This has allowed Argentina to begin to create an independent economy as well.

These alternative institutions are also working. Venezuela has worked within these Latin American partnerships to trade subsidized oil for a variety of goods. In collaboration with Cuba, Venezuela sells oil at up to a 40% discount in exchange for medical care. Venezuelan citizens can travel to Cuba to access medical facilities. This trade agreement also sends Cuban doctors to *Mision Barrio Adentro*, the government program that provides free and accessible health care in poor neighborhoods (this is available regardless of income or nationality).¹ Through recent trade with Ecuador, Venezuela acquired 500 cows in exchange for discounted oil machinery. This trade also provides Venezuela with resources to diversify the economy.⁵

Even though Venezuela’s international reserves are not invested in banks of the North being a major oil exporter still ties their interests to those of the United States. Over half of Venezuela’s oil exports are destined for the United States.¹ As Pedro Mario Burelli, a former PDVSA board member, puts it, “Chávez is celebrating the demise of capitalism as this international crisis unfolds, but the irony is that capitalism actually fed his system in times of plenty.”¹ Contrary to his anti-capitalist rhetoric, Chávez has not forbidden US corporations from

investing in PDVSA. In 2006, private corporations accounted for 23% of the total oil production. Venezuela also owns, or partially owns nine refineries in the US.¹ These investments, along with exporting a majority of Venezuelan oil to the US, have kept PDVSA and the Venezuelan economy connected to the United States.

Despite this clear display of cooperation with US oil interests, Venezuela still endures harsh critique from United States officials. Transparency International, an organization that ranks oil producers in terms of transparency, ranked PDVSA 162 out of 179, giving it the “lowest possible ranking on the basis that it did not produce properly audited accounts and was withholding basic financial information about revenues, taxes, and royalties.”¹³

In addition, there has been some confusion with PDVSA production. OPEC, the US government, and the IEA, say that Venezuela produces 2.4 million barrels per day, but the Venezuelan government argues production is actually at 3.3 million.¹ Given Venezuela’s leadership in OPEC, this leaves room for confusion.

The new policies enacted by the Venezuelan government and supported by the Venezuelan people, have been beneficial for the country and the region. As the United States struggles to recover from the world financial crisis, Venezuela is in an entirely different predicament. According to Fuentes and Pearson, “The government had been implementing measures to protect itself from the financial crisis ten years ago, including redirecting the destination of its international reserves, implementing exchange controls and initiating the independence of the economy from institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.”⁵

The policies enacted to create economic diversity have also been proven successful. Oil income accounted for 56% of the budget in 1997. Ten years later, in 2007, oil income accounted for only 41%. Non-oil income has increased, going from 37% in 1997 to 51% in 2007.³

As Venezuela ended 2008 with a surplus, Hugo Chavez affirmed this success. Commenting on the financial crisis, he explained, “if we hadn’t stopped trusting our international reserves to

the big banks in the United States, a good part of those reserves would be lost.”⁵ In addition, he noted the financial crisis “hasn’t affected us even a tiny bit.”

Even though economic and social developments have been a priority within the government, relying heavily on oil exports creates concern with regards to environmental sustainability. It would seem, from Venezuela’s large oil reserves that have yet to be tapped, that oil will be a large part of Venezuela’s economy for some time into the future. Venezuela still has an estimated 78 billion barrels of conventional crude oil and 235 billion barrels of unconventional extra-heavy crude oil still waiting in reserve.¹ However, it is clear that oil may be phased out sooner than later. Between 2001 and 2004, funding for oil exploration was cut by almost 2/3, from US \$173 million to US \$60 million.¹ This may show concern for the environment, or it may be a display of confidence in the new Venezuelan economy.

The prospects of PDVSA social spending only start to look more promising in the future. In the first quarter of 2009, the Venezuelan government spent US \$2.5 billion on social programs. Of the 209 projects proposed during the 2009-2013 economic plan, only 88 of them are “petroleum-based.”⁵ These projects include building roads, food processing plants, factories, and irrigation systems, funding public health care, and education. *Petrocasa*, a program that builds government subsidized houses with the petroleum processing leftovers, is also underway. As explained by Chavez, the recent financial crisis will not affect these programs; the state reserves contain enough money to fund the planned social budget for the next three years.⁵

As the world watches the Venezuelan economy take on a new form, perhaps we could all learn something. Although the United States is not economically dependent on exporting oil, we are dependent on oil regardless. As thousands of people have lost their homes and jobs, we have been forced to watch our government bail out big banks that have proven to be unstable and unreliable. Because the process of creating sustainable and endogenous development depends on internal resources and community

support, change in the US will look very different here than in Venezuela.

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Interview with Ignacio Vera: Why is the process so centered around Chavez?

By Jorie Kennedy

Ignacio Vera looks just like Paulo Freire. He's a patience-testing slow talker, and speaks as much with his hands as he does with his mouth. I met him and his family at a community center in Barquisimeto, Venezuela. Later I got to spend a week at their house learning about the model of popular education they had been involved in since the 70's. One evening we sat on their porch at a long table to consider some questions I had posed to Ignacio the night before. They were about the social and political changes taking place in Venezuela which are considered by many to be part of a Socialist Revolution. "Why is this process so centered around president Hugo Chavez?" I asked. "Isn't it dangerous to rest the hopes for an entire revolution on one person? Do Venezuelan 'Chavistas' really believe that no one else can be the leader, that things hinge on this one personality? Or are there other leaders in this movement that I just hadn't heard of yet?" Here is part of a transcription of our conversation. All the words are Ignacio's:

...Choorie, your question is, "Why Chavez de unico?" Why is he the only one? But I don't want to answer that question. It doesn't have a

simple answer. It's not a two minute question. It will never be complete. I propose instead that we gather information and find out what information we have and what information we need. We need to document this and to make a time line to see what we know and what gaps we need to fill in.

First, I'm not Venezuelan. I came here from España in the 70's as an educator. Many people came to my house in that time. Christians, *guerrilleros* (guerillas). We were working as a network to investigate the reality of Venezuela. To find out how people can change their realities.

In Venezuela things used to be very much like they are in *los Estados Unidos*, Republican-Democrat, Democrat-Republican. For us it was *Acción Democrática*-COPEI. COPEI-*Acción Democrática*. Designed to never change. Back and forth with corruption and no one held accountable. No one had any oxygen. Absolute poverty. And all of our national production, all the petroleum, was going to serve the United States. And the entire structure, all of Latin America, was arranged to serve *los Estados Unidos*.

OK. In 1992, Hugo Chavez lead a failed coup against the *presidente* Carlos Andrés

Pérez. He failed. That night on TV he said; “*por ahora,*’ for now, the plan to overthrow this government didn’t work and it is my fault. *Fue Yo.*” There is a culture of powerful people not taking responsibility for things. But Chavez said “*Fue Yo.*” After decades of working in Venezuela in our network of educators, out of nowhere comes Chavez. He appears and says; “it was my fault. I lost.”

Once Chavez was released from jail, after the coup, the entire country began to take notice of his style of commanding and how he made decisions. His style and way of being, his way of speaking was very similar to the way we operated in our network of popular educators. Everyone wanted to know, who is this Chavez? But there was a lot of distrust because Chavez is military. Everything was right except that he was military. He was great but he was military! And one of his central ideas was “*pueblo y soldado,*” citizens and soldiers, soldiers and citizens. United. The people and the soldiers should be united! But there were many things that Chavez is unique for.

So, he succeeded in becoming a presidential candidate. Choorie, when it was impossible for him to be a candidate he won! This was impossible, but it became possible! Wow! *Que dicen los Norte Americanos.* “Wow,” huh?

He started to govern and he started *un estilo totalmente diferente.* He began a style totally different. Chavez spoke like a *Venezolano.* He spoke “*Nagwara.*” He sang. He danced. He recited poetry. He changed the constitution and everyone got to vote about what they thought of the changes! Wow! Instead of secretly letting the banks name the Minister of Finance he said; “NO! I name them!” There was a US ambassador. She had an interview with Chavez and told him; “The US says you shouldn’t do A, B, C,” and Chavez said to her; “Leave! *Presidente soy yo!*” And the ambassador had to leave the country.

He did some very unique things. He even united the left that had always been fragmented. Not because he was the boss, but because they respected him. He is a very different leader.

OK,...in 2002 the coup against Chavez

came. And there was a coup. For two days. But, Chavez came back. I remember it well on the television, the helicopter brought him down. Then the media ended the transmission. They stopped the broadcast. The broadcasters had been saying that he had resigned as president or that he was dead. But they had said he’d renounced the presidency. Mmmhm. When Chavez was returning the media put on *comiquitas.* Eeeeehhh, “car-toons.” An entire day! But the anguish only lasted two days and Chavez returned. Wow! And Chavez spoke of unity and pardon! Wow!

OK. April to December, next came the petroleum strike. I don’t know, a month of lines for gasoline because the administration of the petroleum company was against Chavez. 2,000 employees went on strike against Chavez. So he fired 2,000 people in *dos dias.* There were a lot of sabotages on the food importation too; flour, rice, sugar. It was to put people against Chavez and squeeze him out of the government. And it was everything with the media. All the media were saying that this was Chavez’s fault. They were just *contra contra contra* Chavez all the time. Choorie, more than 90% of the media outlets in Venezuela are in the hands of the opposition. But still Chavez survived through all of these things. And it radicalized him and the people.

I wish that there were ten leaders for Venezuela. But *la realidad* is that in the hearts, of the people... is only Chavez. There’s no other. There may be other people with good intentions. But there is no one who the people would respect and listen to. Choorie, its been five hundred years in Venezuela without anyone to trust in. Five hundred years. *Quinientos...quinientos.*

The normal situation of the poor is of slavery. Open or hidden. The structures of power, all, almost all, have functioned so that the people at the bottom work for the people at the top. OK? Always. The normal way of things is this. That means that right now in Venezuela we are in an abnormal situation! OK? Wow. It’s not black and...gray. This is black. And white!

Before I didn’t know anyone similar to Chavez. Fidel? But Fidel was a different moment.

Chavez is going at a moment of US decline and at a time when the world is...needing alternatives. He arrived at the right moment. Evo, Lula, Fidel, Raul, Bachelet, Cristina, ten presidents in Latin America functioning on the same team. They aren't all Chavez, but, I believe, they're a team. And he isn't just saying "Venezuela is Venezuela." Venezuela is Venezuela, but the homeland is Latin America!

There are military and economic powers. Sometimes two in one. The US. Europe. Japan. China. The only real block to the military and economic situations of today is Latin America. Africa: absolutely divided internally by governments dependent on Europe and America. Islam: divided. China and India are run by global economics. It pains me to say it, the only *alternativo* is Latin America.

OK. Only having Chavez is a big problem. If they killed Chavez today this new historic current of Latin America would have to support itself in the other leaders like these countries have been supported by Chavez. I don't know what's going to happen. No one is eternal. And it is true that many times the leaders who have been in power for many years have been dictators. But there have also been great community leaders who have fought for many, many years. There have been great leaders who could lead their people for many years.

Who else has been able to be president for a long time? *Pocos*. Few because except Fidel and Chavez, they killed them all. Jacobo Arbenz. Coup against Juan Domingo Peron. The coup against Salvador Allende, the coup against Bishop in Granada, Choorie, they didn't kill a single dictator. There aren't good presidents because they kill them while they're young. If you're a dictator you get ten years-twenty, thirty. I thought a miracle was changing water into wine. But I changed what I thought was a miracle. No! That isn't a miracle! All of the power in the world is against him but he has maintained. What Chavez is doing is a miracle. I believe. *Yo creo. Yo creo...*

Chávismo: The Re-Emergence of Progressive Populism in Venezuela

By Tillman Clark

Introduction

Populism is a controversial phrase when it is associated with progressive political and economic movements. As it is most commonly used, populism is what Western governments and academics like to call movements and governments that are somehow not subscribed to the dominant ideology and by one way or another are existing outside of their means. This way of looking at populism is largely denigratory and used to mask certain power dynamics and the vested interests that accompany them. This way of looking at populism is fundamentally false.

From a different perspective, populism can be seen as a movement with emancipatory intentions that opens up a democratic rift in the status quo by employing means of mass popular support in an attempt to overcome exploitation and poverty that emerge from an antagonistic socioeconomic and political situation. But good intentions are often not enough. Populism is not a political ideology with a rigid prescription for social change, nor is it a specific set of policies or tendencies. If anything, it is the lack of these attributes that gives populism its character.

Especially as regards progressive populism, which this paper will largely focus on, the element that gives rise to populism is the utilization of a certain logic of “reaction.” It is this aspect of populism that is the starting point for its further limitations.

Populism is often used in reference to the Chávez administration in Venezuela. This paper will argue that, by looking at the history, theory and certain conditions that arise as evidence of the logic of populism, it is an appropriate term to use when discussing the *Chávismo* movement. To be clear, this paper will do so under the premise that the second aforementioned perspective of populism, not the first, is the correct starting point for looking at *Chávismo*. Too often certain critical analyses are used to sanction or excuse the supremacy of the dominant ideological discourse, and while this paper will remain highly critical of populism and of the *Chávismo* movement, it is done so in good will and solidarity with the people of Venezuela who are fighting for a better life. It is the hope of the author that this paper will help in constructing a critical analysis of populism in Venezuela and that the conclusions drawn are not ones that authorize the continued acceptance of

the dominant ideological discourse. Instead, it is hoped that this paper contributes to conclusions and ideas that go beyond both populism and hegemonic capitalist ideology.

In the first section, a look at the history of populism in Latin America will present a contextual introduction to the forms of populist governments in the past. The second section will develop a theory of populism by looking at the traditional academic theory of populism and incorporating more modern and radical theories. The third section will take this theory of populism and look at how it creates limitations, drawbacks and deficiencies in political and economic governance. Following this third section, a look at the presidency of Hugo Chávez and the *Chávismo* movement, and why it is a modern example of populism, will segue into the final section in which conclusions will be drawn and some encouraging aspects of populism highlighted.

A Brief History of the Origins of Latin American Populism

Conventional theory associates populism in Latin America with the rise of mass politics in the middle of the 20th century, when traditional forms of oligarchic domination connected to the *latifundio* based commodity export model were overshadowed by the social mobilization that came with the early stages of industrialization. Following the Great Depression, this export model was replaced by a state-led industrialization effort that transformed the socioeconomic landscape of the continent. While new middle and urban working classes were created by this process, the traditional forms of political representation and inclusion could not fulfill the demands of these new demographics. It is this void that populism filled. Populism incorporated workers and capitalists within broad, multi-class political coalitions backing social reform and state led industrialization. It relied heavily upon nationalism and charismatic leadership to bring together diverse social demographics, and it made special appeals to urban workers and labor unions, who were bound to the state for distribution of benefits and the exercise of political influence. Leaders such as Perón in

Argentina, Cárdenas in Mexico, Vargas in Brazil, and Haya de la Torre in Peru mobilized the masses from the top down, challenging the traditional oligarchic order with their promises of political inclusion, social organization, and economic well-being for the working and lower classes.¹ In gaining access to public office, most of them also expanded the economic role of the state by protecting and subsidizing basic industries, restricting foreign investment, regulating labor markets, and providing a broad range of social benefits.

Traditional populism was largely considered outdated by the economic and political changes of the past several decades. The wave of right-wing military coups starting in the 60s led to the repression of labor and popular movements and to new forms of capital accumulation. When a wave of democratization occurred in the 1980's, it coincided with the infamous Latin American debt crisis and ushered in the era now best associated with neoliberalism and economic "discipline."² This new era marked an incapacity for government to intervene with social programs and spending to respond to popular demands due to the stringent demands of institutions like the IMF and World Bank who insisted on rigid economic policy for debt repayment. These changes weakened organized labor and they deprived governments of the policy tools that had been used by populist leaders in the past. Thus, the "Washington Consensus," as it is popularly conceptualized, a global neoliberal project led more or less by the leadership and overwhelming support from the United States, seemed comfortable enough to assume that previously negatively characterized "populist regimes" would not return to the region and a new era of representative democracy, "fiscal responsibility,"³ and globalized markets was there to stay.

It is now widely accepted that this comfort was unfounded. Highlighted by the complete collapse of the Argentinean financial system from 1999-2002⁴, the neoliberal project in Latin America has crumbled. In the same period, and continuing today, there was an unprecedented wave of electoral victories for Left-leaning presidencies including those that

can be identified as populist. The election in 1998 and ongoing presidency of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela can be characterized as the bedrock of this development. Before continuing, it is important to recognize that the more recent wave of populism in Latin America is a result of the dissolution of the social, economic, and political models built during the era of state-led import substitution industrialization which was constructed mostly by the first generation of populist leaders such as Perón and Vargas and continued into the 1970's by the proliferating dictatorships.⁵ The debt crisis of the 1980's made statist and nationalist development models impossible and paved the way for neoliberal reforms and an opening to global markets.⁶ It was then largely the implementation and subsequent failure of neoliberal reforms that led to the modern re-emergence of Latin American populism. But what constitutes populism? What makes, for instance, the Chávez presidency populist but another not? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Theories of Populism

In traditional scholarly writing on Latin America, populism has been treated as a largely economic phenomenon which encompasses a style of political leadership (charismatic and autocratic) and a specified model of policies (import substitution industrialization with economic nationalism and a large role for the state).⁷ According to this position, populism led to financial crises due to the unsustainable nature of these policies, and neoliberalism was the prescription.

The traditional perspective sees populism as a response to the demands of popular masses for political inclusion, and it is often generated and reproduced in democratic and electoral settings. Populism thus emerges in situations where large sections of the lower classes are available for political mobilization but are not successfully represented by traditional parties and do not have access to institutionalized forms of political self-expression.⁸ It is this definition that separates "progressive" populism from other forms of populism, such as fascism.⁹ Populism is thus a political movement which "...enjoys the

support of the mass of the urban working class and/or peasantry, but which does not result from the autonomous organisational power of either of these sectors. It is also supported by non-working class sectors upholding an anti-status quo ideology."¹⁰ The development that follows is what Tortuato Di Tella, writing in 1970, referred to as the "revolution of rising expectations," in which;

The mass media raise the levels of aspirations of their audience, particularly in the towns and among the educated. This is what has been aptly called the "revolution of rising expectations"... Yet economic expansion lags behind [these expectations], burdened by demographic explosion, by lack of organisational capacity, by dependence on foreign markets and capital, or by premature efforts at redistribution. A bottleneck necessarily develops, with expectations soaring high above the possibility of satisfying them.¹¹

A way to see populism, therefore, is in the relationship between the demands of the peasants, workers and anti-status quo sectors of society and the economic reality of the situation. Additionally, this traditional outlook also sees the linchpin of populism being that the political mobilization triggered by populist leaders is inherently sporadic and never permanent because it cannot be sustained given this relationship between demands and economic reality.

A tradition of dictatorial political leadership in Latin America that is best characterized by the image of the *caudillo*--an authoritarian but popular military leader--may seem appropriate to populism. But what separates the populist leader from the *caudillo* is that populism operates in a context of mass politics instead of dictatorial, singular power. In this sense, populist leaders must have a democratic form of popular support for their rule--either through street demonstrations and rallies or through constant calls to the voting booth. Populist mobilization, therefore, is an inherently top-down process that often feeds off a direct relationship between a leader and an originally unorganized mass of followers. But this is not nearly enough, as almost any original movement can be seen this way.

An alternative approach to populism is taken from a more radical left viewpoint. Ernesto Laclau, a philosopher of the Marxist tradition, in his essay *Towards a Theory of Populism*, is an essential reference point here.¹² For Laclau, populism is not a specific political movement since no defined “populist” movement is the same, but instead occurs when a series of particular “popular” demands is enchainned in a series of equivalences (“interchangeabilities”), and this enchainment produces “the people” as the universal political subject. It has no inherent program or political orientation but through the discourse of “the leader” towards the audience of “the people” a certain political subjectivity emerges through “interpellations” and “the people” develop an identity that did not exist before.¹³

The limitation of Laclau’s analysis is analyzed by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Žižek postulates that populism seeks to overcome a refusal of a complicated systemic analysis by using a logic of “reaction.” For Laclau, populism represents a neutral space for which open struggle can incorporate a larger and necessary sphere and where the content of what is at stake is formed. This means that in populism the content is situation-specific and this specificity is never predetermined, while a theory such as class struggle “presupposes a particular social group (the working class) as a privileged political agent.”¹⁴ For Laclau, the series of equivalencies does not have to be the result of a general particular struggle. In some cases it can be worker’s struggle, in others anti-colonial or anti-racist. The inherent nature of populism is thus a form of frustration or grievance being “interpellated” through a new discourse, but this frustration is mitigated by the “reactionary” belief that there is a hidden agent causing all the problems. As Žižek puts it:

Populism is ultimately always sustained by ordinary people’s frustrated exasperation, by a cry of “I don’t know what’s going on, I just know I’ve had enough of it! It can’t go on! It must stop!” -- an impatient outburst, a refusal to understand, exasperation at complexity, and the ensuing conviction that there must be somebody responsible for all the mess, which is why an

*agent who is behind the scenes and explains it all is required.*¹⁵

Žižek goes further, contrasting the populist discourse to the Marxist one:

[F]or a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such but the intruder who corrupted it (financial manipulators, not necessarily capitalists, and so on); not a fatal flaw inscribed into the structure as such but an element that doesn’t play its role within the structure properly. For a Marxist, on the contrary ... the pathological (deviating misbehavior of some elements) is the symptom of the normal, an indicator of what is wrong in the very structure that is threatened with “pathological” outbursts. For Marx, economic crises are the key to understanding the “normal” functioning of capitalism...¹⁶

It follows that a theory of populism is not so much an idealistic economic/political enacting of policies, an unrealistic relationship between demands and conditions, ideological “interpellation” or solely marked by the will of political charisma. Instead, these characteristics arise from the original lack of systemic analysis that utilizes a logic and rhetoric of “alien” elements infecting the unified and potentially balanced social whole. The solution is thus to find and destroy the problem-causing invaders, rather than seeing society as a society always-already divided by antagonisms with there being no “natural” or “harmonized” state to return to or advocate for. Thus, inconsistent references to the “financial manipulator,” “international capitalists,” “oligarchy,” or the effects of imperialism are used in an effort to externalize the congenial contradictions of the nation. The main issue with this approach is that its ambiguity is the starting point for undemocratic and authoritarian politics.

It may be simply that populism is best embodied by Žižek’s point about the “agent behind the scenes”; populism in this sense is nothing more than a refusal to confront the complexity of the situation with a systemic analysis and thus is the underlying flaw of populism and is the catalyst for its further limitations and shortcomings. This is the true point of departure for which some regimes are

characterized populist and others are not. For a traditionalist liberal or conservative, the game is played within the parameters of capitalism and there is no radical change necessary. Obversely, as opposed to the progressive populism we are addressing here, the radical emancipatory project also differs. Zizek again elaborates upon this point:

[T]he ultimate difference between true radical-emancipatory politics and populist politics is that authentic radical politics is active, imposing, enforcing its vision, while populism is fundamentally reactive, a reaction to a disturbing intruder.¹⁷

It is with this understanding--that populism is a refusal of systemic analysis and its subsequent political and economic prescriptions and instead an almost 'shoot-from-the-hip' social and ideological movement--that we can proceed to look at its negative limitations.

Limitations of Populism

Populism's positive aspect lies in how it often ushers in a new mass democracy that transcends the old, traditional, and oligarchical politics, providing a new sense of dignity and self-respect for lower class sectors of society, who are encouraged to recognize that they possess both social and political rights. Populist leaders are often wildly popular and capable of winning any free and open democratic contest. Because populists have no single doctrine (drawing from existing sociopolitical models such as socialism, corporatism or democratic capitalism) their ideas remain inconsistent and their ideas change frequently over time. The flexibility of these ideas allows them to appeal to the largest amount of voters at any given time.¹⁸ The electoral victories of populist leaders show a clearly expressed public discontent with the way things were and a desire for major political change. They give hope to the democratic principle that an alternation in power could bring about a change in policies and government that had failed to articulate popular demands in the past and were viewed largely as corrupt. But once in office they unfortunately tend to exhibit tendencies that show little respect for the rule of law, political pluralism, and democratic checks and balances.¹⁹

By definition, populist leaders are elected with large electoral majorities from unorganized masses and thus tend to view themselves, and are often viewed, as the embodiment of "the people" and the manifestation of the popular will. The image of the leader who had emerged from "the people" and would return power to them, displacing corrupt and elitist incumbents who had hijacked democracy for self-serving interests (alien elements) is reinforced through this process. As "anti-establishment" or "revolutionary" political outsiders, they characterize the restrictions posed by existing institutions--such as an independent judiciary and congressional opposition--that limit their political autonomy, force them to make concessions with opponents, or constrict their efforts to implement the popular will, as unnecessary and in need of replacement or transcendence in the name of political change. Populist leaders often view institutionalized party structures as constraints on their political autonomy and vestiges of the corrupt past, and see little need for such structures when they can communicate with the public and mobilize electoral support through the media.

Popular referendums are often used to justify institutional changes, allowing populist leaders to claim a democratic mandate. But when the underlying rules-of-the-game are so fluid that they can be rewritten at the whim of temporary and contingent electoral majorities, then there emerges a certain threatening pressure.²⁰ Zizek categorizes the situation as such:

[T]here is in populism always something violent, threatening, for the liberal view: an open of latent pressure, a warning that, if elections are manipulated, the "will of the people" will have to find another way to impose itself; even if electoral legitimization of power is respected, it is made clear that elections play a secondary role, that they serve only to confirm a political process whose substantial weight lies elsewhere [...] This is what gives the thrill to populist regimes: the democratic rules are never fully endorsed, there is always an uncertainty that pertains to them, a possibility always looms that they will be redefined, "unfairly changed in the middle of the game."²¹

Moreover, under conditions of top-down relationships with the leader and the masses, a direct link of sorts, it can be argued that most citizens vote on the basis of loyalties rather than leadership qualities. This loyalty functions within party organizations' control of access to public office, and their recruitment and socialization activities serve to channel and filter political ambitions.²² Even further, it can have an added component of danger when it is associated with the military.

Where populist leaders are associated with institutional support from the armed forces, rather than parties or other organizations, they usually expand the political role of the military and draw it into functions that are far removed from its normal responsibilities. This is dangerous for two reasons. One, it blurs the line between the role of the military and civilian institutions, usually to the detriment of the latter. The military enjoys government support and funding based upon a long tradition while civilian institutions, especially under new governments, rely on secondary forms of funding and are delegated responsibilities based upon their abilities and capabilities as opposed to sort of "providence" which is the case when it comes to certain duties of the military such as defense. Second, making the military political is never a guarantee of loyalty. Latin America especially has a long history of military coups, even in cases of progressive populism in which members of the military find that they can do a "better job" than the democratically elected government.²³

Anti-corruption rhetoric is a regular component of the legitimization of populist transcendence of traditional parties, but the cure is often worse than the disease. The lack of institutional accountability and the tendency towards opportunism and favoritism under populist governments presents an incentive (especially in poorer countries where government positions are not necessarily well paying) to corruption between public authorities and private agents. Additionally, promises to put an end to corruption are hard to take seriously in cases when populist leaders must fill the void presented by a lack of organized support and experienced associates and thus must simply

do so by appointing inexperienced loyalists to government positions.

There are certainly some more nuanced issues with historical Latin American populism that could be addressed, but the aforementioned limitations have been highlighted in order to transition into an exploration of a modern progressive populism that is called to attention by the current transformation of Venezuelan society ushered in by the election Hugo Chávez and the proclaimed "Bolivarian Revolution." While the use of *Chávismo* as an identification of the development of this movement may seem pejorative, it is likely because of the impression that it gives special credibility or importance to the singular influence and power of Chávez himself. While this is not necessarily the intention, it is the intention of this paper to assert that Chávez's discourse and ideological content are populist. As such, the term *Chávismo*--much like *Perónismo*--indicates both the uniqueness of the rise of *Chávismo* and its relation to historical populism. It is with this in mind that we turn to the presidency of Chávez and the emergence of *Chavismo* populism.

Chávismo Populism

In more recent times, populism has been characterized with more of an emphasis on the political mobilization of largely unorganized masses by charismatic leaders who typically circumvent institutionalized forms of representation and challenge established political or economic elites.²⁴ If we use these parameters, a look at Venezuela and the election of Hugo Chávez can be enlightening.²⁵ Latin American history has no shortage of Left-wing military coup attempts, but Chávez' case is unique. Following a failed coup attempt in 1992 that he personally led, Chávez' name was catapulted to political prominence and he was democratically elected on a ticket to transform the national constitution in 1998 with close to 60% of the vote. Using a discourse of nationalism, anti-imperialism and claiming to support a "Third way" that was not completely socialist/communist or completely capitalist, Chávez discredited the institutions associated with neoliberalism while employing a charismatic

personality that marginalized masses associated with. By instituting certain measures, such as re-nationalizing the national oil company (which had been previously nationalized but had more or less degenerated into a “state within the state,” no longer answered to the government and was thus close to a private company), setting up subsidized medical services and food (through the much reported missions), and generally supporting a larger role of the state in the economy, Venezuela began to move away from the type of economic orthodoxy associated with neoliberalism. Following a U.S. supported coup attempt against Chavez, led largely by big business, in 2002 and a strike, again led by big business, in late 2002, Chávez’ rhetoric and actions became increasingly progressive and radical. It was following these events that Chávez began to employ a heightened discourse of anti-capitalism and supported a new, yet largely ambiguous, vision of “21st Century Socialism.”²⁶ Following his election and throughout his terms as president, Chávez has consistently, if we use the guidelines set above, utilized a populist discourse.

Chavez’ rise to power must be seen through the lens of the historical conditions predating his election. As indicated above, an important element of the rise of populism is the failure of traditional models to incorporate popular demands and that large disaffected sectors of society are available for mobilization. In 1989, rioting throughout the country brought about severe repression from the government and hundreds if not thousands of people were killed.²⁷ It was following this event that the traditional model of political representation (marked by decades of representative alternation between two parties, COPEI and *Acción Democrática*) was discredited in the eyes of many segments of the Venezuela population. Chávez’ coup in 1992 was a reaction to this event and although it failed, its timely arrival was enough to place him as a courageous, anti-establishment revolutionary that was what was needed to change the country. This characterization is what propelled Chávez to victory and is part of what continues to sustain his legitimacy.

As indicated above, the key element that

makes a discourse and movement populist is its tendency to utilize a logic and rhetoric of “alien” elements infecting the unified and potentially balanced social whole, and so suggesting a solution of finding and destroying the problem-causing invaders. This applied to Chávez more so in his earlier discourse than his latter, after the adoption of a “21st Century Socialism” program.

In terms of rhetoric, the Chávez presidency can be historically divided by two stages. The first stage was one of a moderate political and economic stance roughly corresponding to the period of 1999-2003. The second stage was one of a more radicalized discourse that adopted the rhetoric of socialism and roughly corresponds to the period of 2004-present. It is important to differentiate between these two periods because the reference to alien elements that upset social unity has remained in both periods, but has largely changed in regards to context and terminology.

The first stage was marked by the use of a “Third-way” nationalism, in which the state was seen as being hi-jacked by corrupt politicians who did not have the interests of the Venezuelan people at heart and that Chávez’ movement (which was made up of a variety of different ideology backgrounds, a telltale mark of populism, but more heavily leaning towards the left) was elected to overcome. Additionally, Chávez employed an inconsistent (in terms of rhetoric vs. practice) anti-neoliberal position that rejected the principles of privatization and fiscal austerity, and was institutionalized on paper through the new 1999 Constitution, but nonetheless failed to substantially materialize initially as many neoliberal positions were continued, and even new ones put into practice.²⁸ As opposed to traditional and radical discourse, this viewpoint saw capitalism as neither inherently stable or problematic but instead saw the results of neoliberalism as a negative outgrowth of poor political decisions marred by corruption and a failure to be adequately patriotic.

Following the 2002 coup attempt, Chávez attempted to reduce the tension caused by the event by employing an even more moderate rhetoric and offering compromises to the coup

plotters. This was obviously an attempt to stem the virulent opposition to his anti-neoliberal policy prescriptions, which will be discussed below. This conciliatory gesture obviously did not work as intended, for from late 2002 to 2003 an eight-week long strike headed by commercial and business interests practically shut down the oil industry and crippled the country's economy. Chávez, speaking on this development, noted; "[T]he oil belongs to the entire nation, not just an elite."²⁹ This confrontation marked the beginning of the second stage of the Chávez presidency and a new contextual populist terminology displayed by the aforementioned quote on "elites."

Following a recall election in 2004, which he won in a landslide, Chávez began to declare his government "anti-imperialist" and began calling for a rejection of capitalism and a new "Socialism for the 21st Century."³⁰ While this transition can be characterized as a qualitative change,³¹ it is obvious that the massive opposition to his initially moderate changes by business and old political interests were the main catalyst of Chávez' radicalization and that the ideological coordinates and long term goals still remained intensely ambiguous.³² This stage in the presidency marked a new policy direction in which structural changes in the economy were to be mitigated by larger state intervention and an introduction of parallel political organization (such as the community councils) was to be implemented. Again, it is important to recognize the populist nature of these changes especially given that the new economic policies of redistribution and state intervention were accompanied by a gigantic spike in world oil prices that swelled state revenue. Furthermore, the frequent reference to the "oligarchy," the influences of imperialism, and the Venezuelan "elites" continued alongside this new rejection of capitalism and thus, even under this more radical context, we see the rhetoric of "alien elements" that infect social unity still being employed.³³

The economic policies of the Chávez government are very reminiscent of previous populist governments in the sense that it involves a larger role for the state, especially in regards to redistribution and regulations,

and a new form of import substitution titled "endogenous development."³⁴ Large scale nationalization of certain key industries such as key electric companies and construction oriented industries increased the centralization of the economy under the state, as these "strategic" areas of the economy were made exempt from the experiments of workplace democracy going on in other sectors.³⁵ This centralization of the economy is not necessarily an element of populism, but when one looks at the corresponding political situation, things become different. For instance, the states use of large oil revenues is largely a mixed blessing. Zizek sees Chávez' limitation lying in;

...the very factor that enables him to play his role: oil money. It is as if oil is always a mixed blessing, if not an outright curse. Because of this supply he can go on making populist gestures without paying the full price for them, without really inventing something new at the socioeconomic level. Money makes it possible for him to practice inconsistent politics (to enforce populist anticapitalist measures and leave the capitalist edifice basically untouched), of not acting but postponing the act, the radical change.³⁶

The traditional "bottleneck" situation mentioned earlier, in which the demands of the popular mobilization cannot be met by the real social and economic conditions, was somewhat, if not entirely, alleviated by this oil revenue windfall. Additional socioeconomic policies, such as the government missions, which include food subsidization, free medical care and educational services, and the role of the state in regulating private business, are suggestive of populism for two specific reasons, respectively. First, most of the mission programs are not state institutions, but instead operate in a form of "outsourcing" through a direct relationship with PDVSA.³⁷ Because they are not institutionalized, they can either be eliminated by a leader down the road who sees no need for them or can simply evaporate when oil revenue does. Second, the regulation of private business, through price controls and calls to ethical or social production, is a distinct representation of seeing the "alien elements" failing to act sufficiently ethical and

thus being the sole bearer of responsibility for the malaise of certain economic conditions. Recently, calls to create “Social Production Enterprises” in which businesses must fulfill a set of “ethical” requirements and invest in parts of their profits in their communities in order to gain special privileged financing, state purchasing and other preferential benefits from the state employ such a logic.³⁸ Even more recently, nationalizations of, and calls to criminal prosecution against, private enterprises that are failing to institute government price controls is even more revelatory of the populist logic of the Chávez discourse.³⁹ Thus, it is hard to tell if any of the economic policies put into place by Chávez are, a.) sustainable (given the nature of fluctuating oil prices), b.) legitimately institutionalized forms that are not dependent only upon those same oil prices, and, c.) viable models and not just experiments or idealistic models put into place by the impulse and hopes of a single charismatic authority.

As such, *Chávismo*’s major limitation is in the role of Hugo Chávez himself. Charismatic leadership is a key component of populism and it is in this area that Chávez has made his fame. The adoration of Chávez is both a product of the nature of the movement and a concerted effort by Chávez and the government to reinforce his indispensability. Campaign slogans such as; “With Chávez the people rule,” “With Chávez everything, without Chávez nothing” or “With Chávez we all govern” are constitutive of this orientation.⁴⁰ While this leads to more obvious problems such as dependence and divisiveness (either you are with Chávez or against him), the real issue is the sense that Chávez is the embodiment of “the people” and thus an almost “divine providence” to rule through the direct link with them. It is from this relationship that a top down form of management is employed.

As indicated earlier, populism’s penchant for charismatic leaders creates a condition in which the leader tends to exert autocratic methods of management. Chávez seems to exhibit such proneness:

“Chávez’s management style seems to be completely top-down, rather than bottom-up or team-oriented. He seems to consider it perfectly

normal and acceptable to issue orders, much like a general in the battlefield, to his ministers in the spur of the moment, with little regard for their existing work-plans or duties.”⁴¹

This top-down method of management is populist for two reasons. First, it is premised on the authority of a single charismatic leader and, especially in Chávez’ case, his ever changing, ambiguous goals and plans. Second, it pays into the logic of the “alien element” of society that can seemingly be corrected through the will towards efficiency and anti-corruption instead of a systematic, structural analysis of the problem. Moreover, this second characteristic is mitigated by the fact that top-down management tends to produce inefficiency and a state of affairs that stifles necessary criticism. Orders are constantly being changed without regard to pre-existing plans, organizational improvements are impossible and all this happens under the rhetorical demand to improve the functioning of government and to eliminate corruption. As such, in the realm of corruption, as noted earlier, populism has played a specifically inefficient role in Venezuela.

Like populist leaders in the past, Chávez was elected under the pretenses of a vastly corrupt and delegitimized government. Speaking from a patriotic, nationalist platform Chávez ran on an electoral candidacy of anti-corruption (among other things). Although corruption is not a new circumstance brought into being by Chávez, there is no doubt that the populist discourse has contributed to very little change, if not a worsening, in the types of corruption most associated with the clientelism and patronage inherent in populism. The logic of populism that alludes to the alien element, or enemy, that is attacking the social unity of the whole creates a condition which those associated with *Chávismo* must band together, thus reinforcing patronage, in order to keep the “alien enemy” out. Moreover, as is the case with Chávez following the coup attempt of 2002 and the subsequent strike of 2003, the professional, experienced class of workers and managers were mostly associated with the opposition to Chávez.⁴² This created a situation in which individuals were appointed to positions of extreme importance based not on

their ability, but their loyalty to the Bolivarian project and to Chávez.⁴³ This is especially the case with role of the military:

*When asked why it is that his government has such a high presence of military officers, Chávez responds that the main reason is that he lacks qualified citizens who support his project. That is, there are plenty of qualified citizens and plenty of civilians who support Chávez, but all too often most of the civilians who support Chávez have no experience in running large complicated state bureaucracies.*⁴⁴

As with past populist governments, the inclusion of the military into the sphere of politicization and patronage is a unique feature of this patronage.⁴⁵

By appointing officers to key government positions, Chávez has blurred the distinction between the role of civil society and the military. Putting the military in such a position can have the benefit of bringing it closer to the people it represents, making the military more civilian and thus bringing about a feeling of solidarity between the people and an institution that has most notably be linked to repression in Latin America. While it has yet to be seen if there are any long term negative effects of this move, it is apparent that certain policy changes are not conducive to helping alleviate possible problems. For instance, following the new Constitution of 1999, it no longer became the role of the legislature to approve military promotions but instead was delegated to the military itself. Because Chávez wields enormous influence in the military, it is seen as a way for him to exert influence over those promotions. Additionally, the placing of over 200 active duty officers at different levels of government institutions following the new constitution certainly blurs the distinction between authoritarianism and democracy.⁴⁶ Critics have gone as far as saying that Venezuela is under military rule, not under the rule of Chávez. While this is a significant stretch, it is not hard to see what might happen in the future given this blurred distinction and politicization of the military. The true disaster in this area would be if something happened to Chávez and the military, given its politicization, could see itself as the true “heir to the Revolution”

instead of looking to civil institutions to find an alternative.

In regards to democracy and civil society, there are several pivotal areas of *Chávismo* that warrant concern. As highlighted earlier, populism heralds a large mass democratic movement that makes an effort to include the voices of marginalized sectors of the population that could not be done by traditional politics. Relying on mass rallies and constant calls to the voting booth, *Chávismo* displays all the characteristics of this type of populism. Mass rallies are a frequent occurrence in Chávez’ Venezuela and since his election in 1998, not a year goes by when an important referendum or recall or election is put to popular vote. As highlighted earlier, these mass calls to the voting booth are an intricate part of legitimizing populist discourse because it justifies changes as a result of democratic mandate. But the limitation of this is two fold. Firstly, due to the charismatic leadership of Chávez and the resulting soft-personality cult and lack of an alternative, it can be said that people vote on the basis of loyalty instead of leadership qualities. Secondly, the constant calls for voting distract from other key issues facing the country. It is hard to focus on more physical manifestations of struggle when the polarized political discourse comes to the fore every 6 months at the voting booths instead of in everyday life, where micro-solutions are found for common peoples problems.⁴⁷ But it would be a mistake to see this as an aberration instead of an inherent aspect of populism and *Chávismo*. Chávez needs the constant democratic mandates to bring about the changes he wants, if not only because his ideas are constantly being altered but also because it allows him to justify changing traditional institutions and circumventing traditional practices, the “rules of the game,” in the name of a “direct link” with “the people” who voted for him.

As identified earlier, this is a problematic aspect of populism. The direct link--the leader as the manifestation of the popular will--creates a certain level of arrogance. With Chávez this was highlighted by a climate in which criticism is frowned upon and this resulting in a top-down management style. It is within this context that a

disregard for the rule of law, political pluralism and democratic checks and balances can be noted in several features of *Chávismo*. Following the original premise of his election, Chávez largely discredited the institutions associated with the previous regime by calling attention to their corruption and failure to account for the demands of the marginalized sectors of society. Once in office, as noted through the aforementioned two stages, Chávez applied the elementary populist discourse of “alien elements”--corrupt politicians, oligarchic elites, agents of imperialism, etc.--to justify the circumvention of traditional democratic procedures and institutions through the guise of manifesting the “popular will” as determined through the mandates of the voting booth.

This tendency is best exemplified by the method through which the 1999 Constitution came into being; Chávez’ campaign pledge to elect a constitutional assembly and overhaul the nation’s democratic institutions. Controlled by a 92% *Chavista* majority, thanks largely to a boycott of the elections by oppositional members, the constitutional assembly moved quickly to claim extra-legal authority to re-found Venezuelan democracy.⁴⁸ It proceeded to increase the size the judiciary to include more judges (sympathetic to Chávez) and shut down the congress in order to convoke new elections to “re-legitimize” public officials at every level of the political system.⁴⁹ As such, having more than a two-thirds majority in Congress, the *Chávistas* had the ability to undertake a vast restructuring of the political system. With a two-thirds majority congress, a sympathetic and reformed judiciary, and the lack of voiced opposition in any democratic institution, there was little blocking the radical change many *Chávistas* hoped to bring to Venezuela and with this more or less domination of all aspects of governance, a wide variety of important changes were made to Venezuelan society during the first stage of the Chávez presidency, all of which cannot be noted here, that have continued and expanded in the second.

It is not the changes made through the new constitution, the subsequent enabling laws and referendums, and the use of socioeconomic policy that requires attention seeing as how the

effectivity, moral stature or necessity of these changes is up for debate. What is important to highlight is how these changes came about. As mentioned earlier, if the legal order can be circumvented through presidential decrees and popular democratic mandates on a reoccurring basis, there is little room for an understanding of “law” and regulations to take hold and the threat of general confusion sets in. This constant “changing of the rules” is a component of populism that may convey a radical element, but there is no doubt that a requisite part of a stable society is a rule of law and if it is constantly changing, or if people constantly expect it to change, then one can hardly expect them to know how to, or try to, follow it. Furthermore, as regards to political pluralism, while many members of the *Chávismo* movement see the opposition as highly corrupt, fetters upon radical change and undeserving of attention, if not “evil alien elements,” there is little doubt that any true democracy must at least make an effort to include all voices. The centralism of Chávez, the distrust and patronage issues following the coup and strike, and the general control of government by *Chávez* supporters does not bode well for such an actuality. Moreover, these issues also emphasize the importance of highlighting the effect of *Chávismo* upon the checks and balances of a democratic state. With the congress, judiciary and presidency all under the control of a single political proclivity, such checks and balances can hardly be expected to function in the way they are originally intended.

This section has looked at the aspects of the *Chávismo* movement that makes it essentially populist. It is important to note that these highlights are not the only narrative that is being communicated in and from Venezuela. The intention to describe the constitutive elements of *Chávismo* populism has allowed other important narratives to fall by the wayside. While populism, as described in this paper, is seen as largely a negative phenomenon with certain distinct limitations and drawbacks, there is no doubt that there exists positive aspects of populism that deserve to be accentuated. The next, concluding section will take a look at some of them as well as prospects for the future of the

Chávismo movement.

Prospects for the Future

As mentioned earlier, populism's positive aspect lies in how it often ushers in a new mass democracy that transcends the old, traditional, and oligarchical politics, providing a new sense of dignity and self-respect for lower class sectors of society, who are encouraged to recognize that they possess both social and political rights. The negative aspect of traditional populism was its effect on democratic citizenship. Populism requires the "privileged link" between the masses through electoral functions and acclamations, but once in power, this leadership provided few institutional means by which citizens can participate in the functioning of government or hold it accountable. Elections were thus merely delegative formalities where the masses choose who to give authority and then retreat to a paternalistic position. It is in this regard that the unique nature of *Chávismo* populism holds hope. The 1999 constitution and constant mandates from Chávez himself provide the institutional groundwork for the possibility of multiple forms of democratic participation from citizens. These include, but are not limited to, communal councils that have the potential for legitimate allocative responsibilities and political power, participatory budgeting in which citizens can take part in their local governments by auditing them for records, and attempts at forms of workplace democracy where forms of co-management act as a check to government influence in nationalized firms.⁵⁰

The question regarding these new forms of democratic participation is; to what extent are these new forms institutionalized and how will they play a concrete role in decision making and influence upon the state. It is one thing to have these idealistic proposals put down on paper, and another to have them work efficiently within the state and civil apparatus. The overarching positive aspect of populism is that it can open up a rift in ideological hegemony and ossification, creating space for democratic thinking and control that goes beyond the limitations of populism. It is not beyond hope that the discourse of democracy and participation is taken more seriously by the people it affects, thus turning them against the

populist bureaucracy, discourse and its limiting configuration.

Laclau's theory of populism employs a hope of this sort; an analysis of populism that sees its most progressive aspects being re-articulated into a form of socialism. Laclau's conclusion of populism, from a decidedly Marxist position, is that; "...the highest and most radical form of populism, is that whose class interests lead it to the suppression of the State as an antagonistic force." Moreover;

*In socialism, therefore, coincide the highest form of 'populism' and the resolution of the ultimate and most radical of class conflicts. The dialectic between 'the people' and classes finds here the final moment of its unity: there is no socialism without populism, and the highest forms of populism can only be socialist.*⁵¹

In this sense, it is not impossible for a populist movement to change into a radical project that employs a more systemic analysis of the antagonisms of a given society. But Laclau's mistake is to suggest that populism is an aspect of radical movements that is inherent and continuous instead of initial and something to be overcome. Again, Žižek acts as a corrective to Laclau, drawing attention to the vastly critical and eclipsing point about populism that overwhelms its other aspects:

*[T]here is a constitutive mystification that pertains to populism. Its basic gesture is to refuse to confront the complexity of the situation, to reduce it to a clear struggle with a pseudoconcrete enemy figure. So not only is populism not the area within which today's emancipatory projects should inscribe themselves, one should go a step further and propose that the main task of today's emancipatory politics, its life-and-death problem, is to find a form of political mobilization that, although (like populism) critical of institutionalized politics, avoids the populist temptation.*⁵²

And, to employ an earlier quote from Žižek again, furthermore:

[T]he ultimate difference between true radical-emancipatory politics and populist politics is that authentic radical politics is active, imposing, enforcing its vision, while populism is fundamentally reactive, a reaction to a disturbing

intruder.⁵³

Accordingly, as long as the discourse of populism employs the rhetoric of the “disturbing intruder” or the “alien element” that affects social unity, it can never truly be a bearer of emancipatory radical politics or a be an element within it. It lacks a long term vision or unitary ideology with which to actively impose itself. It is reactive in the sense that it waits for the contradictions of society to emerge and creates attempts at solutions based on these reactions. Chávez’ “reaction” to the 2002 coup attempt and the 2003 strike is an unparalleled example of this tendency. Faced with a major contradiction, he first attempted a policy of moderate conciliation and when that did not work adopted a radical rhetoric and policy that was fundamentally a “reaction” to a “disturbing” element.

In very direct terms, there is a question of whether Chávez and the *Chávista* government has the ability and ideological fortitude to grapple with the difficult organizational, sociological, economic and political issues that arise from populism and come out the other side with something workable. It may be that *Chávismo* does not have the tools necessary to construct a viable and sustainable political and economic framework, and that an alternative is imperative. Additionally, there is the danger that Chávez has been caught in a cycle that leads him to believe that governance is not complicated and that he is a leader of the people whose large and vague ideas are all that is needed to radically transform society. The simple truth may be that despite the limitations of populism, there are few obstacles to the ability to lead a movement and a country with some degree of popularity if you have expensive resources that are in massive demand. But the obverse and hopeful hypothesis is that populism is inherently unsustainable and that eventually its limitations will be overcome. In regards to the contemporary developments in Latin America and Venezuela, building on this hypothesis continues, and will continue, to be of the utmost significance and importance.

Endnotes

1 For an extended look at a history of Latin American populism, see; *Populism in Latin America* edited by Michael Conniff (1999 London)

2 This term is largely problematic because of the implications associated with a certain, rigid conception of what economic “discipline” is. For neoliberals and institutions like the IMF it is considered following certain guidelines of what they deem necessary economic policies that may be uncomfortable for broad ranges of the population but necessary to gather revenue to pay off debt; hence the term “discipline.”

3 Another problematic term. Who decides what “fiscal responsibility” means? Is it “responsible” to cut off social programs to pay off debt, as the IMF sees it, or are some seemingly unsustainable policies necessary for socioeconomic stability with the real fiscal issues laying in other areas, hidden to the ideology of the IMF? Recent history should point to the strength of the latter proposition.

4 For an in depth look at the crisis and the role of neoliberalism, see *Rise and Collapse of Neoliberalism in Argentina* by Miguel Teubal (2004). Found here: http://www.hawaii.edu/hivandaids/Rise_and_Collapse_of_Neoliberalism_in_Argentina_The_Role_of_Economic_Groups.pdf

5 For brief looks at the policies of Perón and Vargas, see, again, Conniff pgs. 22-43 and 43-63, respectively.

6 While this declaration may seem controversial, there is hardly any doubt that the policies put into place by the first populist leaders were largely unsustainable--especially in the case of Perón--despite their good intentions or origins. While the original pretenses for these policies (their necessity, effectivity etc.) are up for debate, there is little controversy that they largely failed in their intentions and paved the way for the debt crisis of the 80s.

7 For a look at this type of traditional academia, see; *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America* by Dornbusch and Edwards (1991 Chicago). Dornbusch and Edwards see populism largely in economic terms such as redistribution, popular consumption, fiscal expansion all at the expense of macroeconomic stability.

8 Conniff pgs. 4-7 (1999 London)

9 From here forward, when speaking of populism it will be in the sense that it is “progressive” populism--a populism that is associated with electoral democracy and progressive economic policy.

10 *Populism and reform in Latin America* by Tortuato Di Tella in *Obstacles to Change in Latin America* (1970) pgs. 47-74

11 *Ibid* pg. 49

12 *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* by Ernesto Laclau (1977 London), pgs. 143-198

13 *Ibid* pgs. 172-173

14 *In Defense of Lost Causes* by Slavoj Zizek (2008 London) pg. 277

15 *Ibid* pg. 282

16 *Against the Populist Temptation* by Slavoj Žižek (2006) pg. 5 <http://www.lacan.com/zizpopulism.htm>

17 *In Defense of Lost Causes* pg. 304

18 For instance, Perón's "Justicialismo" was a slogan that simply stood for "economic growth and social justice." Who is against economic growth and social justice? (Conniff pg. 5)

19 This criticism may ring hollow from a radical leftist position that see the rule of law, political pluralism, and democratic checks and balances dangerous within the context of capitalism, liberalism and the class rule of the bourgeoisie. The issue is not so much that these principles are *de facto* ignored or not respected, but in how and why they are ignored or not respected. To say that rule of law, political pluralism, and democratic checks and balances are only institutions of a liberal bourgeois capitalism borders on theoretical authoritarianism. In any case, such questions are outside the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that these principles are a requisite of modern democratic governance.

20 Again, I must address the radical critique which might respond to this statement by saying; "What is more democratic than an electoral majority that votes for massive change?" The point of making this statement is not to lay claim to a theory that democratic electoral results are not true reflections of the needs of society (One is reminded of Kissinger's famous quip about the election of Salvador Allende in which he stated, to paraphrase, that the United States could not stand by as the Chilean people made a mistake). Instead, it is important to recognize that a legal order is an important characteristic of a stable society and if "the rules of the game" can be changed so drastically and frequently, it is hard not to see how societal confusion can set in and a further reliance on authoritarian practices mitigated by the direct link between the leader and "the people" could be further institutionalized.

21 *In Defense of Lost Causes* pg. 265

22 Perón, for instance, was notorious for appointing loyalists to important positions of government, including but not limited to his appointment of a supporter to a previously independent position of party secretary of the largest Argentinean Union in May 1946. (Conniff pgs. 33-35)

23 One of the most telling example of this coming in the form of the military coup in Brazil against Vargas in August 1954, leading to his suicide. (Conniff pg. 51)

24 See, for instance; *Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: Unexpected Affinities* by Kurt Weyland in the journal "Studies in Comparative International Development" 32 (Fall 1996), pgs. 3-31

25 It should be noted that, while I find many of the developments in Venezuela to be exciting, interesting and hopeful, I intend to focus specifically on the elements that I find to be populist at the expense of highlighting details of societal improvement in Venezuela.

26 For a more specific look at the history and policies of the Chávez presidency up until 2007-2008, see *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power* by Gregory Wilpert (London,

2007) and *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics* by Steve Ellner (London 2008).

27 Wilpert pgs. 16-17

28 "Additional measures approximating neoliberalism included austere fiscal policies, overvaluation of the local currency, and the retention of the neoliberal-inspired value added tax with the aim of avoiding inflation and shoring up international reserves." Ellner pg. 112

29 Ellner pg. 119

30 Ellner pg. 121

31 For instance, in the book *Democracy and Revolution* (London 2006), D.L. Raby states; "The Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela is still very much a dynamic and unfinished project, but already we can see in Chavez' discourse the emergence of a coherent 'foundational project,' the 'Socialism of the twenty-first century.'" She goes on to write that populism can be revolutionary, but only if it's social base is an "autonomous movement of the dominated classes and where its leader is a true representative of the movement." pg. 256. It seems, from this perspective, that the conditions for revolutionary populism are "autonomy" and "true leadership"--two highly ambiguous qualifiers that can be interpreted a number of ways.

32 That is to say, Chávez was not necessarily radicalized by a theoretical shift in consciousness, but instead by a recognition that his goals could only be met by taking a different path. Earlier, a part of the nature of populism was identified as the lack of a single, unitary narrative and the ability to change positions depending on the conditions that are most "popular." Additionally, Chávez initially said the he "is not a Marxist" and that the working class is not a privileged agent of revolution (Ellner pg. 128), but has taken many stances of an opposite nature. While things are always changing in populist discourse depending on convenience, it is enough to say that this was a key element discussed earlier on populism.

33 It is, perhaps, time for a quite aside on this point. While I find the rejection of capitalism to be an important development of the Chávez presidency in terms of defining ideologically and institutionally the direction of the government's intentions, the fact is that without changing the logic of the system the oligarchy, the elites and the influences of imperialism will remain. It is my contention that the "oligarchs," "imperialists" and "elites" are not functioning as evil outsiders intent on destroying Venezuela but instead are simply following the logical coordinates of a capitalist system. To identify them as "negative elements" that need to be purged from the purity of the whole is to exactly employ a populist discourse that, as we will see further on, leads to authoritarian tendencies.

34 "The emphasis [of endogenous development] is on agriculture (50%) and industrial production (30%), paying particular attention to achieving self-sufficiency with regard to the production of food, clothes and shoes." Wilpert pg. 79

35 Ellner pg. 128

36 *Against the Populist Temptation* (2006) pg. 7 n4

37 Wipert pg. 193 "Much of the government's spending has, in recent years, been carried out directly from PDVSA, the state oil company. For example, in the first three quarters of 2008 (January through September) PDVSA had \$13.9 billion, or 6.1 percent of GDP in public expenditures."

The Chávez Administration at 10 Years: The Economy and Social Indicators by Mark Weisbrot, Rebecca Ray and Luis Sandoval (Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2009) pg. 17

38 Wilpert pg. 82 (How these "ethical responsibilities" are to be monitored has not been detailed, but one can assume it will be through certain state regulations and inspections that would most likely employ highly ambiguous points of reference on ethical standards thus opening up the possibility of corruption.)

39 *Chávez Threatens to Jail Price Control Violators* by Simon Romero, February 2007 in The New York Times; <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/17/world/americas/17venezuela.html?pagewanted=print>

(The institution of price controls is largely populist because of its refusal to address the systemic nature of the problem. A populist in effect shoots the messenger when instituting price controls because its logic emerges out of a rationality that does not know why prices are so high and thus blames the agent of the last step of the production process, distribution and pricing, for corruption and criminal negligence. In effect, the populist says; "We don't know why rice prices are so high, but they are and you are selling them higher than we told you to. Either fix the problem or we fine/nationalize you."

40 Wilpert pg. 201

41 Wilpert pg. 203 (Wilpert goes on to describe how Chávez has called ministers in the middle of the night to perform tasks and that, when faced with criticism, Chávez responds sometimes with "I remind you, you are speaking to the president.")

42 This is most notably highlighted by the infamous "Tascon List" which was essentially a blacklisting of opposition members from government industries and jobs following the coup and strike. (Wilpert pg. 205)

43 Ellner pg. 147

44 Wilpert pg. 49

45 "Of the 61 ministers that have served in the Chávez government between 1999 and 2004, 16 (or 26%) were military officers. Also, Chávez supported the election of retired officers to numerous governor's and mayor's posts. Following the 2004 regional elections, of the country's 24 governors, 22 belonged to the Chávez camp. Of these, nine (41%) have a military background." (Wilpert pg. 49)

46 Wilpert pg. 40

47 During my trip to Venezuela, one of the most constant voices of concern was found in relation to the upcoming vote that would eliminate term limits for the presidency and other heads of local governments. The complaint was that leading up to the vote, the amount of propaganda

related to campaigning distracted from other legitimate problems. People were told to wait until the end of the vote to voice their concerns and to focus on winning the "voting battle." Additionally, many people I encountered sympathetic to Chávez mentioned that while they might be opposed to indefinite re-election, they could see no real alternative to Chávez and thus felt obligated to vote for the passage of the new law.

48 Ellner pg. 111

49 Wilpert pg. 21

50 Wilpert pgs. 53-64

51 *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* pgs. 196-197

52 *Against the Populist Temptation* pg. 17

53 *In Defense of Lost Causes* pg. 304

Venezuela: Socialism for the 21st Century

By Peter Bohmer

For much of the 19th and 20th century, socialism was the hope of millions of working people around the globe, including the United States in the early part of the 20th century. This was the period of the growth of the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW. Socialism has meant a society committed to meeting the basic needs of all people including health, food, education, and housing, where there is full employment and no poverty, where enterprises and firms are socially and publicly owned not privately owned by capitalists to make profits. It has meant a society where workers control how firms are run and where the economy is democratically planned to serve human needs. As a great socialist revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg said in the early 20th century, socialism requires democracy, and democracy requires socialism.

In the 1980's, we were told by government leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, most economists, and media pundits such as Thomas Friedman that there is no alternative (TINA) to unregulated market capitalism. This economic model and the related policies are called neoliberalism in Latin America.

By the early 1990's, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Soviet Union, and the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, signaled to many the end of socialism. So did the movement by formerly non-capitalist nations such as Vietnam and especially China towards a capitalist system of private enterprise led production for profit. The severe economic difficulties of Cuba was considered as further evidence that the period of alternatives to capitalism was coming to an end. This led to the "end of history" claims that liberal capitalism was the economic system that the entire world was evolving towards and would not evolve beyond, and that the time for socialism had passed and that it was not a desirable model.

In 1998, Hugo Chávez was elected President of Venezuela. He spoke strongly and acted against savage neoliberalism in his electoral campaign and after taking power but socialism was not a part of his vocabulary or program for his first few years in office. Since late 2004, he has been increasingly calling for Socialism for the 21st Century in Venezuela, and speaking out against capitalism and imperialism.

This call for 21st century socialism has

resonated throughout the Americas, although a little more slowly in the U.S. than in other places. Even here in the U.S., there is increased interest in and decreased hostility towards socialism.¹

I will share some of my understanding of the present and possible future of Venezuela so that we can effectively counter the criticisms we hear of it by our politicians and media. Another reason to study the Venezuela *proceso* is so that we can dream about and learn lessons for organizing and advocating for socialism in the 21st century in the U.S., a country that today is more unequal in its income distribution than Venezuela.² Venezuela is not socialist but rather Chávez and others calling for 21st century socialism are placing Venezuela in that tradition while calling for something different and new and culturally appropriate and historically specific for Venezuela. In this paper, I will also briefly examine the Venezuelan economy today.

The Chávez Question

Before returning to the theory and practice of 21st Century Socialism in Venezuela, I would like to briefly put forward my take on President Hugo Chávez Frías and his relation to the socialist project there. Focusing primarily on him is the wrong way to understand what is going on. I believe he is a very good president and leader who is committed to democracy and the development of a socialist society. Chávez's understanding of socialism is continually evolving and becoming more concrete as are his policies and proposed structural and systemic changes. He is anti-imperialist³, and both a nationalist and internationalist. Chávez supports in words and actions the growth of diverse social movements: poor people organizing, workers organizing for self-management, communal councils, landless people organizing for getting land to be turned over to them to farm on. Socialism ultimately means people's power over all parts of life. This is happening in Venezuela although less in the sphere of production than in other parts of society.

Central to understanding the Bolivarian revolution, another term commonly used to describe the ongoing social change in Venezuela, is social change from above and from below.

The election of the government led by Hugo Chávez in 1998 enabled ongoing transformation in Venezuelan society but by itself was not a revolutionary change. This idea is expressed in the title of Greg Wilpert's outstanding book on Venezuela, "*Changing Venezuela by Taking Power*".⁴

In the last 10 years, social change from above has caused social change from below which has moved the government of Chávez to the left⁵ which has furthered popular power at the grass roots level. What is exciting about Venezuela is a mutually reinforcing process where the Chávez led government is committed to meeting people's needs and supports activities by the popular classes⁶ in transforming their communities, local governance and workplaces. This spurs the government to continue to further support popular power. The popular classes are becoming subjects of their history, protagonists. This process is more profound than just progressive economic and social programs.

It is equally a mistake to only focus on the building power from below, as some people who believe the state always supports the capitalist class or is inherently oppressive have done. I heard David Hernandez, a long-term labor organizer and socialist, and the current director of Venalum, the second largest aluminum plant in Venezuela, speak at a conference on socialism in Barquisimeto on February 28th, 2009. At the conference, Hernandez said that looking at Venezuela in the early or mid 1990's, one would have thought that Venezuela was the least likely country in Latin America to be undergoing a profound economic and social transformation. Labor and other social movements were weak, as was the left. Since the victory of Chávez, social movements and involvement by the popular classes in local power and in local economic decision-making have flourished. The meaning of socialism is now being discussed widely. David Hernandez pointed out the government led by Hugo Chávez deserves credit for this development of popular power and growing socialist consciousness.

What is also exciting, positive and hopeful is this slowly radicalizing dynamic where President Chávez supports people's power but

does not control it.⁷ This growing power from below makes it possible for him to initiate more socialist-oriented policies and structural change to further challenge the power and privileges of capital, e.g., land-takeovers from wealthy landowners where the resulting farm is then run in a collective or a cooperative manner by the occupants of the land.

What does Socialism for the 21st Century Mean?

One central aspect of 21st century socialism is that it increasingly meets the needs of the Venezuelan people. As can be seen from the following table, Table 1, there has been substantial improvement in social indicators since 1998. Poverty and income inequality have declined sharply. Indicators of health and access to education have substantially improved as have access to water and sanitation. The number of students in higher education more than doubled from the 1999-2000 school year to the 2007-2008 school year.⁸

There has also been substantial growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) primarily since 2003. Real GDP has grown 10% per year since 2003 although at a lower but still respectable growth rate of 4.7% over the entire 1998 to 2008 period.¹⁰ For most of this latter period oil prices have risen. Also contributing to the higher growth rates since 2003, has been the defeat of the employer's lockout and oil stoppage in late 2002

and early 2003 and the Chávez's government's increasing commitment to public investment in infrastructure as well as health and education. There has been significant growth in private and public capital formation including infrastructure, machinery and business and farming equipment, offices, factories, roads and in employment and production in all sectors of the economy including manufacturing and agriculture. This is both a cause of the improvement in the economy of Venezuela and indicates that its economic growth has been caused by more than just the growth of oil revenues.

The growing equality of income in Venezuela over the last 10 years means that the popular classes have gained disproportionately from the growth of incomes and output. Employment in the formal sector has grown by almost 50% over these 10 years, almost double the growth rate of the labor force. The informal labor market, although growing much more slowly than the formal labor market, is still about 40% of the entire labor force.¹¹

Inclusion of the marginalized and poor is another central aspect of the construction of 21st century socialism. The improvements in health, literacy and education of the poorest parts of the population indicate an ethic of inclusion, a government making central the needs of the formerly excluded and second-class citizens. These progressive social policies also make it more possible for the popular

Table 1⁹ **Venezuela Economic and Social Indicators**

Category	Year	% or other measure	Year	% or other Measure
Poverty (individuals)	1998	52%	2008	31.5%
Extreme Poverty	1998	20.1%	2008	9.5%
Gini Index(measure of inequality, 0=total equality; 1=total inequality)	1998	.48	2008	.41
Infant Mortality/100,000	1998	21.4	2006	14
Nutrition related Deaths/100,000	1998	4.9	2007	2.3
Access to Clean Water	1998	80%	2007	92%
Access to Sanitation	1998	62%	2007	82%
Social Security, % of Population	1998	1.7%	2008	4.4%
Unemployment rate	1998	11.3%	2008	7.8%

Note: The end year is the last year where data was available, in most cases 2007 or 2008.

classes to participate in public life. There is a commitment to provide adequate housing with water and electricity for all but so far the growth of adequate housing has lagged although we saw many, many communities getting money to build housing for themselves. The access to cheaper food through Mercal, PDVAL and through community food kitchens are important steps towards making possible the involvement of people in the politics and community activism in Venezuela as is the distribution of about 5 million acres of land to formerly landless families. The growth of free childcare, mission Simoncito, and programs such as Madres del Barrio and mission Che Guevara address directly the inclusion of low income women in the Bolivarian revolution¹². At a January 23rd, 2009 rally that we attended in Caracas, Chávez stated to over 100,000 people that to be a socialist is to be a feminist.

As can be seen in the 1999 Venezuelan constitution, there have also been major steps taken against the discrimination and exclusion of indigenous people and in support of their rights to land and maintaining their culture. That Venezuela is a multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural country is embedded in the 1999 Venezuelan constitution, although unfortunately little recognition is given to the past and current discrimination against Venezuelans of African descent.

Cultural, Political and Economic Revolution

To understand the construction of 21st century socialism in Venezuela, we must look simultaneously at the ongoing political, cultural and economic transformation. I will focus mainly on the economic changes and challenges but they are an inseparable package.

Cultural Transformation

A central part of the socialist project in Venezuela is the commitment to developing socialist consciousness among the population. Towards this end, schools and particularly the various education-related missions stress the teaching of socialist values such as solidarity, cooperation, self-management, and equality and

strongly challenge and criticize individualism, egoism and consumerism. Venezuelan medical students interning and studying at *Barrio Adentro* are learning about medical skills, how to serve the community and about the right of all to medical care. Another part of the ongoing cultural revolution is the conscious objective of developing pride and knowledge of Venezuelan culture and history, of independence leaders, the history of indigenous people and their struggles for self-determination, and of oppressed people's resistance. In the schools, the missions, and in the Ministry of Culture, Venezuelan music and art are fostered and emphasized as are the pluri-cultural and multi-ethnic roots and current reality of Venezuela. There is strong governmental support for the growth of music, films, theater, murals and other forms of art whose roots are Venezuelan. There is a commitment to reclaiming Venezuelan culture, developing Venezuelan media, and combatting the domination by U.S. culture and media.

There is a major campaign carried out by publicly funded or run institutions and by non-publicly supported ones in support of women's equality, worker's dignity, equality for indigenous people and against all forms of racial discrimination, for food sovereignty, endogenous development and Venezuelan sovereignty, for sustainable development and solidarity with oppressed people in all of the Americas and throughout the world. For example, we saw much support for the Palestinian struggle.

Chávez is continually stressing the necessity of transforming values for there to be socialism. Socialism requires both the change in values as well as the transformation of economic and political institutions. There is a danger that words such as socialism and solidarity will become merely rhetoric and hollow unless the economic and political institutions are simultaneously being transformed so that these socialist values are fostered and encouraged and can be practiced. If business enterprises, private or state owned, continue to be hierarchically run while Chávez talks on TV about self-management, cynicism about socialism will result.

Political Transformation

Participatory democracy is often used as a synonym for socialism in Venezuela. Its concept of democracy is far more than voting for candidates of one's choice in free elections and the guaranteeing of basic civil liberties such as freedom of the press, religion, freedom of speech and expression, rights to a fair trial, right to privacy, etc. Participatory democracy means that people should be directly involved in making decisions that affect them, e.g., deciding how government budgets be spent.

Another integrally related concept is popular power. The growth of popular power, particularly at the local level, is involving large numbers of people, in the millions, in deciding how to develop and run their communities. The communal council is an example of participatory democracy and growing popular power. It is exciting to observe the involvement of people formerly excluded from the political process making decisions about their communities, e.g., who needs housing the most, how to build housing, community priorities, etc. As with many of these institutional changes in Venezuela, e.g., the communal councils, how widespread they are and will become, and what are the limits of their power are not yet determined. Moreover, the communal councils, because of their very local orientation—they consist of no more than 400 households, usually less-- are not equipped to make decisions that involve large geographical areas and more people. A new and developing institution of popular power is the comuna or commune. In the comuna, a few communal councils join together to make decisions that affect this larger area and population. In the State of Lara, a comuna decided to build a milk plant whose employees come from a number of adjacent communities and whose milk is distributed among the residents of the comuna. The comuna also will decide how to distribute the surplus.¹³

Also significant is the growth in Venezuela of social movements such as environmental, peasant, women's, indigenous and community media. They are part of the emerging popular power in Venezuela. Many of these social movements are autonomous from the state, from

Chávez and from the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the PSUV, the major political party in Venezuela today which was formed in 2006, and is led by Chávez.

Economic Transformation

Today, the economy of Venezuela is still capitalist dominated economically, although definitely not a neo-liberal one. Let us conceptualize the economy as being divided into three different types of production and social relations; the private, state and social economy sectors. The largest is the private sector, meaning that it is primarily organized with the goal of maximizing profits and that the capital--money, structures, equipment and inventory--are privately owned. This capitalist sector comprises about 2/3 of the economy.¹⁴ It is integrally linked with transnational capital either through imports of their consumer and capital goods and/or with transnational corporations having subsidiaries in Venezuela. Growth in employment and output has been the most rapid in construction, transport, communication, finance and retail and wholesale trade and services; growth of production and employment has been slower in manufacturing and agriculture.¹⁵

The second major sector is the state itself—enterprises that are owned by the state and whose employees are public employees. This public sector includes PDVSA, the state owned oil company. Although much of the revenues of PDVSA now goes directly or indirectly to fund health and education programs and to build housing and infrastructure, it is run in a top down and hierarchical manner with large wage and salary differences among its employees. Wages are also much higher than the national average.

There is little worker self-management in most of the state sector. This sector produces about 30% of Venezuela's output, a proportion similar to its share in 1998. The threat of nationalization and the pace of nationalization have been growing in 2008 and early 2009. The largest bank, foods processing firms such as Cargill, land from rich landowners who were not using it, iron, steel and cement firms, mining, and natural gas and oil related industries have

been nationalized. President Chávez, in a talk in Guyana in the eastern part of Venezuela in May 2009, spoke about government plans to further nationalization and his support for increasing worker control in the state sector, particularly in heavy industry.¹⁶

A new and exciting state enterprise is the CVA, the Corporación Venezolano Agraria. They are a worker self-managed company whose objective is to process farm goods and sell them at low prices to consumers, e.g., canned tomatoes and tomato sauce. They also plan to cut out the profits of intermediaries by transporting food at a very low cost from farms to low-income communities and to institutions such as Mercal which will sell the food at an affordable price to consumers. The CVA has the potential to significantly benefit both farmers and consumers.

The third sector is the social economy. This includes what are often called socialist enterprises such as farms that are publicly owned and self-managed. This sector includes cooperatives and firms that are jointly run and owned by the workers and the state such as a cacao factory that we observed in Barlovento. It includes production organized by the communal councils. In enterprises that are part of the social economy, incomes are often equal for all employees. Workers have a large say in the running of the socialist enterprise, and the surplus is shared with a community that extends beyond those employed there. For example, some of the surplus may be used to build a community cultural center, or provide medical services at a medical clinic or by a doctor to the broader community in addition to workers and their families of the social enterprise. Because most of these enterprises are very small, a leading Venezuelan economist, Victor Alvarez, estimates the social economy is only about 2% of the economy.¹⁷

To me, a socialist economy in Venezuela would require the continued growth of the state and social economy at the expense of the private sector. Equally important is that the state sector and social economy merge, where they become one sector where there is self-management by workers, increasingly equal

incomes and an orientation towards living in harmony with the environment and producing with the objective of meeting human needs not maximizing revenues or profits. This will require alternatives to market determined prices and wages. A socialist economy also means economic justice, an income distribution that is quite equal or with limited differences.¹⁸ As can be seen from Table 1, the row that shows the Gini index or coefficient, income is more equal in Venezuela in 2008 than it was in 1998. However, socialism means a far more equal society than exists there today. A progressive income tax and a tax on wealth above a certain amount are necessary steps that need to be organized for and legislated.

Venezuela has only had limited success so far in developing an economic system where they produce most of what they need at home. For the last 90 years, it has been an economy based on the production and export of oil. More than 90% of their exports are oil.¹⁹ For Venezuela to be a sovereign nation, they should produce and control more of what they consume domestically. To express this, I will use the term of production sovereignty, which is based on and an extension of the concept of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty means that local communities and the Venezuelan people define and control their food and food production systems²⁰. It is a principle incorporated into the Venezuelan constitution and actively promoted by the state and many of the missions. In order for Venezuela to be a sovereign and socialist society, they need to produce more of what they consume using local resources with the appropriate technology. Although endogenous development is a key principle of 21st Century Socialism in Venezuela, there is still very high import dependence of goods and technology.

Before returning to the construction and meaning of 21st century socialism, I would like to briefly comment on two major and related economic problems of Venezuela today, the overvalued currency and inflation.

Overvaluation of the Currency and Inflation

One factor that makes it difficult for Venezuela to reduce import dependence in food

and manufactured goods is the overvaluation of their currency, the bolívar (bsf). The official rate is 2.15 bsf to the dollar.

The unofficial or black market rate is more than 6bsf to the dollar (June 8, 2009). Given the much higher inflation rates in Venezuela than in the United States, the Venezuelan currency is more and more overvalued²¹. Inflation has averaged about 30% per year in Venezuela for the last two and a half years. This means that imports of food and other goods into Venezuela, if imported at the official exchange rate, can be bought at prices far lower than what it costs to produce them in Venezuela. Since inflation means costs of domestically goods are rising, they cannot compete with imported goods, whose costs are rising more slowly unless the bolívar is devalued. If importers had to pay 4 or more bsf for each dollar that they needed to import goods, domestic production would have more possibilities. Similarly at the official rate of 2.15 bsf to the dollar, Venezuelan exports are very expensive for foreign purchasers which limits export markets. Venezuela will probably have to devalue their currency in order to increase domestic production but the fear is that this will further the already strong inflationary pressures in the economy and in anti-government sentiment, causing political unrest. When the currency is devalued, it should be done in such a way that the real incomes of the popular classes are not reduced.²² As long as inflation is greater in Venezuela than other countries, it will be hard to sustain a stable currency.

Inflation in Venezuela today is similar to what it was when Chávez was elected president.²³ In this current period, inflation is caused by a number of interrelated factors. The large growth in oil prices and revenues is a major factor. The high growth rates of incomes and formal sector employment and of transfer payments such as pensions and disability payments have contributed to rapidly growing demand for needed consumption good. Public and private investment in structures, equipment, research and development²⁴ and government demand for goods and services have also grown rapidly. Domestic manufacturing and food production have grown, but at a lower rate than demand for

these goods. Demand has grown faster than domestic supply and this gap has been filled by rising imports and rising prices, i.e., inflation. There is some government control of prices to limit inflation but hoarding, evasion of controls and reductions in the rates of production have sometimes resulted. This is not an argument against price controls but rather that production must be increased, especially social and public production. A moderate rate of inflation with real wages and incomes rising is better than a zero inflationary rate caused by restrictive fiscal and monetary policies, but an inflationary rate that is higher than other Latin American countries and much higher than the United States is a real problem. Increasing labor productivity would reduce inflationary pressures and the growing overvaluation of the Venezuelan currency.

Fall in Oil Prices and the Current Venezuelan Economy

Much, but not all, of the rapid economic expansion of Venezuela from 2003-2008 was fueled by the rise of oil prices. The fall in oil prices in late 2008 and early 2009 has led to a reduction in the planned governmental budget. Venezuela has sufficient dollar reserves so it should be able to maintain its social programs without having to reduce imports substantially nor apply for loans from abroad. President Hugo Chávez has announced that there will be no declines in the social missions and in the quality and quantity of health care and education. Government spending is being cut by 6% this year, 2009, and output and national income will probably grow very slowly if at all. It will be a difficult year economically for most people in Venezuela as the minimum wage raise of 20% will probably be less than the inflation rate, meaning that the real minimum wage will fall. The global economic crisis and the resulting fall in prices of many commodities that Venezuela imports means that inflationary pressures should be reduced in Venezuela. The costs of the global economic crisis will be less in Venezuela than in most countries and, unlike most other countries, the U.S. for example, its social and economic costs will not primarily be paid for by the working and popular classes.

Oil prices have begun to rise again in spring 2009 and given the continued global demand for oil and that we are reaching peak oil production, oil prices are likely to grow rapidly again in the future. This will provide Venezuela with plenty of oil revenue. Foreign exchange from growing exports of natural gas will also increase. The challenge for Venezuela is to use oil and natural gas revenue to diversify the economy in order to attain food and production sovereignty in an economy not dominated by private capital and where workers and communities run the economy. Hopefully these oil and gas revenues will also fund the development of appropriate technologies for domestic production, perhaps in joint ventures with other Latin American countries. This development of appropriate technologies is necessary for the development and diversification of local industry and production that hopefully are environmentally conscious.²⁵

Internationalism and a Multipolar World

Socialism for the 21st century in Venezuela also means increasing cooperation with other Latin American countries and strong opposition to U.S. economic, political and military domination. Venezuela and Cuba formed ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas in December, 2004 as an alternative to the U.S. sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). ALBA now also includes Bolivia, Dominica, Nicaragua and Honduras with other nations such as Ecuador considering joining. The nations of ALBA are discussing forming a common currency and are pledged to fair trade between them to replace market –determined prices, and in sharing technology and intellectual property.²⁶ They are committed to respecting cultural diversity and immigrant rights, and for building sustainable economies that combat climate change.²⁷ Venezuela sending oil at reduced prices to other countries in the Americas, in the Caribbean, and to low income communities in the United States in a spirit of cooperation, solidarity and internationalism is an integral part of the values and practice of 21st century Venezuelan socialism. Other key regional institutions that are part of this internationalism and commitment

to Latin American integration include Telesur, a high-quality Latin American public television station, and Bancosur, Bank of the South formed in January 2008. Bancosur's purpose is to provide to provide alternative lending sources for Latin American countries to the neoliberal international financial institutions. Venezuela's growing relations with Iran, China and Russia do not mean that Venezuela endorses their policies or systems of governance but rather is an attempt to build alliances, to build a multipolar world that the United States does not dominate.

Other Challenges in Moving Towards the Construction of 21st Century Socialism

In addition to the problems already listed in this paper which include private domination of the Venezuelan economy by the multinationals and national capital, the need to produce more and diversify production, inflation, hierarchically run firms, and poverty and economic inequality, there are many others. Socialism requires gender and racial equality and equality for gays, lesbians and other sexual minorities. Gender and racial equality are considered as necessary parts of 21st century socialism and are being advocated for, although their meaning is often quite restricted; there needs to be more of a priority for gender and racial equality at all levels of society.²⁸ Gay and lesbian equality should be, but are not yet, a part of the Chávez and public agenda. Bureaucracy, corruption, crime and insecurity are also major issues which I will not deal with in this paper but are of central importance to the construction of a humane socialism.

In spite of these problems and the continued private domination of the economy, I am very excited about the construction of 21st century socialism in Venezuela. Although the growth is slow, the cultural, political and economic changes are all reinforcing each other and Venezuela is moving in the direction of a democratic and participatory socialism.

Questions, Conclusion

1. Are the educational and health missions, the communal councils, Mercal, and the cooperatives a part of an economy that will coexist alongside a regulated capitalist economy with the state involved in providing many needed social services and doing some income redistribution. I call this the social democratic option. This is the current social and economic reality. A second and more radical interpretation of what is going is that the new society is being built within the bosom of the old; that the social economy and popular power will grow and eventually take over and replace the current profit-based system. Barrio Adentro will become the health system, Mercal will become the food distribution institution, the Bolivarian universities will become the main universities, and the merged social and state economy will become self-managed and expand and become the entire economy. Popular power will replace most or all of the existing state. I call this the socialist option.

2. The second option is very exciting and liberatory as both a strategy and a goal. What stills needs to be addressed in this alternative is how production, distribution and exchange of goods, services and labor will be coordinated? There are major problems with both markets and central planning.²⁹ Both undermine central values of socialism for the 21st century such as solidarity, self-management and environmental justice. There are other possibilities such as participatory planning that are worth pursuing.³⁰

3. A revolution is the transformation of a social system. The 1998 elections were an important beginning and there have been many hopeful small and big steps since. Thus far, it has been a large peaceful and certainly very democratic transition. Democracy has expanded in the sense of the growing inclusion of the formerly excluded and the popular classes' involvement in determining the present and future of Venezuela. If this process continues to move towards 21st century socialism, it is very likely that the Venezuelan oligarchy, i.e. the capitalist class and their supporters will try to maintain their economic power by any means necessary. They have done well economically

in the last 10 years, but no longer have political power and are likely at some time to mount a counterrevolution to maintain their wealth and privilege. Venezuelans have the right to defend their revolution and may have to defend it with arms and people power. Let us work to stop U.S. intervention and subversion in all forms in the present and future. Let us not let the mainstream U.S. media and politicians define the situation in Venezuela. Let us challenge terms such as undemocratic that will be increasingly used if Venezuela continues to move towards socialism and restricts the power of capital to make profit and exploit workers and the environment. This is our responsibility.

4. 21st century socialism is opposed and resisted not only by the U.S. and Venezuelan elites but also by many members of the PSUV, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Terms we often heard while we were in Venezuela for this significant group of people who opposed socialism from within the government and from within the PSUV were the endogenous right, or red on the outside and white on the inside. The growth of popular power, the many young and not so young people graduating from Missions Che Guevara, Robinson, Ribas and Sucre with socialist values and a commitment to building a participatory society are an important counter force. So is Hugo Chávez, who I believe is increasingly moving towards a vision of a truly socialist meaning of socialism for the 21st century, i.e., beyond social democracy. There are many signs that although the speed is slow and the path zigs and zags, and is not direct or without contradictions, that this is the direction of the Bolivarian revolution. This is truly exciting for all of humanity, an example that we in the United States can learn from as we call for, explore, struggle for and build our own culturally appropriate form of 21st century socialism.

Endnotes

1 A Rasmussen national telephone survey of 1100 adults on April 6-7, 2009 found 53% saying capitalism is better than socialism, 27% not sure and 20% saying socialism is better. Among those under 30, the respondents were almost evenly divided, 37% prefer capitalism and 33% socialism with the rest undecided. April 9, 2009. http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/

2 A common measure of income inequality is the Gini coefficient. 0 is total equality, 1 is total inequality. The higher the number, the greater is the inequality. In Venezuela, the Gini coefficient was .422 in 2007 and lower in 2008. See Mark Weisbrot, Rebecca Ray and Luis Sandoval, *The Chávez Administration at 10 Years, The Economy and Social Indicators*, Center for Economic and Policy Research, February 2009. For the United States, it was .463 in 2007 (*U.S. Bureau of the Census, Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States 2007*, Current population Reports P60—235). Using this measure, the U.S. is significantly more unequal than Venezuela. Moreover, the Gini coefficient has been trending downwards in Venezuela, towards less income inequality, and upwards in the United State, towards more inequality. Yearly measurements are presented in these two sources.

3 By anti-imperialist, I mean where one actively opposes the economic, political and cultural domination of a country in the global South by governments and multinational corporations centered in the global North and by international institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO which are dominated by the global North.

4 Gregory Wilpert, *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power*, (Verso, 2007)

5 By left, I mean moving towards furthering economic and other forms of equality, in a socialist direction.

6 By popular classes, I mean 80% of the Venezuelan adult population. It includes those who work in the formal sector for wages and whose income and status is below what is called middle class. The popular classes also include those employed in the informal sector, farmers with small plots of land, the unemployed and underemployed, and single mothers who work in the home. It includes the working class but is a broader and more inclusive concept.

7 For example, there are many communal councils where the majority of its members do not support Chávez and are not members of the party he leads, the PSUV.

8 Mark Weisbrot, Rebecca Ray and Luis Sandoval, *The Chávez Administration at 10 Years: The Economy and Social Indicators*. Center for Economics and Policy Research. February 2009., pp. 13. According to these authors, university attendance grew by 138% between these two periods. I refer to this article which I use for much of my data as Weisbrot, et. al.

9 For more explanations of these data, see Weisbrot, et. al. The numbers in my table are from this article. The authors use data primarily from the Venezuelan National

Institute of Statistics (INE) and the Banco Central de Venezuela (BCV).

10 Ibid., pp. 6-8

11 Ibid, pp. 7,8, 15

12 See the excellent article by Courtney Frantz in this book for the development of this point.

13 Surplus is similar to but not identical to profits. Surplus is the remaining revenue of an enterprise after its pays out wages to its workers and all other costs. The objectives of these socialist enterprises is not to maximize the surplus but to meet human needs.

14 Víctor Alvarez, an economist and former minister of Basic Industry and Mines, and graduate professor at the Central University of Venezuela used this three sector model formulation of the economy. These are the estimates of their relative proportions that he gave to us in a talk at the Centro Instituto Miranda in January, 2009 and in a private conversation on March 25, 2009. See also Víctor Alvarez, "Responsible del Programa de Investigación Sobre un Nuevo Modelo Productivo", in *El Viejo Topo*, October, 2008, pp. 24-31. He said these numbers were approximate proportions of their contribution either to GDP or to employment

15 Weisbrot et al, pp. 8. They do not provide data on agriculture but based on my looking at Venezuelan government data and from many conversations I had in Venezuela, I am quite certain that agricultural production has been growing but slower than the overall growth rate of output.

16 James Suggett, "Venezuela Nationalizes Gas Plant and Steel Companies, Pledges Worker Control", May 22nd 2009, www.Venezuelanalysis.com

17 See endnote xiv.

18 See Robin Hahnel, *Economic Justice and Democracy*, (Routledge, 2005), Chapter 1, for an in-depth discussion of economic justice.

19 Weisbrot et. al, pp. 18

20 See the in-depth article on food sovereignty in this publication

21 If Venezuela's prices of traded goods are rising much more rapidly than that of their trading partners, and the value of the Venezuelan currency is fixed in relation to other currencies, particularly the dollar, this will cause increased Venezuelan imports and decreased exports. If oil revenues are sufficiently high and currency convertibility from the bolívar to the dollar is restricted in Venezuela, the official foreign exchange rate may be maintained for a while. The social costs of this overvalued Venezuelan currency are declining non oil-related production and a black market exchange rate between bolivars and dollars that increasingly diverges in a downward direction from the official exchange rate. Weisbrot, et. al. (page 20), estimate that the bolívar fuerte as of February 2009, should be valued at about 4.2 to the dollar, roughly 1/2 of what it is officially. The current black market rate for the bolívar fuerte compared to the dollar, June 2009, is even lower, only about 1/3 of the official rate.

22 This could be done by bigger price subsidies for goods that fill basic needs, and by raising the minimum wage. Other alternatives could be multiple exchange rates that vary for different goods and/or further rationing foreign exchange in order to promote domestic production.

23 Weisbrot et. al., pp. 19-20.

24 Ibid., pp. 25

25 Development and use of alternate energies and the promotion of trains and mass transit to reduce dependence on both oil and cars are openly discussed and to some extent being implemented. It is unlikely in the near future that Venezuela will reduce its production of oil for the purpose of reducing carbon dioxide emissions and the serious and major problem of climate change.

26 See "*The Declaration of Cumaná*", April 23rd, 2009, www.venezuelanalysis.com

27 "*The Declaration of Cumaná*", April 23rd, 2009, www.venezuelanalysis.com

28 For example, neither the PSUV nor Chávez have publicly raised the issue of the right to abortion for Venezuelan women.

29 See Hahnel, op. cit., for an excellent critique of centrally planned and market socialist models and experiences.

30 See Michael Albert, *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (Verso, 2004) for a feasible participatory planning model that is an alternative to market socialism and central planning.

I am Venezuela

By Kaitlin Baird

I am Venezuela.

My hills and mountains roll for miles
My incandescent *playas* sparkle blue
And my land saturated with *petróleo*

Mi hermano is Simon Bolivar
His purpose at times forgotten
As Gran Colombia has been severed
Boundaries *imaginários* carve up my sisters

Una población bonita dwells on my terrain
Farms and barrios *tranquilos* cover my soil
Yet the thundering voices of revolution pierce my skies
As red unyielding fire drives and spreads to all parts

I am Venezuela.

Histories' relentless bloodbath has ravished *mi pueblo*
And our pain is unforgotten
Yet complete urgency for *cambio* is finally upon us

Mira! I am Venezuela! I am finally alive!
I want *el mundo* to watch
As imperialism's iron fist lunges for a freedom
I have long been denied

Yo soy Venezuela!
Not Cuba, not Russia
Not China or Europe
Not a *muñeca*, not a coward
Nor a *comunista*, a dictator, or capital felon

What I foretell is uncertain
Future's experimental necessity
But for this vital ambition
Mi corazón siempre lucha para Socialismo of the 21st century
I am Venezuela! Yo soy Venezuela! I am Venezuela!